

When to Move Forward

A Sermon by the Rev. Malcolm G. Smith

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Readings

Numbers 13:25-33 (Kempton Project Translation, modified)

²⁵ And they returned from exploring the land at the end of forty days.

²⁶ And they went and came to Moses, and to Aaron, and to all the congregation of the children of Israel, to the wilderness of Paran, toward Kadesh; and returned with word to them, and to all the congregation, and showed them the fruit of the land. ²⁷ And they described it to him, and said, "We came to the land where you sent us, and it indeed flows with milk and honey; and this is its fruit. ²⁸ Nevertheless, the people dwelling in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified, and very large; and also we saw the children of Anak there. ²⁹ Amalek dwells in the land of the south; and the Hittites, and the Jebusites, and the Amorites, dwell in the mountains; and the Canaanites dwell by the sea, and by the side of the Jordan."

³⁰ And Caleb made the people keep silent before Moses, and said, "Going up let us go up, and possess it; for prevailing we will prevail against it."

³¹ But the men who went up with him said, "We are not able to go up against the people; for they are stronger than we are." ³² And they brought out an evil report of the land which they had explored to the children of Israel, saying, "The land, which we have passed through to explore it, it is a land that eats up the people dwelling in it; and all the people that we saw in the midst of it are men of measure. ³³ And there we saw the Nephilim, the sons of Anak, who are from the Nephilim; and we were in our own eyes as grasshoppers, and so we were in their eyes."

Revelation 5:11-14 (NKJV)

¹¹ Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne, the living creatures, and the elders; and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands, ¹² saying with a loud voice:

"Worthy is the Lamb who was slain
To receive power and riches and wisdom,
And strength and honor and glory and blessing!"

¹³ And every creature which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, I heard saying:

"Blessing and honor and glory and power
Be to Him who sits on the throne,
And to the Lamb, forever and ever!"

¹⁴ Then the four living creatures said, "Amen!" And the twenty-four elders fell down and worshiped Him who lives forever and ever.

Divine Providence §59

[T]hroughout its progress in a person, Divine providence looks to that person's eternal state.
[P]eople who think in terms of time and space find this hard to grasp, not only because they love temporal things, but also because they think from the viewpoint of someone present in the world, and not from the viewpoint of someone present in heaven. Heaven to them is as far away as the end of the earth.

On the other hand, people who are in the Divine, because they think from the Lord, think also in terms of eternity when they think from the viewpoint of the present, saying to themselves, "What is something that is not eternal? Aren't temporal things nothing at all by comparison, and don't they become nothing when they end?"

To think in this way is to think... in terms of eternity when thinking from the viewpoint of one's present circumstance. And when a person thinks and at the same time lives in this way,... the Divine providence looks... to the state of that person's eternal life in heaven and guides them to it.

Introduction

- It's hard work being a human being sometimes.
 - We've got these big ol' brains that can think and overthink lots of different thoughts.
 - We can consider lots of different opinions.
 - We can imagine many different possible outcomes and try to weigh pros and cons against each other.
 - And we've got these hearts that hold so much.
 - There are so many people and causes and projects to care about.
 - And our hearts can also get caught up in selfish things too – ambition, greed, desire to control.
 - And we've got physical limitations too.
 - We get hungry; we get sick; we get tired and worn out.
- With all of that we can sometimes feel a bit like, what was the Lord thinking when He gave us freedom of choice?
 - Us? Seriously? Have you met human beings?
 - Surely things would be much simpler if He just told us what to do and then made us do it.
- But, we're not the Lord and He knows better than we do what's best for us and He chose to give us freedom of choice.
 - So here we are with our fallible brains, faulty hearts, and frail bodies figuring out what to do with our freedom.
 - If we're on the path towards heaven, then we're in a lifelong process of trying to learn how to both trust in the Lord's Divine Providence and also use the prudence that our Creator has given us to try to figure out what to do.
- There are many stories in the Lord's Word that have this challenge as a central theme.
 - Today, we're going to look at the story of the twelve spies going into the land of Canaan and the report that they brought back.
 - Before we get into that, I'm going to give you a few seconds of silence to think of an area of your life where you're feeling some uncertainty or anxiety, or an area of your life where you're not sure what decision to make or what direction to go.
 - Take a deep breath and ask the Lord to show you where you're feeling anxious.
 - "Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me, and know my anxieties...." (Psalm 139:23).

Flowing With Milk and Honey and Also Full of Fortified Cities and Giants

- When the twelve spies came back from exploring the land of Canaan they said that it was just as amazing as had been promised to them.
 - It was indeed "flowing with milk and honey" and the fruit which they brought back from the land was unbelievably good.
- But the land also contained strong enemies, large and fortified cities, and literal giants.

