



The Case of the Faithful Senior Citizen

(or, You are Never Too Old)

Joshua 14:6-14

May 12, 2013

About a month ago, I picked out the passage you will hear in a few minutes. What I didn't realize when I chose it: today is Mother's Day. When I was reminded it was Mother's Day, I began to question my selection because the passage is about a man, and talks about spying, war, fortified cities, driving people out of their land. Not exactly great topics for Mother's Day.

But as I thought about it, I realized this really is a great passage for Mother's Day. Yes, it does speak about war and spying, but it also talks about courage, strength, conviction, serving and following God – all qualities needed to be a mother, grandmother and great grandmother.

But I also chose this passage for another reason. The main character is one of my favorite people in all the Bible, and since I am a woman what a better thing for me to do on Mother's Day than to introduce you to one of my favorite biblical characters, a man named Caleb.

Oh, one more thing: I looked up the lectionary passages for Father's Day when Larry preaches, and lo and behold, the Gospel lesson (which Larry tends to pick) is about a woman. So, Larry, let's make a deal. I preach about a man on Mother's Day and you preach about a woman on Father's Day.

So, I invite you to turn with me to Joshua 14.

Prayer: Gracious God, open up your Word to us this day. We ask your Holy Spirit not only to teach us something about you, but to have that knowledge enter into our hearts and souls, so we may live it as well. In Jesus name, Amen.

Before we read, I need to put our passage in context because it is a story within a larger story. So hang with me as I give you the background to this passage because it is very important for what I want to say to you today (found in Numbers 13 and 14).

The Israelites have escaped Egypt where they were slaves. God has given them a promise of a land that will be all their own. They must travel to this new land, and it takes them 18 months to get there. All the while, God provides for their every need...food, water, shelter.

When they get to the edge of the promised land, however, there is a slight catch: the land is occupied. So Moses sends in 12 spies to scout out the land and bring back a report, so they will know their next move. It takes the 12 spies 40 days to explore the land.

When they come back, these 12 men make their report, but there is a problem: they have two different conclusions as to what the people should do next. The majority report was given by 10 of the men: the land is beautiful just the way God said it was. They came back with pomegranates and grapes and figs. It's a land like nothing they have ever experienced before. They are used to desert, and here truly is a lush fertile land. The people are really getting excited now!

But wait. There is more to their report. There is a problem: giants live there! We can't take the land, the spies said; we can't beat them. They are stronger than us. We look like grasshoppers compared to them. And the people listen to this report, and as they do, became fearful and they weep and they complain against their leaders.

Now, if you noticed that report was given by 10 men...but there were 12 spies. There is another report given by the remaining two spies. These two men agreed with everything the other 10 men reported, but they came to a different conclusion. God promised this land to us. God is giving it to us. God will be with us. Let's go in.

What to do? Two reports with two different actions. Who did the people listen to? The majority. They are too scared to go in.

God says ok, if you won't take my gift then I will give it to someone else. You will wander in the wilderness for 40 years until you all die out, and your children will inherit the promised land....all of you will die except for two people. The two spies who gave the positive report – Joshua and Caleb.

Fast forward 45 years. The people wander in the wilderness for 40 of those years; the rebellious generation dies out. A new generation grows up and enters the promise land, and it takes them 5 years to conquer it. They are now ready to divide the land among the 12 tribes. Caleb decides now is the time to remind Joshua of what happened 45 years ago. That is where we pick up our scripture passage.

As I read this passage, see if you can discover what Caleb is known for.

Read Joshua 14:6-14

The word of the Lord....

Did you figure out what Caleb is known for?

Almost every time Caleb's name is mentioned in scripture (and he is not mentioned all that often) it says this: Caleb, he followed God wholeheartedly. It was mentioned 3 times in our short scripture passage today (verse 8, 9, 14). His name comes up 3 more times in the Bible (Numbers 14:24, 32:12; Deuteronomy 1:36), and each time it says, "Caleb, he followed God wholeheartedly."

This is why Caleb is one of my favorite characters of scripture – because he followed God wholeheartedly. Obviously, this characteristic of Caleb is important because the name of Caleb cannot be said without saying, "He followed God wholeheartedly."

What can we learn from Caleb? What does it mean to follow God wholeheartedly?

First of all, following God wholeheartedly means, well, following. Remember when Jesus first called his disciples. He said, "Follow me." Walk where I walk. Go where I go. We are called to follow, not lead and hope God will follow us. It's not running ahead of God and asking God to bless what we do. And, it is not recognizing where God is working, but refusing to follow as the Israelites did. Following God wholeheartedly is following God where God is already working.

