

Keep moving forward, or stop and fall backward? This is the question that is placed before everyone who chooses to put his or her faith in God. Forward, active, dynamic, challenging... these are words that are often used to describe faith. But one thing is for certain: the decision to follow God's leading will always lead to a life characterized by dynamic forward movement. The alternative: stop and go back to where you were.

This fall, we are looking together at the subject of faith. Each week, we are looking at a story of a man or woman from the Old Testament that can teach us something about faith. In each of the last two weeks, I have described faith as a decision to go from safety and predictability to vulnerability and trust. To, as it were, step off a precipice or let go of the trapeze, knowing that when you do, the one who will catch you is none other than the Living God.

Today's passage is one in which God's people face a giant obstacle. And many of them—instead of choosing to be bold and trust God—wanted to turn around and head back to the safety of their old life in Egypt. The decision to trust God is to choose the bold path, because it looks fear in the eye and says the one who created me has something to say about fear...don't have it, you don't need it, I AM is with me, and therefore I can be bold.

It had been two years since the God's people left slavery in Egypt. These were tough years walking the hard, dry road of the wilderness, eating manna, a substance that slightly resembled desert dandruff. The memory remained fresh that "at least back in Egypt, we had bread to eat, and we weren't starving."

The Appearance of the Giant

Have you ever had a time in your life when it felt like you were just barely making it? When your family, your job, your finances were hanging in the balance and all you could manage to eek out were just the basics? Or things around you felt so dull and dry and monotonous that it felt like a desert wasteland? First of all, let's be clear: nobody chooses the desert. The real deserts of life are places no one ever chooses. But what this story is telling us is that we're never in the desert for no reason; there is always something God is doing in our lives when we find ourselves in the desert. In our house, we have a saying, "Never let a good conflict go to waste." **The road to the Promised Land is always hard, it always has obstacles, because it's the road on which we are being changed into men and women of faith.**

So what is the obstacle or challenge that stands between you and the person God is calling you to become? Maybe it's a life transition, a change of a job or a retirement. Maybe it's caring for a loved one day in and day out, when all you want is just some time to yourself to put your feet up. Maybe it's a friend who has thrown you under the bus. Whatever it is, maybe there's a purpose for your being there.

Facing the Giant

After two years of the desert journey, God finally brought the Hebrews to a place called Paran, which is on the northern edge of the Sinai Peninsula, near the city of Kadesh-Barnea—which is just on the other side of Huntington. Kadesh-Barnea is the southern gate to the Promised Land. The Lord told Moses to send twelve of his leaders as spies into the land—“the land,” God said, “which I am giving to the Israelites.” Forty days later, these men returned from their intelligence-gathering mission and brought back pomegranates, figs, and a single cluster of grapes that was so big they had to carry it on a pole between two men.

Ten of the spies said, “This is a land that flows with milk and honey. . . . But it is a land that devours its inhabitants. There we saw the Nephilim—a race of giants. And to ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers.” The other two spies, Joshua and Caleb said, “Giants? Giants? Don’t be afraid of the giants! Remember the name of this place is PROMISED Land. What do we care about the Nephilim, if God has promised to give us the land?” Well, the people decided to go with the majority report:

“And all the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron; the whole congregation said to them, ‘Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! . . . So they said to one another, ‘Let us choose a captain and go back to Egypt.’ ” (Numbers 14:2-4)

So what did Joshua and Caleb see that the others failed to see with their eyes? The Promise. It was God’s promise to them that changed their entire view of every obstacle that came before them. It’s God’s promise that gave them boldness to overcome fear. And the lessons they learned while their feet were being scorched by sand and their stomachs ached for something other than sand flakes were not lost on Joshua and Caleb, because they remembered. They remembered the promise God spoke to them through Moses at Sinai when he received the Ten Commandments. “If you trust in me,” God says, “the result will be that I will bring you into a land that is plentiful beyond your wildest imagination. It’ll be yours.”

Nothing will shape your identity more than the promises you believe. We live in a society that keeps telling us that our identity is determined by our job, our resume, our social standing, or our wealth. But the Bible claims that our identity is determined most of all by the promises we believe.

