

## *“Countercultural Leadership”*

(Numbers 14:1-25)

“Forgive the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of your steadfast love,  
just as you have pardoned this people, from Egypt even until now.”

(Numbers 14:19)

### **Scoping out the Promised Land** (Numbers 13)

Guess what!?! By Numbers chapter 13, the people have arrived at the edge of the Promised Land! No longer do they need to ask, “Are we there yet?” because they’ve made it! But before they go to claim their inheritance, God tells Moses to send 12 spies to scope out the land.

So Moses sends out a representative from each tribe to research the Promised Land and to bring back some fruit. Their objective is to scope things out and bring back a positive report of the land, which will help psych the people up to enter it and receive their reward! We’ve made it! God is faithful!

But that’s not exactly what happens. Sure, the spies go out and even bring back some fruit from the land -- grapes, pomegranates, and figs. “It’s true, they say, the land does flow with milk and honey! ***But the people are huge!!*** There’s no way we can defeat them! We shouldn’t go...we should find somewhere else to live.” At least that was the report from 10 out of the 12 spies. 2 Spies, however, Caleb and Joshua, had a different report. Caleb said, “let’s go right now and settle the land!”

12 spies go out. Once they return, 10 spies instill fear through their report while 2 spies seek to instill confidence.

Which is easier: fear or boldness? What would you have done? Would you have sided with the 10 or the 2?

### **Response/Consequences**

Well as many of us know, fear is the easier of the two, the more natural response. Numbers chapter 14 therefore describes the people’s fearful response to the spies’ report.

#### I. *Fearful Wailing* (Numbers 14:1-4)

The people are overcome with fear. They raise a loud cry and weep all night long! Then they complain against Moses and Aaron, saying, "Why didn't we just die in Egypt, or even in the wilderness?! Why is God tempting us with a land where we will all be killed...Hey, here's an idea, let's choose a new captain and go back to Egypt!" Give me an "E"! Give me a "G"! Give me a "Y"!

The people are on the edge of the land of Promise and God is urging them to claim their inheritance and fulfill the covenant. But what do the people do? They cower in fear and are easily swayed by the idea of returning to Egypt, to the land of slavery! Their fear counters their faith. Their fear causes them to revolt against Moses and reject God's covenant!

## II. *Confident Humility* (Numbers 14:5-9)

Things were not going according to plan. The spies were supposed to instill faith and confidence in the people, not fear!

What was Moses to do? The people are not only whining, but they're ready to replace him as their leader and return to Egypt! Furthermore, this is not the first time nor will it be the last time that Moses' leadership is challenged. Back in Numbers 12, Moses' own brother and sister, Aaron and Miriam, challenge his authority. Later in Numbers 16, a few men by the names of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram lead 250 leaders of Israel to confront Moses and again challenge his authority!

Now I don't know about you, but the job of leading the people of Israel would not be my first career choice! Talk about a high-stress work environment!

But, that being said, leading the people never was Moses' ideal job either. He made that quite clear back at the burning bush. Moses absolutely did not want the job of confronting Pharaoh and leading the people out of Egypt. But finally after God countered his every excuse, he had no choice but to accept God's call.

And while we might be confused about Moses' hesitancy at the burning bush in the face of God's extraordinary call, here we come to realize that it was Moses' hesitancy to jump into the limelight that made him the perfect man for the job. Why? His job wasn't to glorify himself but to glorify God! He was to proclaim God's deliverance and lead God's people according to God's directions. This wasn't about Moses. This was about God. Numbers 12:3 actually says "Now the man Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth." This exaltation of Moses' humility might seem silly to us, but it shone through in the most difficult of times.

You see, when Moses was confronted with a difficult situation, his default position was this (fall on face)! Moses would fall on his face in front of the people and in front of God. Now that is countercultural leadership! If the people would have complained to Pharaoh, you can bet that he wouldn't have fallen on his face before them. The opposite is supposed to be true: people fall on their faces before their leader.

But that's what Moses does: he falls on his face as an act of supplication, pleading for the people to reconsider their rash decision, and even more importantly, praying for God to intervene. This is something we learn time and time again from Moses: a leader of the people isn't someone who puts themselves on a pedestal, but rather someone who turns the people's attention back toward God.

Furthermore, as Moses and Aaron were flat on their faces, Caleb and Joshua tore their clothes, an act of grief and anger. They tried to re-instill faith in the people by saying, "The land is great! If the Lord is with us, he will give it to us. Don't rebel against God and ***don't be afraid!***" Because fear counters faith.

These leaders -- Moses and Aaron, Caleb and Joshua -- are practicing countercultural leadership, calling the people back to faith in God's covenant; but the people only threaten to stone them.

### III. *Influential Intervention* (Numbers 14:13-19)

At this point, before stones begin to fly, God steps in to respond. All the people see God's glory and we can imagine that a rowdy crowd quiets down. God says to Moses: "How long will these people treat me like dirt? How long refuse to trust me?...I've had enough—I'm going to disinherit them and turn you into an even stronger nation than they!"

As we've talked about before, a covenant is a mutual agreement between two parties. Both parties are responsible for keeping up their end of the bargain. Thus far God has kept one end of the deal, leading and providing for the people, but the people have been fairly lax with their responsibilities, whining the whole way, even here at the edge of the Promised Land! So God's about ready to call it quits with this stubborn people and try again.