- When we're faced with big decisions we can often see a number of good things that we might get if we made the decision and we can also see a number of really scary or hard things that might come with it too.
 - How do we weigh these up with our little brains?
- If we were to apply this story to our lives in a simplistic sort of way we might say that this story is telling us that we should go ahead and do the thing that we're feeling nervous about.
 - Trust in the Lord and move forward!
 - But it's not quite that simple.
- There are also times in our lives when trusting in the Lord means that we should *not* go forward.
 - For example, just a little bit further on in this story, the people have refused to go into the land and the Lord has told the children of Israel that actually they will have to wander in the wilderness for forty years before they are ready to go into the land.
 - When the people hear this, they mourn greatly.
 - And then, the next morning, they get up early and they say, "Here we are, and we will go up to the place which Jehovah has promised, for we have sinned!" (Numbers 14:40).
 - And Moses tries to stop them and tells them it will not succeed but they still go up and enemies from the land attack them and drive them way back.
- So it's not always the right decision to move forward.
- And it's not just cowardice that might make us question a decision.
 - It might be humility and innocence.
 - We might be trying to be open to the Lord's leading, trying to be willing to hear and obey if He's actually telling us *not* to go forward.
 - How can we know what we're supposed to do?

Listen to Caleb and Joshua

- It's useful to listen to the words of Caleb and Joshua, the two spies who brought a good report of the land and who tried to convince the people not to refuse to go into the land.
 - Numbers 14:6-9 (Kempton Project Translation, modified)
 - ⁶ And Joshua the son of Nun, and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, who were of those who explored the land, tore their garments; ⁷ and they said to all the congregation of the children of Israel, saying, "The land, which we passed through to explore it, is a very, very good land. ⁸ If Jehovah delights in us, then He will bring us to this land, and give it to us; it is a land which flows with milk and honey. ⁹ Only do not revolt not against Jehovah, and do not fear the people of the land, for they are bread for us; their protection is removed from them, and Jehovah is with us. Do not fear them."
- A couple of things to notice about what they're saying.
 - They're not denying the existence of the challenges or pretending they're not there.
 - They just believe that those challenges are surmountable, with the Lord's help.
 - Another thing we can hear clearly in their words is that they're not motivated by *self*-confidence; they're motivated by confidence in the Lord.

- The Lord is the only reason they think this difficult task is possible.
 - One last crucial thing to notice is that the key issue for them is the people revolting or rebelling against the Lord.
 - In some sense it's OK to be afraid of scary things – that's understandable.
 - But the people start there and then go several steps beyond that to questioning the Lord's motives and entirely rejecting His leadership.
 - Numbers 14:2-4 (Kempton Project Translation, modified)
 - ² And all the children of Israel murmured against Moses and against Aaron; and all the congregation said to them, "If only we had died in the land of Egypt! Or if only we had died in this wilderness! ³ And why has Jehovah brought us to this land, to fall by the sword, that our wives and our infants should be for plunder? Would it not better for us to return to Egypt?" ⁴ And they said, a man to his brother, "Let us put someone as head, and let us return to Egypt."
- That's not just being scared and having a few doubts; that's full-on bad-mouthing the Lord and rejecting His leadership.

The Perspective of a Bug

- Let's talk a bit more about the evil report of the 10 spies.
- We can get an interesting insight into their perspective in the significance of what they compare themselves to.
 - When they describe how they felt in comparison with the giants in the land they say, "we were in our own eyes as grasshoppers, and so we were in their eyes" (Numbers 13:33).
- The teachings of the New Church reveal that the symbolism or significance of grasshoppers or locusts in scripture is the lowest level of our thought (*Apocalypse Explained* §543).
 - This is the level of how things look, sound, and feel to us because of how we experience them through our five senses.
 - This level of our thought can be a useful foundation to higher thought, like the literal sense of scripture supports higher levels of meaning.
 - This is why John the Baptist, who represented the literal sense of the Word, ate locusts (*Apocalypse Explained* §543:14).
- But this level of thought becomes a real problem – like a plague of devouring locusts – when it becomes the basis on which we evaluate everything, when we see and judge everything on the basis of how it seems to us from our five senses (see *Apocalypse Revealed* §424).
- This perspective from the eye level of a bug on the ground really misses a lot.
 - And in the story we can see an example of just how far off from the truth this perspective can be.
 - The ten spies thought that they were like grasshoppers in the eyes of their enemies but it was actually the exact opposite.

- Forty years later, when the children of Israel go into the land and spy out Jericho, they hear from one of the inhabitants of Jericho that the people in the land had heard about the children of Israel and about Jehovah and they were terrified.
 - The person says, "And we heard, and our hearts did melt and the spirit arose no more in any man before you; for Jehovah your God, He is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath" (Joshua 2:11).
- The teachings of the New Church reveal that all of our thoughts and feelings – both heavenly and hellish – come from the spirits around us in the spiritual world.
 - This is a whole big topic which we won't get into right now but I'd be happy to talk to you more about it afterward, if you have more questions.
 - For today's story, I'll just mention that the teachings of the New Church say that there are spirits who like to influence us to believe that falsity is truth and good is evil.
 - But we can realize it's happening if we know to watch for it.
 - *Secrets of Heaven* §1673:4
 - We can tell whether such spirits control us simply by this: If we consider the truth of the Word to be false, if we have proved this to ourselves so firmly that we are blind to any other way of thinking, we can be fairly certain such spirits are present with us and dictating to us.
- If you're feeling like a grasshopper about to get squished and like everything the Lord teaches is stupid and wrong, then you're probably being messed with by these sorts of spirits.
 - You're getting an evil report from the ten spies.
 - They're telling you how they see things.
 - And it's just not true.