If the promise you believe is that you are on your own to make what you can of life and on your own to get out of the wilderness, then when you stumble onto the giants, you had better be afraid, because ours is a society that devours its inhabitants. It wants you to be afraid that you are just a grasshopper. But if you believe that it’s the promise of the Kingdom, of a new land and a new life that awaits you, you can do anything.

We don’t know what happened on the afternoon of August 9th between Michael Brown and Darren Wilson. But we do know that it was caused by fear. A tragic event that is

tearing at the fabric of that community, or revealing the tears in that community. It's this injustice that is causing whites and blacks alike to fall back into old patterns of racism and segregation. But there's one man who walks the streets, believing that he has within him what it takes to overcome this giant before him. Captain Ron Johnson is a Missouri State Patrolman assigned to bring security to Ferguson, Missouri. Where everyone else is acting out of fear, he is not. On the one side, you've got armored vehicles; on the other, you've got molotov cocktail throwing crowds. And into the middle of those opposing sides steps Ron Johnson.

On the first night, he stepped in the middle and did something very different. He said, "Take off your gas masks and body armor and come to the middle and let's talk about things together." He marches with protesters, listens to their stories, and unites these two opposing forces, and when he does, he often comes away with tears in his eyes.

The Nation.com recently ran a story that asked is Ferguson's Ron Johnson the new Captain America? I think anyone who can hear God's call to walk through the wilderness, can face the giants, and stand up on Faith is certainly worthy of a title like Captain America, don't you? Having faith in God's promise of a Promised Land on the other side will do such a thing.

Overcoming the Giant

People who live with faith in the promise of God, that Promised Land burning brightly within them will change the world. And when many will fall away and say, "Things were safer in Egypt," faith will lead us to believe that's not good enough. Just good enough is never God's plan for his people. God's plan is always, ultimately for our flourishing, of flowing waters, green fields, of new horizons. But getting there always requires faith.

There is a wonderful movie that came out a few years ago. I'd encourage you all to watch it. It's called *Sophie Scholl*. It's about a group of university students living during the 1930s in Germany as the Nazi regime rose to power. There was a campaign of intimidation and fear. In the midst of this, a group of university students wrote leaflets in opposition that they surreptitiously distributed throughout Germany. At one point, they were brought before a Tribunal, which was really a Kangaroo Court, just a bunch of military officials, and there in front of their obstacle she was able to say to the Nazi officials, "One day you will stand where we are standing. You see we serve one who is greater than you." Sophie was a Lutheran Christian.

Here's what Sophie Scholl says in one of her letters about living: greatest damage today is done by those millions who want to survive as honest men, who want to survive and be left in peace, who don't want their little lives disturbed by anything bigger than themselves, those with no sides and no causes, those who won't take measure of their own strength for fear of antagonizing their own weakness. Those who don't like to make waves or enemies, those for whom freedom, honor, and truth, and principles are only literature. Those who live small, mate small, die small, it's the reductionist approach to life. If you keep it small, you keep it under control. You won't make any noise, the boogey man won't find you. But it's all an illusion, because they die too, those people who roll

up their spirits into tiny little balls so as to be safe. Safe? She says, what is safe? Life is always lived on the edge of death, from the place where promise lies. Narrow streets always lead to the same place as wide avenues, and a little candle burns itself out just like a fiery torch does. I choose my own way to burn.

She believed in good news, she believed in a promise that kept her going when the road ahead looked treacherous and full of overwhelming obstacles. Caleb and Joshua had a similar view of the obstacles in between them and the Promised Land. It was a strange unpredictable hope that seemed so farfetched. But it was a way that reached down into the very core of their identity and was unavoidable. They knew the road getting there would not be an easy one, but believed that choosing to trust in the promise was worth letting go of all that mediocre living they had done in Egypt.

If you're standing on the edge of something big, something daunting, remember that God's promise of care, of provision, of peace is always nearby. The Bible says that 38 years after voting against going into the Promised Land, they finally make it. And we don't hear much about Caleb again, except one brief note. After they cross over, we read that Caleb fought against the Giant Nephilim and defeated them. Promise realized. Amen.