

## A Fearless Senior Citizen

Numbers 13-14; Joshua 14:6-15

Thanks to those who have shared a children's story on fear. Please sign up for the Sunday's still available in August. It would be good to have a mix of Bible stories on sticking with your principles, courage, conquering fear, or what ever theme you sense will be helpful for the children. Plus, if you have any stories about people, or yourself, that would be a bonus.

Today, let's remind ourselves of a fearless senior citizen in the Old Testament. It's one of those stories that start in one place and finish in another place in the Bible.

Numbers, chapters 13 and 14 are listed in the bulletin for you to read on your own. It's where this story begins, 45 years before the rest of the story. The background of our story begins in the wilderness. The people of Israel were headed toward the Promise Land. God told Moses to send some spies to check out the land. So one man from each of the 12 tribes went and explored the land. (13:18-20)

After 40 days, they returned safely & reported. This is another number 40 in the Bible, and was another test of the Israelites. I hear the echo of the 40 days of flood and a new start. The 12 spies reported that the land was great! **But** then the spies said "the people who live there are powerful, the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw the descendants of Anak, the giants, there." (Num. 13:27b-28).

So the Israelites became fearful & complained. But Caleb, one of the spies, **silenced the people &** said, "We should go up & take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it."

But 10 of the spies, said, "We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are." And they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored. They said, "The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size. We saw giants there (the Anak,). We

seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them." (Num 13:30-38) The Anak are mentioned in Genesis 6:4.

As a result of this report, **the people were terrified, fearful.** They did not believe God could deliver the land to them safely. They began grumbling and said they would have been better off back in Egypt as slaves. They talked about choosing a leader to lead them back to Egypt. (Numbers 14:1-4) That's how scared they were. They rebelled against God and God's leader, Moses.

Then Moses and Aaron fell face down in front of the Israelites. I imagine they were symbolizing how dangerous the Israelites attitude was. And I suspect they were praying.

**Joshua**, another one of the spies, and Caleb, tore their clothes as a sign of great distress, and said to the entire Israelite assembly, "The land is exceedingly good. God wants to give it to us. Don't rebel against God. Don't be afraid of the people there. Their protection is gone."

But in response, the whole assembly talked about stoning Joshua & Caleb. (14:6-10a)

At that point, God got mad. He was fed up. He had provided escape from slavery. He had provided food and water in the desert. He had provided laws so they could live in peace and harmony. Scripture says, "Then the glory of the LORD appeared at the tent of meeting to all the Israelites. The LORD said to Moses, "How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs I have performed among them? I will strike them down with a plague and destroy them, but I will make you, Moses, into a nation greater and stronger than they." (Num 14:10b-12) We know Yahweh God can do this. He'd done it before with the flood.

But Moses pleaded with God to not destroy the Israelites – even though they deserved it. He offered two good reasons. **First**, the Egyptians and other people will hear about it and think

God was not powerful enough to carry through on the promises to give these people a land.

**Second**, Moses reminded God - you are slow to anger, abounding in love, forgiving sin and rebellion. This is your character. (14:13-20) But you don't leave the guilty unpunished. So in accordance with your great love, forgive the sin of these people, just as you have pardoned them from the time they left Egypt until now.

God responded by forgiving them and not killing the unbelieving fearful Israelites. But they were sentenced to 40 years in the wilderness & would die there. Only Joshua & Caleb, the two spies who said they could conquer the people in the Promised Land, survived and were given the privilege of going in to it.

God said, "No one who has treated me with contempt will ever see it. But because my servant Caleb has a different spirit & follows me wholeheartedly, I will bring him into the land he went to, & his descendants will inherit it. Not one of the rest of you will enter the land I swore with to make your home, except Caleb & Joshua. And anyone who was then under 20 years of age would reach the Promised Land."

