

## **When God Says Go**

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Texts: Numbers 13:1,2, 17-21, 25-4:4; Numbers 14:20-35 (readings at back of sermon)

As you can see, we are leaving the book of Exodus this week, but we are still on the Exodus journey, and this week, just as we are taking a detour from Exodus, the journey also takes a profound detour. To recap the story thus far – hitting only the highlights – Moses had led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt after a protracted negotiation with Pharaoh during which God had afflicted Egypt with 10 plagues. After Pharaoh let them go, he changed his mind and set his army after them. The Israelites were trapped with their backs against the Red Sea, but God gave Moses the power to part the Red Sea so that the people of Israel could go through it, and then the waters came back on the army after the Israelites were safe. Then the time in the wilderness began. The whole journey from Israel has been characterized by a lot of complaining among the people of Israel. And time after time, God comes through and rescues them or feeds them or provides water. Soon, almost two months after they had left Egypt, God gives them the Ten Commandments but while Moses is meeting with God to get them, yet again the people are complaining, as in Moses' absence they become restless. The people pressure Aaron, Moses' brother, to build them an idol, a calf made from gold, so that they might worship something more tangible. Moses is furious when he sees this, and destroys the Ten Commandments, but then he returns to God to get a new set. They spend the rest of the first year really settling into religious routine. We'll hear a little more about that in two weeks – we're slightly out of order today.

We've probably all heard about the forty years that the people of Israel spent in the wilderness. But, during the second year, God was ready to lead the people into Canaan, to the Promised Land. And so we heard in the first reading how they had sent a party of scouts into the land to check it out and returned affirming that Canaan was indeed the land of milk and honey. And one of the scouts, Caleb, encouraged Moses saying, "We must go up and take possession of it for we are more than able to do it." But the people were afraid and wanted to go back to Egypt. Yet again they were complaining and ready to go back into slavery rather than engage with the unknown.

So, following the part that Ted read, things actually got pretty dramatic. Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before the entire assembly, and two of the scouts, Joshua and Caleb, tore their clothes and implored the people to trust that God would lead them safely into the good land of milk and honey. But the people refused, and indeed, threatened to kill Caleb and Joshua.

God was furious. God was, at this point, with this refusal, ready to be done with this people. And we can certainly understand this from God's perspective – after freeing them from Egypt, keeping them safe, providing for their food and drink, providing for their spiritual and moral nurture, after all the complaining, God was bringing them to the place where there would be nothing to complain about, and they balked. And so, God told Moses he was going to strike them all down, except Moses, and start over with Moses to build a new nation.

And Moses started to negotiate with God. And Moses' argument was pretty interesting—he said, “You don't want to do that, because if you do, you're going to look really bad to all the other nations. They know your glory is in the midst of the people and that you appear to them and are before them guiding them as a pillar of cloud, but they'll say even with all that, you weren't able to lead them into the land that you had solemnly promised to give them, so you killed them.” And then Moses crafted an even more clever argument, saying essentially that God had shown his great power in his great loyalty to the people, even though he doesn't forgo punishment. And Moses concluded, “Please forgive the wrongs of these people because of your absolute loyalty, just as you've forgiven these people from their time in Egypt until now.” Moses argues that God's power is shown in loyalty and forgiveness, not in anger and destruction. And this is where the second reading begins.

[Read Numbers 14:20-35]

We take the 40 years in the wilderness for granted, but it was entirely avoidable. Just three weeks ago, when we learned about God leading the people through the Red Sea, we learned that God had said to them “Go forward; journey on” as they were crying out for help, and considering returning to Egypt. They didn't learn from that episode... or any other instance in the journey when again and again God had protected them, cared for them, and always been present among them. They still did not trust God. And so when God said “Go,” they said “No.”

I wonder how often we do that. How often do we squelch the Spirit? How often when God is calling us forward into something uncertain, do we dig in our heels, listen to our fears, and refuse to move? How much of God's mission goes undone because we refuse to do it? How much of the challenges that the Church is facing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have come because the Church hasn't wanted to move? How often has the Church failed to speak truth to power because it might make people mad? How often have we played it safe?