Following God wholeheartedly may mean walking forward with courage. Remember the grasshopper complex? The 10 spies who saw the giants said they felt like grasshoppers next to the giants. They were already defeated in their minds. Caleb never denied the giants; he just knew that God was bigger than the giants.

Following God wholeheartedly may mean waiting for God's promise for a very long time. Caleb had to wait 45 years for the promise of God – the promise of land. You may be saying, "Well, God hasn't given me a promise like that." You are right, God has not given you a promise, God has given us thousands of promises, all written in this Word. I will never leave you. I will guide you. I will forgive your sins. I will crown you with love and compassion. I will give you a future and a hope. I will renew you. I will listen and answer your prayers. I will supply your daily bread. I will guide and protect you. The Israelites forgot that God provides. They were intimidated by what they saw, not encouraged by the provision of God. They focused on the people giants, not the giant

promises of God. To follow God wholeheartedly is to have expectant faith, to believe on the promises of God. That yes, God will come through.

Following God wholeheartedly may mean serving God when you are very old! Caleb was 85 years old when he decided to take on giants. That's pretty old to take on giants. You are never too old to serve God. We have been called to a whole life with God that goes on until we are called to our eternal home. So I am sorry to say – there is no retirement in the Christian life, even in a retirement community!. Serving God is a life-calling. And I have a feeling it will continue on in our new walk with God after we leave this earth, so you might as well get used to it now.

Following God wholeheartedly means following God cheerfully. Caleb sounds like a pretty cheerful guy to me. Here I am, God, I'm 85 years old and I'm ready to go! He served God cheerfully and with great enthusiasm.

Following God wholeheartedly means being a partner with God. Caleb said "with God helping me, I can obtain the land." We say that a lot around here. When we ordain elders and deacons, and ask them if they will be faithful to God, their answer is: "I will, with God' help." When we bring new members into this congregation, we ask them to be faithful to God and this congregation, their answer is, "I will, with God's help." When we commission a new Stephen Minister, we ask them to serve God and others faithfully, they say, "I will, with God's help." Knowing that we cannot live the Christian life on our own and must depend on God's help to do so means to follow God wholeheartedly.

To those of you who are leaders in the church, this is for you as you are called to follow God wholeheartedly. You have the responsibility to lead your people rightly before God. The 10 spies who gave the majority report lead the people to see fear and unbelief. As leaders, we are not to overwhelm our people with many problems but direct them to Jesus Christ and tell them that our God is able: without Christ we can do nothing but in Christ we can do all things through Him that strengthens us. That is the report we are to bring - our God is able! Look not to circumstances, look to the living God. This is following God wholeheartedly.

Following God wholeheartedly means wanting to fully experience what God has planned for you. "Give me this hill country," Caleb said to Joshua. Caleb wanted to experience the promise God had given him so many years ago.

I knew without a doubt that God had lead me to seminary, but I didn't start out well in the pastorate. My first job in a church was as an intern in a Baptist church. I was let go from that job after preaching, ironically, on Mother's Day. (Someday I'll tell you that whole story.) I lost my first pastorate as an ordained pastor within 2 years, frankly, because I just did not do well.

And in those wilderness times after losing those jobs, I remember saying to God, “I know without a doubt you lead me to Seminary. For my whole life you have trained me to be a pastor. I won’t give up. I want to fully experience what you have planned for me.” Following God wholeheartedly means wanting to fully experience what God has planned for you. I can tell you with certainty I am doing that today.

If you read our email blast from last Thursday, I mentioned that I would reveal today if I had a tombstone what it would say. Can you guess? If I had a tombstone it would say, “She followed God wholeheartedly.”

And one last thought about following God wholeheartedly. You may have a translation of the Bible that says this: Caleb followed God fully. Literally meaning he filled after God. To follow God wholeheartedly is to be filled with God. So we come to worship to be filled. We study the scriptures together to be filled. We pray so we will be filled with God.

So, I am going to end with a prayer so you may be filled with God. You may recognize this prayer— I have said it several times here in worship. I say this prayer every morning for myself – I pray it now for you. Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, I pray this day we will live in your presence and please you more and more.

Lord Jesus Christ, I pray this day we will take up our cross and follow you.

Holy Spirit, I pray this day we will be filled with all your fullness and your fruit will ripen within us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control.

Amen