**Of Nephilim and Grasshoppers**

We return to our ongoing sojourn through the patriarchal narratives this 20th Sunday after Pentecost.

We pick up the trail in Exodus 33 with Moses having a dialogue with the Lord at another significant juncture in the drama of the nation. We recall the drama like this:

* We had the epiphany in the burning bush (3),
* God calls Moses back to Egypt and he declares to Pharaoh “Let my people go” (5),
* Moses has a showdown with Pharaoh (7-12),
* the people leave the land via the Red Sea (10).
* In chapter 20 God gives the people of Israel the Ten Commandments and many other varied laws.

By chapter 32, with Moses on the mountain with God for 40 days and nights, the people, under to leadership of Aaron, create a Golden Calf to worship, believing that Moses was dead or had abandoned them.

And in the history of lame excuses, Aaron’s ranks at the top when Moses asked him how he could let this happen. Aaron says when the people said Make us gods, I said, “give me your gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!” (Ex 32:24).

But now the time of transition is complete for the people of Israel. And God says to Moses in our chapter today: Go, leave this place, you and the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt, and go to the land that I swore to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob… (Ex 33:1).

And in spite of all the drama of the first 32 chapters, the story is really just beginning. The Lord of the Rings Trilogy has nothing on the Pentateuch for epic scale.

They are to now leave the Mountain of God and enter the Promised Land. But I think you will recall that the people grew faint in heart. And when the Joshua and his mates came back from reconnoitring the Promised Land and found it to be a “land flowing with milk and honey” (see Numbers 13). Btw, it was about this time of year as it was the season of the first ripe grapes… (Num 13:20).

Of the twelve spies only two said let’s go take the land, Joshua and Caleb. The other ten said it was impossible. They are too strong! They will crush us! Which brings me to my clever title for today. The ten said There we saw the Nephilim [the ‘sons of God’ the ‘warriors of renown’ of Gen 6]; and to ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them (Num 13:33). In fact, they refused to go in to the Promised Land because of their fear; not irrational fear really. That is what the meaning of that story is all about. They refused to go into the Promised Land because of fear.

They wanted to elect another leader and threatened to stone Moses and Aaron (Num 14:4, 10). So God assigned them to 40 years in the wilderness until all those, well, faithless ones should perish.

Now, sure, Moses was always prone to self-doubt, as we are going to see in today’s text in Ex 33. See my notes for the texts on this. [At the burning bush Moses says ‘but, but who am I that I should go to Pharaoh’ (3:11)? ‘But who should I say sent me if they ask’ (3:14)? “But what if they don’t believe me’ (4:1)? ‘But I am slow of speech and slow of tongue’ (4:10)!]

And yes, we all understand that the stakes in the time to come were enormous beyond all imagination; that leaving the Mountain of God was another step into a seeming void.

“Go, leave this place, you and the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt…”

This is where we become privy to a very private conversation between Moses and God. Moses said to the Lord, “See, you have said to me, ‘Bring up this people’; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. (Ex 33:12)

To which the Lord patiently answers “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.”

And Moses says, “If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here.”

And the Lord patiently says I will do the very thing that you have asked…

I almost get the sense that the Lord has gotten quite used to this continual self-doubt of Moses. He is almost like a parent who is working at home and the child keeps asking questions and we answer with about a third of our mind. E.g. ‘Dad, can I take the car and go on a cross country road trip with my friends. We haven’t really decided which direction we will travel….?’

Dad, ‘Umhum, have a nice time…’

Eventually God looks up from his keyboard and reassures Moses like this… Okay Moishe…I hereby make a covenant. Before all your people I will perform marvels, such as have not been performed in all the earth or in any nation; and all the people among whom you live shall see the work of the Lord; for it is an awesome thing that I will do with you. (Ex 34:10)

Yes Moses, get up and go into the land.

**From the Text**

For those who don’t know the backstory, a year ago we were saying goodbye to the pastorate of Gary and Cheryl Bennett after thirty years serving this church. And we wondered how it would all go. What would become of us?!

We stood on the doorstep of our own transition – leaving the mountain behind as it were. I don’t want to get too allegorical at all, but we are now well on our way and we have written on the blank pages of the book we had before us last year.

And the Lord, as He did with Moses at the Mountain of God, bids us to go forward into the land.

The pages of the last year have been written. Who knew it would be the 2020 we got?

Here is what I said that Sunday a year ago. Here is what we asked the Lord to teach us. Let’s see how we are doing.

* “God… help us to know the depth and the breadth and the power and the mystery of your love afresh. ***That as we write, let it be a story of love first and foremost.*** What does that mean practically? We don’t know. And that’s okay. Good thing we are disciples.”

And the Lord patiently answers “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.”

* “God… teach us anew about the comfort, energy and hope of the shared life of the community of faith, here and across our city. Let’s pray that in this next chapter that our bonds of brotherhood and sisterhood are strengthened and our fellowship deepened.”
  + Prayer warriors praying
  + Ministry Staff and Pastors serving
  + Bible study and Connect leaders
  + Cleaners
  + Warehouse workers and volunteers
  + Scripture readers
  + Office Staff
  + Interns who do a little of everything
  + Handy-persons who keep the building and parsonage maintained and repaired
  + Those who dance and act
  + Those who decorate
  + Those who sing
  + Those who play musical instruments
  + Those who run computer programs, cameras, lighting, and sound equipment
  + Those who care for the needy
  + Those who sponsor new Canadians
  + Cooks and bringers of food and bread
  + Growers and bringers of flowers
  + Those who phone seniors and seniors who phone everyone
  + Lead Team
  + Search Committee
  + Building and Grounds
  + Finance and Accounting
  + Covid Committee
  + Church Board
  + Discipleship Committee
  + Outreach Committee
  + Missions Council
  + Pastoral Care Team
  + Those who care for our children
  + The youth and young adults who bring so much life!
  + Photographers
  + Counters
  + Generous givers of money and resources
  + Card writers (birthdays, encouragement, etc.)

How’s that for “God… teach us anew about the comfort, energy and hope of the shared life of the community of faith?

* “God… show us how to communicate the Gospel in this new day, with all of its shifting cultural and moral and political currents. How can we, in this new day, be the Visible Handprint of God to those you bring in our path? Don’t you know, I ask, that the future will look different from the past. That it must?”

Well… that could hardly have been more prophetic. Is Pastor Dave also to be found among the prophets??!!

I am so proud of our church family and the way we have risen to the challenges of 2020!

I close with this. I don’t like hand-wringing. I don’t like the paralysis that is born of fear of the future or the horror of making a mistake. I’ve never had any patience for it. I don’t criticize Moses; I just don’t understand him.

If fear dominates a perspective, you might as well just crawl into a hole in life and stay safe. If the world appears to us as full of Nephilim and we are grasshoppers then we should just go back to Egypt.

But if you want to do something, you have to be ready to fail and get up and press on, no matter what the world throws at you. I would much rather make mistakes along the way and deal with it than sit motionless, afraid to move on from the Mountain of God.

So my brother and sisters, the words of the last few weeks echo in our minds:

* let us work out our salvation (Phil 2:12).
* Let us …press on to make it our own, because Christ Jesus has made us his own (Phil 3:12). And let us rejoice in the Lord always for the resurrection of Jesus Christ is in our hearts, and he bids us walk with him in responsible grace, and he enlivens us in our faithfulness, he lays hold of us to make us his own.
* I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus (Phil 3:14).

And God’s promise is this… and all the people among whom you live shall see the work of the Lord; for it is an awesome thing that I will do with you. (Ex 34:10)

Thanks be to God and here is to another great year together on God’s path to the Land.