Then what happened? The ten spies who did not have faith, who were afraid, and who led the community of Israel to grumble, died of a plague from God. And when the rest of Israel tried to enter the land, but were defeated and fled farther back into the wilderness. They were rebellious fearful, slow learners. (Nu 14:36-44)

But then we have the rest of the story about a fearless senior citizen. This story doesn't seem remarkable – just another person showing up and asking for his allotment of the land when the land was divided out among the tribes and clans and families. But when we remember that Caleb was one of the 2 spies who urged the Israelites to believe God would lead them to take the land; and that he was one of only 2 adult persons, plus their families to survive the 40 years in the desert; then the story really starts to get our attention.

And it's important to notice, where stories are placed in the Bible. The book of Joshua is a factual account of which tribe got what land. Interesting but boring. Not much human interest or inspiration. But then we get this story about Caleb. It's a deliberate insert into the story of Israel. With an important message.

Caleb went to Joshua, the other spy who trusted God to help them take over the land, and the leader of Israel at the time, to remind him that he had been faithful and followed God even when all the others had not. He claimed the promise Moses had made to him and his descendants because of his faithfulness.

Moses had promised Caleb "the land on which his feet had walked will be your inheritance forever, because you have followed the LORD my God wholeheartedly." This is when we discover that Caleb had spied on the exact land where the giants lived. And he was ready to take over that land – even at 85 years of age. Usually with Bible characters we have to guess at their age, but Caleb's age is deliberately inserted into the story. It's like he's saying to Israel, "Don't forget I'm the spy that said we should go into the land 40 years ago. I told you we could trust God. I'm going to get my land."

Caleb was fearless, trusting, believing that God would help him conquer the land of the giants. A normal person would tell or ask Joshua to send the army to fight the giants – on their behalf, because they had been faithful. But instead Caleb asked Joshua, "give me this hill country... with the Anakites, the giants we were so afraid of, & their large, fortified cities. The Lord helping me, I will drive them out just as He said." Instead of sitting back at the end of his life, Caleb takes on this big challenge.

**So what can we learn from this story? First**, grumbling and rebelling against God and against God's leaders and against God's plans for us, never has a positive ending. Being ungrateful to what God has provided for us, has negative consequences. We like to gloss over this kind of thing, but, we dare not.

**A Second learning is**, we are not done until God takes us home. Regardless of what age we are – God doesn't expect us to retire. Whatever that is – each of us is different, but God has something for us to do. It may be as important as simply, encouraging others, being a positive presence, attending worship, praying, giving, and witnessing. Followers of Jesus do not retire. It's not part of our thinking. It's not part of God's plan. This idea of sitting back and relaxing, is what the financial and travel people have come up with – to get our money. I don't know what God wants you to do as you age, but there are many opportunities to have fun and to build the Kingdom of God at any age. Jesus' retirement plan for us is heaven.

**Third**, God has been preparing each of us for today's task our whole life long. Caleb was the perfect person to lead the fight against the giants. He had the most experience, had seen the most battles, and had spent 40 years waiting for this opportunity. Whatever we face today, God has been preparing us for. I believe God says, age is not an excuse, even though many of us face health and energy issues. Maybe the health issues give us opportunities to be witnesses in some ways.

For example, Robertson McQuilkin, shocked a lot of people, when he stepped down from the presidency of Columbia Bible College and Seminary in 1990 to care fulltime for his ailing wife, Muriel. I remember when it occurred and how lots of people were shocked. His work was going so well and he was gaining fame for it.

But he said, "When the time came, his decision was firm. It took no great calculation. It was a matter of integrity. Had I not promised, years before, "in sickness and in health . . . till death do us part"? This was no grim duty to which I stoically resigned, however. It was only fair. She had, after all, cared for me for almost four decades with marvelous devotion; now it was my turn. And such a partner she was! If I took care of her for 40 years, I would never be out of her debt. His resignation speech to Columbia has been heard by tens of thousands of people

around the world." Now I guess he did have financial resources so he could stop work, which is very different than taking the money and spending on pleasure.