There's a lot of concern about whether denominations are going to survive, whether churches like ours will be around even in 25 years. And my own conviction is that we may not be, if when God says Go, we say No. That's one reason that I have been so excited about this church saying YES. And there have been a number of instances over the years of Frame saying YES. And of members of Frame saying YES. I'll just share one example from the past, but there are many.

Forty-two years ago, when South Vietnam was falling, and people who had worked with the United States needed to get out, four families in this church sponsored Vietnamese families. They helped them to move here, and in at least one case, they welcomed the family into their home. Jack and Cynny Porter welcomed a family they had known for twenty years through Jack's military service, and they helped them get established. The congregation also helped these families, bringing things to the church to help these four families have furnishings for apartments. The father of the family that Jack and Cynny sponsored has recently given \$20,000 to Frame, to help this church continue to reach out. The Session has approved the mission committee's suggestion that this be allocated between Frame's Mission Grants and Frame Feeds over the next four years.

And now, we've been asked to the Warming Shelter, offering overnight housing to homeless men and women during the cold months of the year. It may inconvenience us. Lance Broecker has been working hard to make the adjustments to the building that the inspectors required. It will

cost us a little more for insurance. Things might go wrong. Some of the guests will have issues with drugs or alcohol. Some might have mental illness. Don't get me wrong – Evergreen Community Initiatives, who runs the Warming Shelter, has strong policies and effective staff and there have not been problems. But there are no guarantees. And our Session didn't let the possibilities stand in the way of our saying YES and in this 125<sup>th</sup> year of our building, expanded the hospitality ministry of this building and of our congregation. And many of you have told me how excited you are that we are doing this.

And God continues to have a mission in the world. We will still be called to GO, to speak out, to work for justice – and it may be hard. There may be risks involved. As Jesus made abundantly clear in his teachings and in his own life, discipleship has costs. It takes us out of our comfort zones, and sometimes it takes us out of our safe zones. But the thing is, playing it safe is not what the Gospel requires of us individually or as a congregation. In these days, and really in all ages, the church is called and disciples are called to discern how to respond to a variety of situations. Over the last week, these things have happened:

Last night, the neo-Nazis marched in Charleston again and they said they will keep marching. Racism and white supremacy are still on the rise, both among individuals who feel freer to speak in racist terms because we have a president who does, and among organizations who have said publicly that they believe the president has their back. And he hasn't denied it. For most of the last 40 years, the government has supported and at times promoted civil rights. It seems that may no longer be true.

On Friday, the Justice Department issued a statement asserting that the government would be aggressively defending religious freedom—but in recent years, “religious freedom” has become code language for “freedom to discriminate” against women's access to health care and against equality for LGBTQ persons.

Again this past week, there are rumors of wars. And there were 60 people killed in Las Vegas by a single shooter, and 7 other mass shootings – shootings with 4 or more casualties – over the last week.

These are Gospel issues. And in these times, many of us may understand God to be calling us to GO – go speak, go march, go advocate, go work, go teach and preach the Gospel and follow God into the future. Others may say NO, these issues are no place for the church. Discipleship is hard, and it carries risks. Speech and silence, action and inaction, both are risky. These issues, and others, will lead us to conversations that some of us would rather not have as we seek to discern how God is calling us. This may be a time when the church is deciding whether it will follow God, or choose instead to be in the wilderness until God raises up a new generation. The question as always is “How, then, shall we live?”

Amen.

### **Numbers 13:1-2, 17-21, 25-4:4**

**13** And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, <sup>2</sup> “Send men to spy out the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the children of Israel; from each tribe of their fathers you shall send a man, every one a leader among them....”