Names

- It's interesting to look through the list of the names of the ten spies.
 - The meanings of their names include things like rumor, judge, defile, escape, expose, conceal, and timid.
 - We will hear the report from those parts of us or from those spirits who are with us.
 - It can be useful to give those spirits a name – to say, "Oh, that's my anxiety talking."
 - We can listen to the report according to those spies or we can listen to the report of Joshua and Caleb.
 - Let's talk about the meaning of their names.

Joshua

- When Joshua is first mentioned in this story he is called Hoshea (Numbers 13:8) which means "salvation".
- But Moses changes his name to Joshua before sending them to spy out the land (Numbers 13:16).
 - And Joshua means "Jehovah saves".
 - This change adds emphasis to *Who* it is that is doing the saving.

- And, not coincidentally, Jesus has the same name as Joshua, it's just the Greek form of the name instead of the Hebrew form.
- There is a Joshua within you – there is a part of you that knows that the Lord can save you.
 - Listen to Joshua's report within you.

Caleb

- The name Caleb has two possible meanings.
- The most common meaning given for the name Caleb is "dog".
 - And that might sound like a negative thing to be called a dog but think about a dog with its master.
 - Think of how loyal and trusting a good dog is.
 - Think of how a good dog will unquestioningly follow its master anywhere its Master wants to go.
- That's how Caleb was with Jehovah.
- Other people understand the meaning of the name Caleb in another way, the combination of two words to mean "whole-hearted".
 - Like the command to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength" (Deuteronomy 6:5).
 - Caleb can represent whole-hearted trust in the Lord and willingness to follow Him.
- Whichever meaning of the name Caleb you go with the significance is largely the same and you have a Caleb within you.
 - And when all the people hear the evil report and start spiraling, Caleb quiets them down.
 - "And Caleb made the people keep silent before Moses, and said, 'Going up let us go up, and possess it; for prevailing we will prevail against it'" Numbers 13:30).
 - This is very reminiscent of when the disciples were on a boat in a huge storm and Jesus "rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm" (Matthew 8:26).
- On a practical level, trying to deal with thoughts and feelings like the evil report of the ten spies, there are a few things we can do:
 - First try to just notice that we're having those kinds of thoughts and give them a name.
 - And then try to notice that theirs is not the only report we can listen to.
 - It might not be quite as loud but Joshua and Caleb are there too.
 - Their report represents a higher perspective than the bug-eye-level report.
 - Like the lesson from the book *Divine Providence* talked about, we need to try to look at things from the perspective of eternity.
 - Heaven can seem pretty far off but we can look at things we're dealing with in the here and now from the perspective of eternity.
 - Will this matter in 5 years?
 - What will still matter in 50 years or 500 years?
 - Thinking this way can really shift what feels important to us.

- The passage says that “when a person thinks and at the same time lives in this way... the Divine providence looks... to the state of that person’s eternal life in heaven and guides them to it” (*Divine Providence* §59).
- We can hear this eternal, whole-hearted, trusting perspective expressed with joy and celebration by the thousands upon thousands of angels in the scene we read from Revelation in which they say, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honor and glory and blessing!” (Revelation 5:12).
- Just as there are lots of spirits you can spend time with who will try to convince you that everything is stupid and terrible, there are also thousands of good spirits that you can spend time with who would love to support you as you grow in your confidence in the Lord your God.

Conclusion

- To wrap things up, think back now to the area of your life that came to mind earlier when I asked you to think of something you’re feeling uncertain or anxious about.
 - It may be that you have some big questions in that area of your life and you would love to know what you should do.
 - And it’s likely that you’re going to still be unsure about what you should do.
- But maybe reflecting on this story will help you connect with some more wholehearted trust in the Lord.
 - And maybe it can give you a little more sense of peace that things will be OK either way, if you continue to try to follow the Lord and do what’s right.
- The children of Israel messed up in this story.
 - They listened to the wrong report; they were fearful and cowardly and they rebelled against Jehovah their God, in spite of all He had done for them.
 - And, you know what, He kept on looking after them all through the forty years in the wilderness (Deuteronomy 2:7).
 - And then, when they were ready, He gave them another chance to enter the promised land, and that time, with Joshua leading the way, they were able to go in and find their new home in the land flowing with milk and honey.
- Amen.

If you would like to talk more about this topic, get in touch with Malcolm at malcolm.smith@brynathynchurch.org.