But Moses intervenes in an influential way. "But God, if you do this, the Egyptians will hear about it and they'll tell everyone! The whole world will say, "Since God couldn't get these people into the land of promise, he slaughtered them out in the wilderness. God failed." Is that what you want people to think about you? Please, may your power exemplify itself not in violence, but rather through patience, steadfast love, and forgiveness. Please forgive these stubborn people once again just as you have been forgiving them ever since they left Egypt!"

I wonder, how many of us talk to God with this kind of honesty and passion? Moses has a deep love for the people, even if they do cause him a load of grief! And Moses is committed to doing all that he can to make sure the people make it to the land of Promise, even against overwhelming odds.

So when God threatens to disinherit the people, Moses reminds God of God's own words proclaimed in Exodus chapter 34:6-7 "The Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and fourth generation."

Yes, there are consequences for the people's unfaithfulness, but God is first and foremost a God of **mercy, grace, patience, steadfast love, faithfulness, and forgiveness.**

Moses asks God to forgive the people according to God's steadfast love for them.

Once again, Moses provides us an example of countercultural leadership. The people have completely rejected both Moses and God, but Moses stays faithful to the covenant, even seemingly reminding God of God's own covenant obligations.

Now with Moses' bold words to God, we might expect a bolt of lightning with his name on it, but that's not what happens. God hears Moses' plea. And God does respond with forgiveness for the people...although God responds with words of judgment as well.

God forgives the people. God will not disinherit or destroy them after all. But the people's own request to die in the wilderness will also come true. The people will not enter the Promised Land right now, but instead will now spend 40 years wandering in the wilderness, one year for each day that the spies spent scoping out the land. In those 40 years, a generation of people would die and it would be their children who receive their inheritance in the Promised Land. God's steadfast love for the people will continue to the next generation.

So God tells the people to turn around and head away from the Promised Land because God will not be with them if they try to enter.

Well, the people are pretty upset. They say, “Okay, we get it, we were wrong...but now we’re ready, let’s go take the Promised Land!” Isn’t this such a human thing? “Okay, we learned our lesson, and now we want to make it right.” But things are now different. Trust has been broken, and trust is not easily rebuilt. Moses warns the people not to go because God won’t be with them. But the people go anyway...and they are defeated by the Amalekites and Canaanites. This also is a human thing that many of us understand: **stubbornness**. First the people stubbornly refuse to go into the land with God, then they stubbornly try to conquer the land without God!

This whole story is a big turning point in the people’s journey through the wilderness. What could have been a relatively short journey has now turned into many more years of wilderness wanderings. But Moses sticks with the stubborn people, and God sticks with them too, because God is a God of **mercy, grace, patience, steadfast love, faithfulness, and forgiveness**.

### **Scoping out the Kingdom of God**

Well, we are not on a physical journey through wilderness to the Promised Land. But this is our journey too. We are a stubborn people who tend to trust more in **fear** than in **faith**. We find much to be afraid of, especially people who are different than us.

So what does it look like for us to journey through the wilderness toward the Promised Land? Well, when Jesus entered his ministry, he proclaimed a new Promised Land, which he called the Kingdom of God. Now, let’s not be confused, the Kingdom of God is not a physical place to settle down. Rather, God’s Kingdom is the reality of God’s active Reign all around us here and now. God’s kingdom is an alternate reality that is breaking into our world ever since the time of Jesus. God’s Kingdom is Heaven coming to Earth.

And **we** are the spies sent out into the Promised Land to scope things out. **We** are to look for God’s fruitfulness all around us and bring back a report to our friends and families. **We** are to notice God’s active presence all around us, in the beauty of nature, in the compassion of our neighbors, in the joy of children. God’s Kingdom is present and active right here in the middle of rural Kansas. God is working to bring about healing and restoration in our midst if only we have eyes to see.

So I’m sending you out today, this week, with the same mission as the spies who went into the Promised Land. Go and find God and bring back a report.

### **Response/Consequences**

- I. \_\_\_\_\_
- II. \_\_\_\_\_
- III. \_\_\_\_\_

But what kind of report will you bring? Will you, like the 10 spies, look quickly past the fruit and instead notice the barriers to God's Reign: corruption, greed, hate, jealousy? And will you then allow these barriers to make you afraid of doing anything for the benefit of God's Reign?

**Or**, will you, like Caleb and Joshua, focus in on the fruit of God's kingdom: compassion, love, grace, peace? And will you allow this fruitfulness all around us to instill **faith** instead of **fear**?

We are the spies sent to scope things out, but we are also the people who hear the report. This means that we have an obligation to respond to the reports of God's Kingdom. And we **can** respond, like the Israelites, with fear. We can fearfully retreat back into our own days of slavery. **Or**, we **can** respond, like Caleb and Joshua, with courageous **faith**. We can take new risks for the benefit of God's kingdom. When we notice God's presence, we can join God at work. We can practice radical love, grace, and peace.

We are the spies, we are the people who respond to the reports, and we are also countercultural leaders like Moses, Aaron, Caleb, and Joshua. We are leaders who seek to exalt God, not ourselves. We lead the charge into the Promised Land.

Therefore, may we scope out God's kingdom all around. May we respond faithfully to the reports of fruitfulness. And may we courageously lead others into God's kingdom work all around us by joining God in bringing reconciliation and peace.

Amen.