<sup>17</sup> Then Moses sent them to spy out the land of Canaan, and said to them, “Go up this way into the South, and go up to the mountains, <sup>18</sup> and see what the land is like: whether the people who dwell in it *are* strong or weak, few or many; <sup>19</sup> whether the land they dwell in *is* good or bad; whether the cities they inhabit *are* like camps or strongholds; <sup>20</sup> whether the land *is* rich or poor; and whether there are forests there or not. Be of good courage. And bring some of the fruit of the land.” Now the time *was* the season of the first ripe grapes.

<sup>21</sup> So they went up and spied out the land from the Wilderness of Zin as far as Rehob, near the entrance of Hamath....

<sup>25</sup> And they returned from spying out the land after forty days.

<sup>26</sup> Now they departed and came back to Moses and Aaron and all the congregation of the children of Israel in the Wilderness of Paran, at Kadesh; they brought back word to them and to all the congregation, and showed them the fruit of the land. <sup>27</sup> Then they told him, and said: “We went to the land where you sent us. It truly flows with milk and honey, and this *is* its fruit. <sup>28</sup> Nevertheless the people who dwell in the land *are* strong; the cities *are* fortified *and* very large; moreover we saw the descendants of Anak there. <sup>29</sup> The Amalekites dwell in the land of the South; the Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites dwell in the mountains; and the Canaanites dwell by the sea and along the banks of the Jordan.”

<sup>30</sup> Then Caleb quieted the people before Moses, and said, “Let us go up at once and take possession, for we are well able to overcome it.”

<sup>31</sup> But the men who had gone up with him said, “We are not able to go up against the people, for they *are* stronger than we.” <sup>32</sup> And they gave the children of Israel a bad report of the land which they had spied out, saying, “The land through which we have gone as spies *is* a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people whom we saw in it *are* men of *great* stature. <sup>33</sup> There we saw the giants (the descendants of Anak came from the giants); and we were like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight.”

**14** So all the congregation lifted up their voices and cried, and the people wept that night. <sup>2</sup> And all the children of Israel complained against Moses and Aaron, and the whole congregation said to them, “If only we had died in the land of Egypt! Or if only we had died in this wilderness! <sup>3</sup> Why has the Lord brought us to this land to fall by the sword, that our wives and children should become victims? Would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?” <sup>4</sup> So they said to one another, “Let us select a leader and return to Egypt.”

### **Numbers 14:20-35**

<sup>20</sup> Then the Lord said, “I do forgive, just as you have asked; <sup>21</sup> nevertheless—as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord— <sup>22</sup> none of the people who have seen my glory and the signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have tested me these ten times and have not obeyed my voice, <sup>23</sup> shall see the land that I swore to give to their ancestors; none of those who despised me shall see it. <sup>24</sup> But my servant Caleb, because he has a different spirit and has followed me wholeheartedly, I will bring into the land into which he went, and his descendants shall possess it. <sup>25</sup> Now, since the Amalekites and the Canaanites live in the valleys, turn tomorrow and set out for the wilderness by the way to the Red Sea.”<sup>[a]</sup>

<sup>26</sup> And the Lord spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying: <sup>27</sup> How long shall this wicked congregation complain against me? I have heard the complaints of the Israelites, which they complain against me. <sup>28</sup> Say to them, "As I live," says the Lord, "I will do to you the very things I heard you say: <sup>29</sup> your dead bodies shall fall in this very wilderness; and of all your number, included in the census, from twenty years old and upward, who have complained against me, <sup>30</sup> not one of you shall come into the land in which I swore to settle you, except Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun. <sup>31</sup> But your little ones, who you said would become booty, I will bring in, and they shall know the land that you have despised. <sup>32</sup> But as for you, your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness. <sup>33</sup> And your children shall be shepherds in the wilderness for forty years, and shall suffer for your faithlessness, until the last of your dead bodies lies in the wilderness. <sup>34</sup> According to the number of the days in which you spied out the land, forty days, for every day a year, you shall bear your iniquity, forty years, and you shall know my displeasure." <sup>35</sup> I the Lord have spoken; surely I will do thus to all this wicked congregation gathered together against me: in this wilderness they shall come to a full end, and there they shall die.