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Sermon Series: *Looking Up*, No.1

Yes, We Can!

January 16, 2022

**Numbers 13:1-3, 17-30 (NIV)**

The Lord said to Moses, <sup>2</sup> "Send some men to explore the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites. From each ancestral tribe send one of its leaders."

<sup>3</sup> So at the Lord's command Moses sent them out from the Desert of Paran. All of them were leaders of the Israelites...

<sup>17</sup> When Moses sent them to explore Canaan, he said, "Go up through the Negev and on into the hill country. <sup>18</sup> See what the land is like and whether the people who live there are strong or weak, few or many. <sup>19</sup> What kind of land do they live in? Is it good or bad? What kind of towns do they live in? Are they unwalled or fortified? <sup>20</sup> How is the soil? Is it fertile or poor? Are there trees in it or not? Do your best to bring back some of the fruit of the land." (It was the season for the first ripe grapes.)

<sup>21</sup> So they went up and explored the land from the Desert of Zin as far as Rehob, toward Lebo Hamath. <sup>22</sup> They went up through the Negev and came to Hebron, where Ahiman, Sheshai and Talmi, the descendants of Anak, lived. (Hebron had been built seven years before Zoan in Egypt.) <sup>23</sup> When they reached the Valley of Eshkol, they cut off a branch bearing a single cluster of grapes. Two of them carried it on a pole between them, along with some pomegranates and figs. <sup>24</sup> That place was called the Valley of Eshkol because of the cluster of grapes the Israelites cut off there. <sup>25</sup> At the end of forty days they returned from exploring the land.

<sup>26</sup> They came back to Moses and Aaron and the whole Israelite community at Kadesh in the Desert of Paran. There they reported to them and to the whole assembly and showed them the fruit of the land. <sup>27</sup> They gave Moses this account: "We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit. <sup>28</sup> But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of Anak there. <sup>29</sup> The Amalekites live in the Negev; the Hittites, Jebusites and Amorites live in the hill country; and the Canaanites live near the sea and along the Jordan."

<sup>30</sup> Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, "We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it."

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We are in the book of Numbers this morning, if you'd care to turn back there.

This book of Numbers reports some of the greatest events and accounts of the Bible, but they're hidden from many, because many people look at the title and presume it's just a bunch of lists of numbers and names.

That's a shame, and after this morning, I hope we'll see it differently.

We're in Numbers, Chapter 13.

Before we start, let me mention two disclaimers.

First, the title I chose for this particular message of this series, "Yes, We Can," was not inspired by former President Obama's campaign slogan, nor was it inspired by the "Bob the Builder" cartoon. It actually comes from something in the text here that we'll talk about in a few minutes.

Second, you should know that the picture on the front of the worship folder [a balding man with shaved head looking up, shown from nose up] is not me,

although I admit it does look something like me from about "here" [forehead] up.

Actually, it looks like more and more of us from about here [forehead] up.

So, I just want to be clear about those things.

I have observed recently, and maybe you have too, that between COVID and all its effects, and politics and the weather issues we've had and inflation, rising prices, supply shortages, personal struggles and everything else that's either *going* on or *not* going on in our world today, there seem to be more and more people who are looking *down*. They walk through their days with their heads hung...either in depression or anxiety or grief or hopelessness or some combination of those.

Do you see that?

I see it in our culture. People are looking down, *physically*.

But people are also looking down *emotionally*. They're retreating into themselves. They're slowing Ye

Now, some of this our government has either *asked* or *forced* us to do, and I know very well the great debate that goes on as to what's effective and what isn't in handling this virus.

But regardless of what you think about that, what's important here is that we don't make this practice of looking down *permanent*.

As healthy as it may (or may not) be to live life looking down, as we've been asked to do, figuratively speaking, for a time, it is absolutely *unhealthy* to *keep* looking down—to come to the place where we adopt that posture as *normal*.

*That*, in fact, is *deadly*, because we were not made to live like that.

The human race was not made to, either physically or emotionally, look down for any extended length of time.

There is a reason that people who physically walk around like this (head down) all the time—the Eeyores of our world—there's a reason they have sore necks and bad backs and poor posture and usually worse conditions than that.

We weren't created to live life looking down—neither *physically* nor *emotionally and mentally*.

People who live their lives looking for the worst, planning to lose, retreating into themselves, disconnecting from society (it really doesn't matter if you're wired as an introvert or extrovert), people who, for whatever reason, disengage for too long develop all sorts of mental and emotional and relational pains.

Even spiritual pains.

And the reason for that is that we were made—we were created—to engage with other people. We were made to be together.

The whole idea behind God saying, "It is not good for man to be alone," does not just apply to marriage. Long

before He made us for marriage, He made us for Himself, and for one other.

We reach our best potential when we're engaged with God and with others.

