

Facing our Future with Faith instead of Fear

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Are We There Yet?

Numbers 13

I recently read an article that said, according to surveys, Americans are less happy with our lives than we've been in 50 years since. The surveys also tell us that Americans are also more fearful and anxious about our futures than we've been in decades. Certainly, the COVID-19 pandemic has created a very high level of unhappiness and anxiety. Many of us feel more financially insecure than we did just a few months ago. Some of us are afraid for our health and the health of loved ones, especially loved ones who are older or have health conditions.

But one other major reason for the high level of fear regarding the future, according to the surveys is that Americans feel like we're entirely on our own. We don't trust our leaders to protect us. We feel like we have to make our way through a very dangerous world, not as a united community where we're all in this together, but as a divided community with each of us scrambling to figure out how we and our families can be kept safe.

I read another article recently about how pervasive fear and anxiety are regarding the way that we parent our children. A mom was investigated because she left her elementary school-aged child alone in a public place for several minutes while she ran into the store to pick up a drug prescription. Statisticians tell us you would have to leave a child alone in a public place for 750,000 straight years before that child would be snatched by a stranger. But many parents in America never allow their kids to play on a suburban playground or walk to school or ride a bike with a friend without direct adult supervision.

Certainly, there is a direct correlation between the amount of media a person consumes and the level of fear they experience. Mass Media determines their headlines by the old saying "if it bleeds, it leads". Media understands that to get more eyeballs looking at their website or news program the simplest way to do that is by fear. Not only does sex sell, but fear sells. There's absolutely a direct correlation between the amount of media someone consumes and the level of fear they experience regarding the future.

Of course, all of us know that there are no guarantees of prosperity, health, romance in this fallen world. How then, in this anxious time – during COVID and police shootings and high unemployment and protests – how can we as individuals and together as a church face our future with faith instead of fear? That's what I want to talk about today in a message that I've titled, "Facing our Future with Faith instead of Fear". Let's pray.

We've been doing a series over the past several weeks titled "Are We There Yet?" that is drawn from the Old Testament books of Exodus and Numbers in which God's people are led on a journey out from Egypt into the Promised Land.

We've mentioned several times in this series that Vineyard Columbus is on a journey. I have frequently mentioned over the last couple of years that in December of 2020 I am going to turn the leadership of the church over to Eric and Julia Pickerill who will become our new Senior Pastors. We're going to be entering a very new season for our church because this September I will be starting on my 34th year as the only Senior Pastor this church has ever had.

How should we look at our future as a church? How should we as individuals look at our own circumstances? In the story we're about to read, the people of Israel find themselves standing on the border of the Promised Land. Now, they have been journeying in the wilderness for more than a year. Imagine a yearlong car trip with hundreds of thousands of complaining and grumbling people. Many of them screaming "Are we there yet?" We have to go to the bathroom. We're hungry. This trip is boring. My brother is staring out of my window. The last one, by the way, is a complaint we actually heard on our summer road trips. Our daughter would start crying in the back seat because her brother, Daniel, was deliberately staring out of her car window. And he was. I found myself having to yell into the back, "Daniel, look out your own window and stop looking out Sharon's window!"

So the children of Israel have been journeying for a year. They are just about to get to the place they were aiming at and we read this in verses 1-2.

Slide Numbers 13:1-2

The LORD said to Moses, ² "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."

Moses sends out these 12 spies, leaders of the 12 tribes, to explore the land. Here's what we read:

Slide Numbers 13:26-31

²⁶ 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. ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of Anak there. ²⁹ 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."

³⁰ 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.”

³¹ But the men who had gone up with him said, “We can’t attack those people; they are stronger than we are.”

We can see the two very different perspectives of Caleb and presumably Joshua on the one hand, and the other 10 spies on the other.

Slide Numbers 13:30-31

³⁰ 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.”

³¹ But the men who had gone up with him said, “We can’t attack those people; they are stronger than we are.”

Look, all the spies were confronting the same reality, the same facts. They all saw the same land. They all saw the land’s fruitfulness and beauty. They all saw the same cities and the same enemies. But the meaning and interpretation of those facts were totally different. We human beings are meaning making creatures. Given the same facts, we interpret those facts based upon the inclinations of our hearts.

The text that we’re looking at plainly points this out. We can look at our futures as individuals or as a church through the lens of fear or through the lens of faith. Let’s start by talking about facing our future with fear.

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Facing our future with fear

Every day of our lives we face a crossroads where we have to make a choice, a decision – will I draw back in fear or move forward in faith? What are the signs that we’re moving backward in fear?

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We compromise our calling

God’s Word tells us that you and I can live the abundant life that Jesus came to bring us. He said I came to give life and to give it to the full. We Christians are called to trust that Jesus knew what he was talking about; that following him is the way to have a flourishing life. But there are a thousand decision points along the way where we are tempted to say in fear, “I don’t think that Jesus knows what he’s talking about.” Despite Jesus’ clear command, we make compromises because of fear.

