

"GRASSHOPPERS, GIANTS, AND GOD"
JUNE 24, 1990

TEXT: Numbers 13:33 "And there we saw the Nephilim, the sons of Anak, who come from the Nephilim, and we seemed to ourselves as grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them."

At first glance, life today seems far removed from those who wandered through the Sinai more than three thousand years ago. Over the years, almost everything has changed --and changed tremendously. But, as someone once said, "Just because everything has changed does not mean that anything is different." And I decided to preach on this passage from the book of Numbers because it speaks of human needs which today are just as real and just as challenging as they ever were.

As the chapter opens, we find the children of Israel on what they hope will be the last lap of their passage through the dessert. Before them lies the land which God has promised them, a land flowing with milk and honey. There is just one little problem. Someone else already lives there, and, not knowing much about them, Moses sends out spies to reconnoiter.

In part of the story which I did not read we are told that he chose twelve men, one from each of the twelve tribes, and said to them, "Go up into the Negev yonder, and go up into the hill country and see what the land is, and whether the people who dwell there are strong or weak, whether they are few or many, and whether the land they dwell in is good or bad . . . and bring [back] some of the fruit of the land."

So they went. To avoid detection they probably hid during the day and traveled only at night. But even in the darkness what they saw was impressive. After forty days, they returned to Moses saying, "We came to the land to which you sent us; it flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit." And they brought out figs and pomegranates, and a cluster of grapes so large that it took two men to carry it.

Even allowing for a little exaggeration, at least as far as those grapes were concerned, the land was obviously as fertile and pleasant as God said it would be. But taking it would not be easy. As the scouts reported, "The people who dwell in the land are strong and the cities are fortified and very large; and besides, we saw the descendants of Anak there."

That was what frightened them, the descendants of Anak, the Nephilim, the giants. We do not know much about them, but apparently they were men of huge stature whose very size intimidated others. Some scholars suggest that Goliath was one of their race. At any rate, they certainly frightened Moses' scouts. Only Caleb wanted to get on with the conquest. The others painted a grim picture of the dangers involved. "We are not able to go against the people," they said, "for they are stronger than we. We seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them."

They wanted that land. They believed God meant them to have it. But they allowed themselves to be intimidated. Frightened by what they saw, they lost confidence in themselves. They even lost confidence in God. And, as a result, instead of possessing God's promise, they wandered through the wilderness till their whole frightened generation was gone.

I wonder how many of us may have had the same kind of experience? How many of us have had something we wanted: a part in the school play, a better job, a date with Miss or Mister "Right," a larger, more expensive house, a business of our own. Something that was pleasant and desirable and within our reach. Something we wanted, but which we lost because we let some one or some thing intimidate us. Because between us and our Promised Land there loomed giants as terrifying as the sons of Anak. Because in our sight we became as grasshoppers and let ourselves be turned away.

Life is like that --full of giants. And sometimes it does not take very much to turn us away. What we need is to hear a Caleb saying, "We are well able to overcome it." Or a Joshua crying, "Be not frightened, neither be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go." Someone to remind us that what really counts in life is not how things look in our eyes, or in the giant's eyes, but how they look in God's eyes.

And, in God's eyes, even the most fearful giants are all cut down to size. That is one reason why the Bible is so relevant today. It is full of giants. And full of men and women who foolishly allowed themselves to be intimidated. Moses' scouts were frightened by the sons of Anak. Saul's army was terrified in the presence of Goliath, another swaggering giant who threatened to destroy them, to crush them like so many bugs. Elisha's servant trembled before the army of Syria. And even Peter cowered in terror from the giants that roamed the streets of Jerusalem the night that Jesus was betrayed.

But, there are also those who saw beyond the fearful things in life, men and women whose trust in God cut life's giants down to size. Caleb was one of those. As we have seen, had it been up to him, the Jews would have swarmed into the Promised Land forty years before they did. And David, though still just a boy, turned back the taunts of Goliath, saying, "You come to me with a sword and with a spear, and with a javelin; but I come to you in

the name of the Lord of Hosts" (I Samuel 17:45)

When Elisha's servant trembled because of the Syrian chariots, Elisha calmly replied, "Fear not, for those that are with us are more than are with them." "And the Lord opened the young man's eyes and he saw; and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire around Elisha." (II Kings 6:16-17)

And when Peter and John were confronted by the chief priests, they calmly answered, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot but speak what we have seen and heard." (Acts 4:19-20)

What gives us the courage to see life's giants through God's eyes? David H. C. Read writes, "It can only be the overwhelming conviction that the spiritual world is man's ultimate environment, that the Kingdom of God is infinitely more powerful and enduring than any earthly kingdom, that God himself is no ancient symbol but a living presence, the one with whom every single one of us, every power on earth, has in the end to reckon . . . [Christ's] word is explicit: "Be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do." "No more that they can do." This is the Achilles' heel of all mortal giants. They have no jurisdiction over the soul of men. Not one of them can touch that inner life that is held in the grip of God.

Understanding that gives us new eyes with which to see the world. No matter how we feel, we know that we are not grasshoppers. We are children of God, upheld by the living Christ. Though our enemies bully and threaten, though they can sometimes make life painful, they have no power over that in us which is most real and most lasting. To know and to trust the living God allows us to meet life's worst without fear and without surrender. "Be not frightened, neither be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."