We're at our best when we get out of ourselves, when we reject that temptation to look *down*, and instead choose to look *up*—look up to *God*, to those around us, and to the needs of our world—and then begin to use the days we're given to engage with others, to participate in community.

Now I know some might say, "But look at how bad things are in our world today. It's depressing! That's why I'm looking down."

And it's true there are depressing moments in life. We all experience down times.

But no matter how bad things look, there is also *great good* in our world today, *because God is in our world today*.

God is in our world.

God's Holy Spirit is in our world, and with Him, even the *impossible is possible*.

With Him, what may *appear* to be reality may *not actually be* reality.

As long as God remains in our equation, what might appear to be a foregone conclusion is not necessarily so.

Which means that, as long as God is part of our situation, we can look *up!*

As long as God is present in our world, we can have hope!

As long as God is with us, we can get out of ourselves and risk engagement and follow the plan God has for us.

In fact, in order *to even begin* to follow the plan God has for us, we *have to be looking up*.

To follow God, we have to look up.

That is one of the most important messages of this book—both the Bible in general, and the book of Numbers in particular: in order to follow God, we *have to look up*, and we *can look up* because God is very much a part of life.

As we follow the account of the Hebrew people, I tend to be surprised that so often they seemed to forget, and they needed to be reminded of this fact that God was part of their world.

I mean, we read about all the tremendous things God did for them, especially in their escape from Egypt: the signs and wonders He performed, the plagues upon the Egyptians, His leading and feeding and provision that was so evident. We read about all that and we think, "Man, how come they couldn't seem to remember all that God had already done for them? His presence had been so evident. Why would they even think of questioning His direction, His power, His ability?"

We think, "Man, if I'd have been there, I would have done so many things differently than they did!"

Ah—that's easy to say as we stand *here*, on *this* side of *time* and *Jesus* and the *Holy Spirit*.

But the fact is, our "forgetters" work pretty well too, don't they?

At least mine does.

You know, one thing I think the fall really damaged in us is our ability to remember, and then to act on what we remember—what we know is true.

That seems to be especially the case where God is concerned, and our enemy capitalizes on that whenever He can.

Satan uses our forgetfulness of God to push our heads down—to turn our attention inward, to anticipate only the worst and then to conclude that all is lost.

The enemy did this to Israel over and over again.

God would carry them along—He'd give them an enormous victory that could only be attributed to Him.

Yet as soon as the crisis was past, it seemed God's people completely forgot what He was capable of, and they'd either start *complaining*, or they'd shrink back in *fear*, or they'd be reduced to *wallowing in self-pity*.

Time and again, God would say to them, "Here, do this," and they would say, "No—we can't," and our Numbers passage gives us a great example of this.

Through all the ups and downs of their Egypt and post-Egypt experience, finally they arrive at Kadesh and come to the moment God had in mind for them ever since Abraham.

Notice that it's God's idea to send the group of leaders to check out the land. God tells this to Moses and Moses does what He's told: he chooses one person from each tribe for this special reconnaissance team.

Now, at this point, one might wonder why this step was even needed. I mean, God certainly knew what the land and the people were like.

But you see, God gives us the responsibility to think and reason and investigate and process and choose. Certain things God does *for* us, and certain things God gives *us* to do *for ourselves*—and we'll not always know why He does the one or the other. All we can do is to do as He says and know that His way is the best.

Here, what I'd imagine God was doing was giving these leaders the opportunity for faith—to exercise and build their faith muscle through giving them the freedom to choose: would they believe God or just what they saw with their eyes?

Was there a way to believe both?

They had to choose what they would do.

You know, let me say here, it's subtle instances like this one that make me, theologically, a Wesleyan—that keep me from being a Calvinist or part of the reformed branch of the Church. The Bible is utterly full of moments like this where God asks people to choose, and I just can't believe that God would ask people to do something that really makes no difference. If God is honest and genuine, then what He asks of us matters.

And our answers matter, you see?

The recon team is dispatched from the southern border of Canaan, and they travel north, past Beersheba, where Isaac had settled 300 years earlier, past Shechem, where Jacob built an altar and bought land for a tomb, clear up to, verse 21 says, the entrance of Hamath—way up north, near Damascus.

There they turned around and headed back south, through the more fertile areas, past Hebron where

Abraham was buried. On their way, verse 23 says they stopped and cut a branch with a single cluster of grapes, as Moses had asked them to do back in verse 20, since it was grape season. It took two people to carry it back to Kadesh, and there they gave a report of their 40-day trip.

Imagine the tension in the camp as the people waited and watched for the team's return. This was back in the time of wonder, you see—before technology let us be in constant communication with everybody.

And imagine the excitement when the team carried that branch and fruit into the camp and their excitement in the confirmation that the land was as good as promised.