I think of wonderful single Christian women who I’ve known who were afraid to face the future being single and alone. So, in fear, they compromise their standards. They began

to date and then to marry someone who didn't share their Christian convictions. Why did they compromise? They were afraid! They didn't believe that following Jesus and being obedient to his commands would lead to a flourishing life. They didn't believe God had their best in mind when he issued his command regarding who we should date and who we should marry. They didn't trust that God could and would satisfy them in the future or that God could bring along someone better than the person they are choosing now.

I wonder, those of you who are viewing this, how many of you have compromised in the past regarding a romantic relationship simply because of fear?

How many times have we compromised the truth simply because of fear? We feel caught, we are afraid that the truth will embarrass us or reduce us in the eyes of someone whose respect we want – so we lie. I wasn't responsible for the hurt you experienced. I didn't do what you think I did. It wasn't my fault. I intended the right thing. I wasn't acting selfishly. Again, for those of you who are viewing this right now, how many times have you lied your way out of a difficult situation? How many times have you cut corners on the truth because you didn't want to face the pain of being fully honest. Lying is **always** an act of fear. You can't lie in faith. You can't lie while you're trusting God to provide for your future.

How many people have come right up to the edge of committing their lives to Christ, right up to the border of the Promised Land, and then shrank back in fear? Someone gets to a place of beginning to believe that Christianity really is true. Jesus really did what the Bible claims he did. Jesus really did work miracles. Jesus really died on a cross to pay for our sins. He really did rise from the dead. They see that Jesus is who he said he is – right up to the Promised Land of making a commitment to be his follower – and then they walk away in fear.

What are they afraid of? They begin to count the cost – How will this being a “committed Christian thing” impact my career? How will I be viewed? What will my friends think? How much will this cost me personally? What will my family say? As a Jesus follower I'm going to have to give up certain things, certain relationships. Do I really want to pay that price? Fear or faith?

Eric will be talking in a future message about some of the things God is calling Vineyard Columbus to as a church. The question for us as a church will be, will we move forward together in faith or move backward in fear?

What are the signs that we're shrinking back in fear?
We compromise our calling

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We maximize the obstacles

Look with me again at the negative report that the 10 spies give:

Slide Numbers 13:31-33

³¹ But the men who had gone up with him said, “We can’t attack those people; they are stronger than we are.” ³² And they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored. They said, “The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size. ³³ We saw the Nephilim there (the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim). We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them.”

How many times have you heard people exaggerate the obstacles? Listen to what they say. They say, not only are these people descendants of Anak (a very big people), but they come from the Nephilim. Nephilim are the ancient people who were said to be giants. These Canaanites are not only tall, they’re not only big, but they are like the mythological giants of old from way back in Genesis 6.

People who live in fear, love to maximize the obstacles we have living our Christian lives here in America. Yes, there are people who want to restrict religious liberty. Yes, there are people who are so committed to the secular agenda, that they really are working hard to block religious freedom wherever they can. Does that mean that we followers of Jesus have to approach our futures in fear? There have been hard times before! Christians have faced huge obstacles and yet the gospel has triumphed!

I think of England in the early 1700’s. Arnold Dallimore, who wrote a book on George Whitefield, the famous 18th century preacher who brought about, along with John Wesley, the Great Awakening in England, says that

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“in 1660 in the violent rejection of the Puritans that accompanied the restoration of the English monarchy, much of the nation threw off restraints and plunged into godlessness, drunkenness, immorality and gambling. The gin craze began in 1689 and within a generation every sixth house in London became a gin shop. The poor were unspeakably wretched. There were over 160 crimes in England that had the death penalty. Gin made the people what they were never before—cruel and inhuman. Signs over gin shops read, “Drunk for 1 shilling, dead drunk for 2 shillings, free straw.”

“Women were treated even worse than men. Hundreds of hardened hookers and murderesses were locked in battle over scant and rotten rations with mothers caught when forced to steal to keep their children from starving. Open sewer trenches for toilets ran through the cells. Hundreds jammed together in cells made to hold a score of

prisoners. Rats and insects were everywhere. One man took his dog to prison to protect himself against the rats and the rats ate the dog.”

And then God got a hold of His church and the whole country changed. Not just the church, not just renewal, but revival – the church impacted the world around it. Schools were started; hospitals and orphanages were created; reforms took place in prisons, in child labor laws, in housing. The whole country changed through the influence of the church.

I think of the South in our own country under Jim Crow. Black people in the South weren’t allowed to enter public parks. Theaters and restaurants were segregated. There were segregated waiting rooms and buses and train stations. The water fountains, the restrooms, the building entrances, the elevators were all segregated. Black people couldn’t be buried in white cemeteries. There were different cashier windows at amusement parks. Blacks couldn’t live in white neighborhoods. In Atlanta, African Americans were given a different Bible to put their hand on when they swore an oath to God in court because they couldn’t touch the white Bible.

