



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

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3rd Sunday of Easter

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The Rev. Brent J. Eelman

"Presbyopia: Is it Contagious?"

Numbers 13: 1-3, 17-20, 25-33

The Lord said to Moses, 'Send men to spy out the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites; from each of their ancestral tribes you shall send a man, every one a leader among them.' So Moses sent them from the wilderness of Paran, according to the command of the Lord, all of them leading men among the Israelites.

Moses sent them to spy out the land of Canaan, and said to them, 'Go up there into the Negeb, and go up into the hill country, and see what the land is like, and whether the people who live in it are strong or weak, whether they are few or many, and whether the land they live in is good or bad, and whether the towns that they live in are unwalled or fortified, and whether the land is rich or poor, and whether there are trees in it or not. Be bold, and bring some of the fruit of the land.' Now it was the season of the first ripe grapes.

At the end of forty days they returned from spying out the land. And they came to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation of the Israelites in the wilderness of Paran, at Kadesh; they brought back word to them and to all the congregation, and showed them the fruit of the land. And they told him, 'We came to the land to which you sent us; it flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. Yet the people who live in the land are strong, and the towns are fortified and very large; and besides, we saw the descendants of Anak there. The Amalekites live in the land of the Negeb; the Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites live in the hill country; and the Canaanites live by the sea, and along the Jordan.'

But Caleb quieted the people before Moses, and said, 'Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it.' Then the men who had gone up with him said, 'We are not able to go up against this people, for they are stronger than we are.' So they brought to the Israelites an unfavorable report of the land that they had spied out, saying, 'The land that we have gone through as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people that we saw in it are of great size. There we saw the Nephilim (the Anakites come from the Nephilim); and to ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them.'

When I was in my 40s, I began to have some difficulty reading smaller print. I made an arrangement in to see an ophthalmologist, and have my eyes tested. The procedure went relatively smoothly and at the end of the examination of the doctor informed me that I needed bifocals. I was taken aback and asked the question why? (the answer should have been obvious to me.) She responded, "You have presbyopia." "What is that?" I asked. She replied, "You might call it farsightedness". I responded, half questioning, "I am farsighted now?" "Yes," she said, "You have presbyopia."

I left the doctor's office that day having learned a new word, presbyopia. I remarked to myself: "here I am a Presbyterian with presbyopia." I mused further, and began to play with the word.

"Presbyopia: a narcotic for Presbyterians, (perhaps a new description for a dull sermon.) I wonder if it is contagious. It is neither a drug or contagious. But I thought wouldn't it be wonderful if Presbyterians could be farsighted, (not presbyopic in the medical sense, but farsighted, willing to look past the moment to the future and seize life's opportunities!) I realize that I am making a play on words.

We Presbyterians tend to have Pres-myopia. We tend to be short-sighted. (Once again, I am not talking about eyes, I am talking about our attitudes). We live, remembering the past and how good it was. We are nostalgic... and fear the future with all the changes and challenges that it holds.

Presbyopia means old eyes. Our eyes, like the rest of our body age, and consequently we need lenses to correct the changes brought on by the years. While most Presbyterians have or will develop presbyopia, my primary concern this morning is can we become truly farsighted in terms of our vision for our lives. Can we begin to think ahead? And when we do, can we do it without being overcome by fear, without feeling intimidated by the future? Our challenge is to be farsighted: to think and dream big when it comes to the future of our church. We need to be Presbyterians with "presbyopia" and I pray that it is contagious. The church, indeed the world needs farsighted visionaries!

Today's text is from the book of Numbers. Let me set the scene: Moses has led to the people of Israel to the land of Canaan. This was the land God had promised them. They had journeyed for but a short time and they were on the border of the Promised Land. He wanted to find out what land and the people who inhabited the land were like. So he picked one individual from each member of the 12 tribes to explore the land of Canaan, the Promised Land. These "spies" were told to bring back an "intelligence assessment."

After 40 days of spying on the land, the twelve returned with good news and bad news. First the good news. They reported that the land flowed with milk and honey. They brought back fruit from the land: grapes as large as melons! Indeed, this was a remarkable land. But then they shared the bad news. The inhabitants of the land were huge. Not only were they big they were strong. Not only were they strong they were fierce. And then they offered their conclusion: "There is no way that we can occupy that land."

You can imagine the effect this report had on the people of Israel. It frightened them. They started to whisper among themselves. "There is no way that we can occupy this land." They probably were critical of Moses. Perhaps they began to question the wisdom of God.

