

**THE VISION SUMMIT –
STAGE 2. SURVEYING THE MOUNTAIN**

Numbers 13:31-33

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September 22, 2019

PREFACE

Today is the birthday of Junko Tabei¹, the Japanese mountaineer who was the first woman to reach the summit of Mount Everest. She was also the first woman to climb all the Seven Summits. The term “Seven Summits” refers to the highest mountain peak on every continent.

Today also marks the second week of the six week Vision Summit Series. We are using the story of Moses, when he stopped to climb Mount Nebo while leading the people of God on the journey to the Promised Land, as a background. This Vision Summit series is an opportunity to find encouragement in our life together, see where God is leading us, and consider how we can pass the torch of faith to the next generation.

SCRIPTURE

But the other men who had explored the land with him disagreed. “We can’t go up against them! They are stronger than we are!”³² So they spread this bad report about the land among the Israelites: “The land we traveled through and explored will devour anyone who goes to live there. All the people we saw were huge.³³ We even saw giants there, the descendants of Anak. Next to them we felt like grasshoppers, and that’s what they thought, too!” (Numbers 13:31-33 NLT).

I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ (Philippians 1:6 NRSV).

MESSAGE

Modern mountain climbing provides many helpful analogies that can be used to describe the life and mission of the church. Climbing is a group effort. The climbers are part of a larger team – most of whom do not make the actual climb but nonetheless are essential for and benefit from a successful climb. You may be the spiritual equivalent of a climber or a sponsor or an outfitter or support staff but what is needed is that we work together as a team in order to have a successful expedition as the people of God.

Mountain climbing is carried out in stages. The first stage is the choosing of the peak. We need to know where we are going. We examined that stage last week.

¹ Junko Tabei is pronounced as JUNK oh tuh BAY.

The second stage involves surveying the mountain. What are the challenges that will be faced? What are the problems that need to be overcome? What is the best route to take? Altitude sickness, temperature, weather, potential falls, hidden crevasses, steep inclines, avalanches, and managing supplies are among the issues that may need to be addressed when surveying a mountain in preparation for a climb.

On the journey of faith we will also face a number of challenges. As the people of God seeking to serve Jesus Christ we have to deal with a great many problems on our spiritual expedition. Now what would a survey of the current religious situation in America reveal to us?

The good news is that most Americans identify as Christians. The bad news is the number is dropping at a significant rate. In 2007, Pew Research² found that 8 out of 10 identified as Christians. Ten years later the number is down to 7 out of 10.

A growing number of Americans have given up on God. They have become “Nones,” a term popularized by Pew Research. And their numbers are increasing. In 2007, the Pew Religious Landscape study found that 16% of the population claimed no religious affiliation. Ten years later the number has grown to nearly 25%.

Mainline churches, which would include the United Methodist Church (UMC), Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), Episcopal Church (TEC), Presbyterian Church (USA) (PCUSA), American Baptist Churches USA (ABCUSA), and the United Church of Christ (UCC), have been in steady decline since the 1970s. In 1972 nearly 9% of the population attended one of these churches on a regular basis.³ In 2016 it was under 3%. According to predictions from the General Social Survey, based on statistical trends, the average mainline church has 21 Easters to go before closing their doors for good.⁴

Since 1998 the Wall Street Journal and NBC News have conducted a national survey on values. The results of the most recent one were released last month. There were a variety of concerns surveyed including belief in God and the importance of religion. Two thirds

² Pew Research is a subsidiary of The Pew Charitable Trusts and conducts public opinion polling and demographic research.

³ 27.8% of the population said they were members of one of these churches. Less than a third of that number, or just under 9%, actually attended.

⁴ See <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2016/september/state-of-american-church-when-numbers-point-to-new-reality.html>

of those ages 55 and older said belief in God and religion were very important. Less than a third of those ages 18-38 said the same. This is an appreciable drop from only two decades ago.

Surveys like these can paint a grim picture. American congregations can easily get discouraged. But this is not the first time in history that God's people have faced challenges.

Over 3,000 thousand years ago, God brought the people of Israel to the edge of the Promised Land. The Israelites sent out a scouting party of twelve persons to investigate. The Book of Numbers (13:25-14:9) tells of their report to the people after their return. The scouts agreed that it was a wonderful and fruitful land, a land flowing with milk and honey (Num 13:27). They even brought back evidence. But they disagreed over what to do next. Caleb and Joshua believed that the Israelites should take God at his Word and enter the land that God had promised to them. The other ten said that was not possible.

The land we traveled through and explored will devour anyone who goes to live there. All the people we saw were huge. We even saw giants there, the descendants of Anak. Next to them we felt like grasshoppers, and that's what they thought, too! (Num 13:32,33).

They described the people of Canaan as giants, and said of themselves:

“We felt like grasshoppers, and that's what they thought, too!” (13:33).