We can take comfort and draw strength that God will see us through what ever difficulties we face. We can trust that God is in control and wants the best for us – and will help us to be fearless, whatever our situation, like Caleb and like Robertson McQuilkin.

**The fourth thing** we can learn is, we might have to wait 40 years, like Caleb to see God's promise. And even then we might have to get in & fight for it and have our fears tested again. We know Caleb never forgot the words God said to him through Moses. When the time was right he stepped forward to claim the promise. Do we have that patience and hope – to wait for God's timing to keep His promises? I'd like to know what Caleb did those 40 years in the wilderness. I don't think he just sat around eating ate manna and quail.

Maybe you discover a ministry that God has prepared for you and is calling you to. I know a school teacher who was drawn into and learned some new skills. He began to lead Celebrate Recovery, Christian AA groups. I was there when he told his church leaders at age 65, this was his call for the rest of his life.

I know people who pick up on service opportunities that seniors can do when they retire. This sometimes becomes more than just a winter engagement in a warm climate. They discover that it's what God has called them to.

I have met a people making a change in their careers in their 40's and 50's. I know two lawyers who gave up good jobs and good money to become pastors. Doesn't make sense. Or does it? When God calls, it's important to listen and pay attention. At any age. We need to be open to new opportunities and new calls.

We need to recognize from Caleb's example, that **fifth**, he wanted to go and fight. He didn't

sit back and just pray. He didn't expect God or Joshua to just hand him the land. I don't know about you, but I often want to claim the promises of God like gifts from Santa – things that just show up in my life without any effort on my part. But Caleb stepped up and acted. God has and is preparing each of us, not for retirement, but for fearless work, enhancing the Kingdom of God.

A few years ago when I went to an aunt's funeral, the first person I met was a cousin. He said hi and then immediately burst out, "I'm 23 years, 8 months and 16 days until retirement." I felt like asking, "Why are you alive?" If as a follower of Jesus, retirement was all he was looking forward to, he's in spiritual trouble.

**A sixth learning is** – we may be called to fight fearlessly. Caleb didn't sit back and expect God to fulfill his promise like we receive birthday presents. Caleb models for us the opposite approach – to claim the promises of God by acting like there is nothing that will stand in the way of God keeping those promises. It didn't matter that he was 85 yrs old. It didn't matter the Anakites were the biggest most intimidating opposition in the promised land. All that mattered was that God had made a promise. Caleb trusted God. So Caleb grabbed his sword and headed off to the hills to defeat them. And he drove out the giants and claimed his land.

We need to be careful we are not finding excuses to cover up our fears. Caleb was very confident in God's leading. He overcame any fears he had. He didn't let fear imprison him in the desert. He kept fighting on God's side. We have a choice of fear or faith.

We all know people who say they can't wait to die. They rightly wonder why God keeps them here. We have this story of Caleb choosing faith and trust and action over grumbling, fear, rebellion and passivity. Maybe our challenge is to exhibit the fruits of the spirit, a prayer life, a life of encouragement, portioning out our wealth, and being a witness about our Creator's faithfulness to us.

Caleb displayed great faith. To act on the promises of God before we see evidence of their fulfillment. To stand up and say, "God has promised this, so I'm going to live it." For example, God's Son Jesus promised that those who seek Him will find Him (Matt 7:7).

We are promised that when we have opportunity to share our faith, if we simply open our mouths the Almighty's Holy Spirit will put the words on our lips (Mark 13:11).

Our Creator promises to teach us the truth and to set us free by that truth (Jn 8:32).

Sometimes the promises appear instantly and without any action on our part, but more often I believe we have to act in faith in order to see the fullness of God's promises in our lives.

Sometimes we have to let go of those giants that are our own spiritual and emotional and attitudinal barriers.

Like Caleb, we have to march off into battle to be able to claim God's promises of victory. I love how Caleb was active in his claiming the promise of God, and I'm challenged by it. I think this story is in the Bible as a contrast to how people often are fearful, and yet, when we trust God, the giants in the way are overcome.