But that's where the celebration ended, because that's where the agreement ended. From there, the report divided because the reporters' perspective differed.

It was like when the Supreme Court issues a majority report and a dissent.

The majority report went like this: "The fruit is *huge*, but the people are *huger*, and we'd never be able to overcome them and take the land. They're too powerful and too numerous, so any idea of conquest and occupation would be doomed from the start."

This was the conclusion of ten of the twelve spies.

But two saw things differently.

Caleb, the tribe of Judah's representative, and Joshua, the leader from the tribe of Ephraim, took exception.

In this account, verse 30 there says it's Caleb who "*silenced the people before Moses and said, 'We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it.'*"

Can we take it?

"Yes, we can!"

I guess it is a little like Bob the Builder there.

Caleb says, "Yes, we can!"

So, how can it happen that twelve people see the same thing and have the same experience, yet disagree about what it means?

How can ten say, "No way," and two say, "Yes, we can!"

Here's how: *ten* were looking *down* and only *two* were looking *up*.

The ten *overestimated* the difficulty of taking the land, because they *underestimated* the power of God.

The ten could see no further than the extent of their own strength. It was all human-to-human comparison for them, because somehow they'd left God out of their life's equation.

From that point of view, of course, there was *no way* that Israel, in her own strength, could take on all those nations and peoples.

The ten were right to doubt *Israel's* strength, but they were wrong to doubt Israel's *God's* strength.

But they did, and so they were overcome with defeatism and pessimism about their future.

But Caleb and Joshua saw the future differently.

Because they'd kept God *in* their lives, they were able to factor Him into this circumstance. They were able to take God's *power* and God's *armies* and God's *promise* into account.

Somehow, they were able to remember what the rest of the spies did not: that God had done far harder things than this in days past, and so they were looking up to God in expectation for the days to come.

You see, it wasn't just wishful thinking or youthful exuberance that drove Caleb and Joshua. Their confidence was based in reality. Though they were the voice of the minority, they were the voice of both faith and reason. And they should have prevailed.

But, of course, they did not.

The ten went out and spread their pessimism, and in the end the people forgot about the giant clusters of grapes and remembered only the giants. And so we see, on in chapter 14, that all that looking down of the ten led to nearly the *whole camp* looking down. The whole group began to complain and weep. They grumbled against Moses and Aaron. They began looking backward, talking again about going back to Egypt.

How sad that the people whom God had delivered from the ancient East's greatest empire are now in lament because the Canaanites and Amorites stood in their way.

They even began to talk about choosing a new leader.

And when Joshua and Caleb spoke up again, the people threatened to stone them—just as centuries later Stephen, another teller of truth, would be stoned.

And that's when God got mad.

Verse 10 there says He appeared at the Tent of Meeting in front of the whole camp, and He said to Moses, "*How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in me in spite of all the miraculous things I've done? I will strike them down and start over again with you!*"

Then Moses, bless him, prayed for the Israelites—and God forgave them.

But God still denied all who denied Him entry into Canaan, and sentenced them to dwell in the wilderness for 40 years—one year for every day of the scouting expedition.

Their apprehensions became their future, you see?

In the end, only Joshua and Caleb would see the land.

Why? God says there in verse 24: "*Because my servant Caleb has a different spirit and follows me wholeheartedly.*"

A different spirit. A spirit that looks up.

The one who remembers what God has done in the past is the one who brings God into the present.

And the one who brings God into the present is the one who can live looking up!

It's so easy for God's people to view today's hardships as more significant than anything of the past through which God has brought His people.

But that's simply not so.

Just as it was in Joshua's day, so has it been in every day—and so it is today: God's people have always *been* and will always *be* confronted with a wide disparity of interpretations of the same facts and of similar personal experiences and social events.

Yet, to interpret them correctly and faithfully, we must remember God and include Him in the equation.

That's what allows us to respond to life looking up.

And we can!

Because of who God is and what God's done, we can live life looking up!

Now, as we do, we can count on being in the minority. We'll have to brace ourselves for that.

But we must have that same "different" spirit as Caleb to enjoy all the blessings of God.

What is it that's happening in your life that is tempting you to look down? Can you identify it?

And can you decide right now that you're not going to live life looking down?

Ask God for the mind to remember Him,  
the eyes to see Him,  
the faith to trust Him,

and a spirit that is different from most in our world – and frankly much of the Church, a different Spirit that allows us to live life looking up.

Prayer

Closing Song: *Who Is on the Lord's Side?* (vv. 1, 4)

Benediction:

Harry Emerson Fosdick summed today's theme up so well when He wrote, "It's not so much what life brings to us in her hands as it is what we bring to life in our spirits that makes the difference between people."

That's what made the difference between Caleb and Joshua – and the rest of their team.

It can make just as big a difference today.