Evidently, the Israelites had an image problem. They thought of themselves as grasshoppers. For them the journey into Canaan was fraught with big and insurmountable difficulties. As a result, they did not make it into the Promised Land. God waited for a whole generation to pass before he gave them another chance.

Having a false image of ourselves can be quite debilitating. If we think we are giants we will look down on others and our self-importance will block the flow of mercy and grace in and through our lives. If we think we are grasshoppers then we will be too afraid to risk anything for the cause of faith and the Gospel.

The truth is we are neither grasshoppers nor giants but the beloved children of God.

The tragedy of the story in Numbers is that the people had a false image of themselves. That false image was a form of rebellion against God (see 14:1-9). Churches often suffer from the same problem today.

The first symptom of this rebellion is complaining.

“And all the Israelites complained” (Num 14:2).

They complained about being there. They complained about the problems they faced. They complained about the leadership. Then their complaints became an excuse for not going forward at all.

Thom Rainer, author of *Scrappy Church*, says that many modern congregations major in complaining, also:

"We can't compete with the megachurch in our town!"

"We can't reach young families. They all go to the big church that has all the children's and student stuff."

"We don't have the money or the people the other churches have."⁵

Soon the complaints become excuses:

We don't have enough resources. The people in our community would never be a part of our church. We don't have the right leaders. Our facilities are in terrible shape. We are too small to make a difference.⁶

Rainer says that scrappy churches are churches that move from excuses to action. They stop blaming others. They stop comparing themselves to other churches. They deal with conflict in healthy ways. They become lifelong learners.

He also says that making this change is not easy. It may require major adjustments. But, over time, the fruit will show.

The second symptom of rebellion is a strong desire to go back. The Israelites said:

Wouldn't it be better for us to return to Egypt?" . . . "Let's choose a new leader and go back to Egypt!" (Num 14:3,4).

⁵ Thom Rainer, *Scrappy Church* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2018), 4,5.

⁶ Rainer, 33.

In contrast, Caleb and Joshua wanted to go forward. They said:

And if the LORD is pleased with us, he will bring us safely into that land and give it to us. It is a rich land flowing with milk and honey. ⁹Do not rebel against the LORD, and don't be afraid of the people of the land. They are only helpless prey to us! They have no protection, but the LORD is with us! Don't be afraid of them!" (Num 14:8-9 NLT).

Unfortunately, the desire to go back is still strong today. What is the difference between "the Amish" and "Presbyterians"? Answer: 100 years. The Amish are a Christian sect stuck in the 1850s. Whereas Presbyterians are a Christian sect stuck in the 1950s. (To be fair, you could substitute the names of many other American churches.)

The 1950s and 60s were the golden years of American church life. With relatively little effort, pews were filled and Sunday Schools were bursting at the seams. But the American landscape has changed and today, according to The American Church Research Project only 17.3% of the population actually attends a church (Michigan is slightly higher at 19.5%).

If we want to reach that 82.7% of the population outside the church we can't return to the 1950s. We can't go back. We need to go forward. We need to be like Caleb and Joshua. Our highest desire must be to please God. And with confidence in God we continue forward on the journey of faith.

Surveying the situation is important for any kind of expedition. It is helpful to know the challenges that will be faced. But perhaps the biggest challenge has to do with attitude. Lack of confidence has ended many an expedition.

After surveying a mountain, climbers may decide not to climb that particular mountain. They may feel that the challenges are too great. They may conclude that the effort may not be worth the risk, that it is too dangerous.

A guide was leading a group of people on a hike near some mountains. He pointed at a majestic looking peak and said, "This one is the most popular with mountain climbers. Most days you have a few teams doing a climb." A woman asked, "How long does it take to get to the top?" The guide replied, "The ascent, depending on your skill level can take between four and seven hours." A man asked, "How long does it take to get down?" The guide answered, "Well, you can do it in about 20 seconds but that's generally not recommended."

After making a survey, a climber may decide not to climb the mountain or may even decide to give up climbing altogether. And that is fine. Because, after all, climbing mountains is an optional, recreational adventure and not one of life's necessities.

But this is where the analogy breaks down when it comes to representing the journey of faith for the people of God. For us this is not an optional exercise. We may need to choose a different route. We may need to come up with different tools and resources. But this spiritual expedition, that is, this mission of the church of Jesus Christ must continue if we want to be faithful to the Lord.

We need confidence. Our English word confidence comes from a Latin expression meaning, "with full reliance upon." This is similar to how the New Testament understands confidence. Paul writes:

I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ (Phil 1:6).

The word that is translated as "confident" is from a Greek term meaning "reliance or trust based on the persuasion of truth." If you are persuaded something is true and you act on that truth then you are expressing confidence. Paul was persuaded of the truth of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. He was willing to act on that truth and urges us to do the same.

We need to trust God. We need to have a full reliance upon God. We need to believe that whatever God has begun in us God will bring it to completion. In other words – God's not done with us yet!