We know that difficult challenges have a way of exposing the "negatoids," the small thinkers who cultivate fear rather than action!

But there was a minority report. Caleb, told the crowd to hush and proceeded to share his intelligence assessment. "Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome them." Caleb saw the same things that the other people saw. He saw the land that flowed with milk and honey. He saw the large fruit. He also saw the people that lived in that land.... Why did he have a different assessment? Why was he not afraid? Caleb was farsighted. He saw into the future and that future included the land God promised His people. He saw the obstacles. He was realistic.

He knew that it would be a challenge. But he also knew that they could live in that land. This is the "faith" and "hope" that is declared throughout the Bible.

The reality is that the Calebs of the world are a small portion of the population. Most of us tend to be like the other spies. We see the possibilities that the future holds, and we shrink from it. The challenges seem too big. We are myopic, instead of presbyopic: nearsighted instead of farsighted. We do not consider the future and are content with the rubble of the present. We need women and men like Caleb: individuals who are able to look into the future, not with fear, but with a sense of excitement and hope. We need individuals who have the faith to believe that the future, filled with its challenges and obstacles, is still the future that God wants us to live in... and if we are faithful to God, "we can inhabit that land." We can live into the future God has promised.

But we tend to be stuck. Most of the time we lose our nerve and give into our fears. Most of the time we listen to the fear mongers... and never move toward the promises God holds for us in the future. We lose our nerve. There are consequences for this. Consider: the people of Israel did not enter the Promised Land then. Instead, they wandered aimlessly for 40 years in the wilderness. Because of their lack of farsightedness, and their unwillingness to step up to the challenges that were before them, they drifted, lost in the wilderness for 40 years.

There is a steep price that we pay for our failure of nerve... our lack of faith... for responding to fear rather than to hope. Spiritual short sightedness... indeed spiritual myopia, has its consequences. Most importantly, it is faithless. Hebrews 11, the great chapter of faith contains this remarkable statement about the Old Testament patriarchs. "All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them." ...from a distance they saw! One of the attributes of faith is farsightedness... seeing into the future and moving toward that future in faith even if you never arrive.

What about us? We do not stand on the edge of the Promised Land... but we have challenges before us. There are important challenges in each of our lives. There are challenges for this congregation, but those challenges are combined with opportunity. Faith.. farsighted faith enables us to see life's challenges as opportunities. Faith enables us, with Caleb, to say, "We can live in that future."

If you have attended my presentations to the Breakfast Club you are aware that many of the challenges here at our church are challenges facing all congregations throughout the country. Churches of all types and theologies are confronting the reality of fewer resources, both human and capital. That combined with other factors have placed the church in a wilderness. Here is the question: Do the challenges inspire the type of fear that leads us to do nothing and wander aimlessly in an ecclesiastical wilderness? Or do we respond to the Caleb's in our midst who say, "We can live in that future... we can do it"? Will we find the nerve to live into the promised future that God has given to us as an inheritance.... Or will we listen to our fears and continue to wander in the wilderness of doubt, fear, and anxiety.

We need to remember.... It is not about us. It is not about us having a nicer church and an exciting program of ministry and mission. No. It is about the future: the generations who will be here years from now. It is about the people whose names we do not know and whose faces we have not seen. It is about leaving a legacy of faithfulness, building on generations of faith, rather than merely feeding off of the faith and generosity of our ancestors. There is something very special about sacrificing for future generations. Some of us have had that privilege and know the joy of sacrificing

for our children's education. Can we have the same farsightedness now, to sacrifice for future disciples who will confess that Jesus is Lord, worship here, study here, and grow in faith here?

Next week, we will bring a confirmation class before us. They will make their confession of faith. I am going to remind them that confirmation is not graduating from church..... But today, I am reminding you that it is not about us. It is about the youth who come forward for the children's message. It is about the 11 young adults who will confess their faith. It is about the youth who come to the Wednesday and Friday programs. It is about the children in our nursery school. It is about those who wander in... perhaps because they have no other place to go. It is about future generations. We can get cynical and say... "They won't come... They will be gone." But that is a self-fulfilling prophesy. We need to hear the Calebs of our congregation rise and say: "The future is good. God has promised us. We can live into that future."

We owe a thank you to those previous generations who were farsighted enough to think about us, though they did not know us. God calls us to dream and think about the future and that takes farsightedness. It is time for us to catch Presbyopia and be farsighted, looking into the future as we act in faith now. It is time to build upon generations of commitment with farsighted faithfulness. I hope and pray this is contagious! Amen.