But then God raised up Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and things changed. Never say this particular obstacle is simply too big. Never say the forces in opposition are too strong. God can and God will work through people who want to be used to change things. I’m praying for revival! I’m praying that the Holy Spirit is poured out in the church in a renewed and powerful way. I’m praying that the current twin crises of COVID and the current protests about racial injustice will be used by the Lord to draw people to himself! My prayer is that people across our community and across our country will say: “we can’t face all these crises in our own power. We are not big enough or smart enough! We need God!”

How do we pull back in fear?
We compromise God’s call
We maximize the obstacles

Brothers and sisters, it’s never who we are or the obstacles we face. It’s always whose presence is with us. Vineyard Columbus has a great future if the presence of God stays with us. If we follow the leadership of the Holy Spirit, if we keep welcoming the presence of God we can face our future with faith.

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Facing our future with faith

Let’s look back at Numbers 13

Slide Numbers 13:1-2

The LORD said to Moses, ² “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.”

The people of Israel have been free from Egypt for over a year. God tells them at the beginning of the story that he’s giving them the land of Canaan. He says to Moses,

Slide Numbers 13:2a

² “Send some men to explore the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites.

God tells them the end of the story at the beginning. You don’t need to worry, I’m giving you the land. Move into Canaan with all its problems or you can move into Upper Arlington or New Albany or Westerville. You see in these verses, that when we choose to move forward in faith,

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We prioritize our obedience

God gave the children of Israel the goal. The goal is for you to take the land of Canaan that I’m giving to you. It’s not just one of several options – you can take the land of Canaan or you can go somewhere else, you can take part of the land – it’s “you can take the land”. People who move forward in faith are folks who are very clear about the goal right from the get-go. When I used to run (I haven’t in years), I would always make sure I determined ahead of time how far I was going to run. I didn’t care if my side hurt. I didn’t care if I was tired. I knew what the goal was. I’m going to run till I reach the goal! If I just said, I’m going to go run, and see how far I get, I didn’t run very far.

In his mercy, God allows the people to check things out before they have to meet the goal. You can go up and explore the land, you can try it out before you actually have to take it. Check it out a little bit. But friends, I’ll tell you what, you have to get things in absolutely the right order.

First, you have to have a clear goal in mind and make the decision you’re going to obey **before** you check things out and see **how** the goal is going to be met. Let me say that again. You first decide “I am going to obey”. And then you figure out, ok, **how** am I going to obey? I’m going to stay married! I’m going to be sexually abstinent! I’m going to commit myself to be an agent of racial justice! I’m going to tithe! Most people who fear reverse the order.

Because of fear people say, “I’ve got to figure out **how** I’m going to obey before deciding **whether** I’m going to obey God. If I can’t figure out **how** I’m going to obey, I won’t do it.” I’ve learned over the course of my life that frequently God doesn’t reveal to me at the beginning **how** I’m going to be able to accomplish something until I begin to walk. That’s absolutely true with ministry calling. Maybe the Lord has told you “here’s what I

want you to do. I want you to start this group. I want you to begin a Bible study with your neighbors. I want you to engage in this ministry. I want you to give this amount of money. I want you to make a difference in the world in this way.”

Very often, at the beginning, you don’t know how you’re going to be able to fulfill it. You must absolutely first decide that you’re going to obey regardless. As you begin to walk, God will show you the resources he’s going to bring alongside you, the strategy he wants you to employ. Brothers and sisters, that’s been our history at Vineyard Columbus. In building our multi-ethnic church, starting different ministries, starting our Community Center, we didn’t have some grand plan and then set out to do it. We heard from the Lord and chose to move and then, and only then, God revealed the strategy.

People who move in faith prioritize obedience. Can I ask a personal question to those of you viewing: is God asking something of you? Even in this season of COVID, are you following him in a sacrificial way? Is God asking you to take a step of faith even though you don’t have all the details worked out? Commit yourself to obey God even if you don’t have the full plan.

In facing our future with faith, we not only prioritize obedience, but faith is built as:

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We emphasize seeing God’s present provision

Read with me as we close

Slide Numbers 13:23-27

²³ 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. ²⁴ That place was called the Valley of Eshkol because of the cluster of grapes the Israelites cut off there. ²⁵ At the end of forty days they returned from exploring the land.

²⁶ 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. ²⁷ 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.

The Valley of Eshkol is literally “cluster valley”. It’s a valley almost mythological in its fruit-bearing. It provided such abundance. If you want to have faith, look around you for evidences right now of God’s provision.

Friend, is there anything right now that you can say thank you to God for? A supportive friend, a family member who always stands by you, your church, that fact that you’ve got a roof over your head or have a wonderful child that you love. Is there anything

around you that you need to look at where you see God's provision? Maybe you have a sense of purpose with regard to your work. Maybe you have the respect of others. As you look around, do you see the evidences of God's goodness? As you look around Vineyard Columbus, do you see evidences of God's blessing on the church? As we journey forward into our future, as individuals and collectively as a church, let's move forward in faith, take hold of the good things God still has for us instead of shrinking back in fear. Let's pray.

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Rich Nathan
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Are We There Yet?
Numbers 13

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