

Like Grasshoppers
Joshua 1: 1-9

Numbers 13: 1-2, 17-33;

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My husband David runs Momentum Bike Clubs, a group mentoring initiative for teenagers around bicycles. When he's starting a new club at a Title I middle school, he asks the principal to recommend particular students; he says, "I don't want your students who make the Dean's list, play sports, or are in the band, or in theatre. I want your students who don't have any activities, the students who need the extra support." Many of these kids score high on the test you don't want a high score on: the test of Adverse Childhood Experiences. They have experienced high incidence of trauma, even in their short lives. As he is recruiting students for the club, he also recruits a different set of adult mentors for each club, because that's really the point: to surround these students with consistent, interested, encouraging adults. Truth be told, no middle schooler has too many adults in his/her life, but these kids don't have enough for sure.

These middle school students and mentors ride their bikes one day a week after school, primarily along the Swamp Rabbit Trail, from their school to Furman, or to Travelers Rest, or to Cleveland Park for a scavenger hunt on bikes.

Momentum also has a group for high school students; these older students go for longer bicycle rides, with more elevation change. They will ride their bikes up Paris Mountain, and then they ride up Caesar's Head, and then they go on even more difficult rides nearby called Skyuka, the Bakery, the Green River Switchbacks, and then, Sassafras Mountain. As these kids are confronting ever more challenging rides, they can get intimidated by the size of the mountain; sometimes they think they can't do it. They see the steep road ahead, their legs hurt, their hearts are pounding with the effort, they're breathing hard, and they're tempted to stop, they're tempted to walk their bike up that hill.

They can feel defeated just by looking at the size of the challenge ahead of them.

Centuries ago, in very different circumstances, the Hebrew people felt the same way; they felt defeated just by looking at the size of the challenge ahead of them. Our text this morning is from the book of Numbers. This story takes place after the people have wandered around in the wilderness for 40 years, after being delivered by God from slavery in Egypt. As this text begins, they are looking across the Jordan River into the Promised Land, but they have not entered it yet. I'm reading from Numbers 13: 1-2, 17-33, and I'll be skipping over the verses that list place names that are hard to pronounce and that are not essential for the flow of the story:

The Lord said to Moses, ²"Send men to spy out the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites; from each of their ancestral tribes you shall send a man, every one a leader among them." ¹⁷So Moses sent them to spy out the land of Canaan, and said to them, "Go up there into the Negeb, and go up into the hill country, ¹⁸and see what the land is like, and whether the people who live in it are strong or weak, whether they are few or many, ¹⁹and whether the land they live in is good or bad, and whether the towns that they live in are unwalled or fortified, ²⁰and whether the land is rich or poor, and whether there are trees in it or not. Be bold, and bring some of the fruit of the land." Now it was the season of the first ripe grapes.

²¹So they went up and spied out the land. ²³And they came to the Wadi Eshcol, and cut down from there a branch with a single cluster of grapes, and they carried it on a pole between two of them. They also brought some pomegranates and figs. ²⁵At the end of forty days they returned from spying out the land.

²⁶And they came to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation of the Israelites; they brought back word to them and to all the congregation, and showed them the fruit of the land. ²⁷And they told Moses, "We came to the land to which you sent us; it flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. ²⁸Yet the people who live in the land are strong, and the towns are fortified and very large." ³⁰But (one spy) Caleb quieted the people before Moses, and said, "Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it." ³¹Then the men who had gone up with him said, "We are not able to go up against this people, for they are stronger than we." ³²So they brought to the Israelites an unfavorable report of the land that they had spied out, saying, "The land that we have gone through as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people that we saw in it are of great size, ³³ and to ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them."

They felt like grasshoppers. These spies were intimidated; they were afraid, because the people in that land were large and their cities had strong walls. These spies felt tiny in comparison and completely inadequate for the difficult task ahead. Like those kids on those bicycles, they felt defeated just by looking at the challenge ahead.

Have you ever felt like a grasshopper, compared to the overwhelming challenge that lay ahead of you?

For someone struggling with addiction, the very idea of living the rest of their lives clean and sober is completely overwhelming; it feels totally unrealistic, out of the question, way too hard. It's easy to feel like a grasshopper. One of the main slogans of AA and NA is "One day at a time." It's too overwhelming to say to myself, "I'm not ever going to take a drink again, in my whole life". But it's more do-able, more realistic, to say, "I'm not going to take a drink today." And then again tomorrow say the same thing. A Bible verse that is related to the

"one day at a time" slogan is from Psalm 119, which we all just sang with Bronwyn: "thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path." God may not give us the floodlight that we want, looking way into the future, but God does give us a lamp for our feet, enough light to see the next step. God provides what we need: light enough for one step at a time, strength enough for one day at a time. Another local group that focuses on addiction recovery is called FAVOR, Faces and Voices of Recovery. Like AA and NA, they too value the wisdom of "one day at a time", but unlike AA, they do not make a big deal out of milestones, such as 30 days sober, 6 months clean, because for some people, it's too defeating to "relapse" and have to "start all over" for a streak. FAVOR says, everybody has good days and bad days; and just because you have a bad day doesn't mean all is lost. If you have a bad day today, you can still have a good day tomorrow, without the overwhelming challenge of "starting all over."

Folks struggling with addiction aren't the only ones who can feel like grasshoppers... It's amazing how quickly our life can change with a medical diagnosis, for ourselves or for someone we love. It can be overwhelming and completely intimidating; we can feel inadequate for the challenges ahead.

Other times we can feel like grasshoppers when we look around at all that our community needs in order for all God's children to thrive: affordable housing, transportation, access to health care.

We can feel like insignificant grasshoppers when we look around at what our nation needs in order for all God's children to thrive: immigration reform, mental health care, criminal justice reform, racial justice, economic justice, safety from gun violence.

We can feel like tiny grasshoppers when we look around at what our world needs in order for all God's children to thrive, especially coordinated action to address the climate crisis.

So, back to the Hebrew people in the wilderness: when they hear this report from the spies, they are afraid, they are completely intimidated, they do not want to proceed in the face of such challenges.

But then two other spies speak up; Joshua and Caleb give different advice than the other spies. Now Joshua and Caleb saw the same large people and same cities with strong walls. But Joshua and Caleb remember something important: they remember that the people have faced huge challenges before, and God has brought them through. They remember that God brought them out of bondage in the land of Egypt; they remember that God provided for them during their 40 years in the wilderness, giving them manna enough for the day (yet another biblical connection to "one day at a time"). Joshua and Caleb know that God's faithfulness in the past assures them that God will continue to be faithful in the

future. They know that the primary thing is not their fears or how small they feel; the primary thing is who God is. They know that God is bigger than their fears. So they encourage the people to proceed, even in the face of those huge challenges that lie ahead.

Just like the Hebrew people so long ago, we have good reason to be afraid. Our fears are not unrealistic; unfortunately, our fears are grounded in reality. Bad things can and do happen, all the time, even to people who don't deserve it. Suffering and pain and injustice and heartbreak are simply part of life on this earth. But, like the Hebrew people so long ago, we have a choice: We can choose to live by our fears, or we can choose to live by our faith. We can choose to focus on our fears, getting immobilized and overwhelmed, or we can choose to keep our eyes on God, looking to God for that lamp unto our feet, looking to God for light enough for this day, looking to God for strength enough, wisdom enough, hope and courage enough for this day. We don't have to start out with enough strength, or courage, or hope, to last us the rest of our lives; we have only to look to God for what we need today.

We can also remember that the Hebrew people did not face their challenges individually, each person on his/her own, but they faced their challenges together. They worked together, they prayed together, they trusted God together, they encouraged each other, they reminded each other of God's faithfulness in the past. God gave them each other as resources, as gifts, for navigating the difficulties of life. God doesn't expect us to make it on our own; we are in this together. We are here for each other.

Not long after Moses heard the reports from these spies, Moses died, and Joshua became the next leader of the people. Talk about feeling like a grasshopper; it must've been very intimidating to Joshua to think that he had to fill Moses' shoes. But God's word came to Joshua; we find this in the book of Joshua, chapter 1, the first 9 verses. Hear these words of God to Joshua: *"Now proceed to cross the Jordan River, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous, for you shall put the people in possession of the land that I swore to their ancestors to give them. Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you. I hereby command you: be strong and of good courage, do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."*

So the next time you face a daunting challenge and feel like a grasshopper, whether it's a personal challenge like addiction or illness or financial struggle or if it's a challenge we face as a people, remember these words: "Be strong and of good courage; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."

Just like Joshua and Caleb drew strength and hope by remembering how God delivered the people from bondage in Egypt and provided for them in the wilderness, we too can draw strength and hope by remembering those tough times we've already been through: remember that God walked with you, and gave you strength to persevere, and brought you out on the other side. Remember the significant people God placed in your life to remind you of God's faithfulness and goodness and mercy and hope. We can also remember those tough times we've been through as a community and as a nation, and notice that God has brought us through; and, God has sometimes even brought good from circumstances that looked like no good could come from it.

Lots of things can make us feel like grasshoppers, but our God is bigger than our fears, and our God gives us what we need to face the challenges that lie ahead. Thanks be to God! Amen.