Giants in the Land!  
Numbers 13:26-33

Teddy Roosevelt is one of my heroes. I think he is one of the five greatest presidents ever to serve our country. As you know, I love to read and routinely recommend books; I commend to you David McCullough’s biography of TR, Morning on Horseback. The book chronicles his life leading up to his election as president.

Most have heard or read stories about TR leading the Rough Riders up San Juan Hill in the Spanish American War. Or perhaps remember his quote, “Speak softly and carry a big stick.” Once, this bigger than life man, while delivering a speech in Milwaukee, survived an assassin’s bullet to the chest. He could not be stopped, he just kept on speaking. TR was a giant of a man.

Life was not always so, as a young child, he was sickly and weak; plagued with asthma. Fed up with his life of nurses and nannies, he determined to live a vigorous life and committed himself to a grueling fitness routine.

TR was not always the ironed willed man of legendary proportions – the stuff of myth and tales. While very young, his mother once found him hiding from her on Sunday morning. The family was preparing to attend church at Madison Square Presbyterian Church, in New York City. He owned up to the fact that he was terrified. His mother after much prodding got to the source of his fear. He was terrified by the “zeals.” He said when the minister read from the Bible about the “zeals” he feared for his life. His mother went to the concordance and looked up the word; she began to read out loud, Teddy begged her to stop. She was reading from the King James this passage, “And his disciples had remembered that it was written, ‘The zeal of thine house has eaten me up’” (KJV, John 2:17).

Most of us have fears; some real, some, like Teddy’s, imagined. According to many studies, our #1 fear, is the fear of public speaking and #2 the fear of dying. Jerry Seinfeld said, “to the average person, if you have to go to a funeral, you’re better off in the casket than doing the eulogy!”

Most of our fears are like those of young Teddy Roosevelt, they are based on perception not grounded in fact. We would be hard pressed

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1 Seinfeld episode 61
to find a story in the Bible more telling about human nature, especially fear than the one before us today.

In it twelve spies have returned from the land of Canaan. In their report to Moses and Aaron, we find two sides of human nature: fear and bravery, timidity and courage, trust and mistrust, pessimism and optimism. All of us at one time or another has experienced both. One day the sun shines and the next clouds obscure. One minute we are bold, the next we cower.

The story of the spies focuses our attention to this truth about ourselves – we have something of a dual nature, a complex moral awareness, if you will. But it points us to something deeper; this is a story about faith and trust. Our measure of faith and trust shapes our view of God. Do we trust God, above all else? Do we have faith in God’s providence? Do we believe in God’s goodness?

In this story the Hebrew tribes have been freed from their captivity for 2 years. They have just left the Sinai desert and are on the boarders of the Promise Land, peering like a neighbor over the backyard fence, looking at the very place where God, through his servant Moses has led them. With the sagacity of a lawyer and the wisdom of a prophet, Moses sent spies into the land, one from each of the 12 tribes to check it out before entering. He knew God had given them the land, but he also knew that fools go in where angels fear to tread. He wanted to evaluate what he would have to do to take the land and prepare the people to do it.

The 12 traveled up through the Negev desert into the hill country and into an area that would later be named Galilee. The trek was about 250 miles each way and lasted 40 days.

Upon returning the spies told their story – a land flowing with milk and honey; fruit so abundant that it required two men just to carry one cluster of grapes. The land is everything, everything that God said it would be. But …

Isn’t there always a “but? What God had said about the land was true, but 10 of the spies looked away from God and focused on their fears – there were giants in the land; mean and ferocious men. And 10 of the spies saw themselves as grasshoppers, waiting to be squashed!
Caleb and Joshua, filed a minority report. They didn’t deny that there were giants in the land – but their “but” was different, “We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it” (v.30). The other ten spies continued, “The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there were of giant size” (v. 32). The contrast is unambiguous – Caleb, we a can do it! The others – we will be squashed! God had promised to give them the land – the reaction to the promise was yes, we can do it from two and no, we can’t from ten.

The fearful report has the desired effect with the people, fear spread among the people, the Bible says that very night all the Hebrews grumbled against Moses and Aaron, "If only we had died in Egypt! Or in the desert! Why is the Lord bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and our children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn’t it be better for us to go back to Egypt? And they said to each other. We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt” (v. 14:2bff).

These people had been delivered from 400 years in exile, much of it spent as slaves. God has parted the waters and moved them through the Red Sea. By God’s hand and for their protection the most powerful army on the planet was destroyed and they did not have to lift a hand. It was God who provided food and water in the desert where there was none and now at a sign of adversity, they are ready to return to slavery.

The pernicious affect of fear, we will retreat back to the known, regardless of how unpleasant, rather than moving forward to live into our election as people of God. We will choose the safety of slavery rather than appropriate faith and move boldly to where God is leading us. Fear is its own prison.

It is human nature that we battling. Our depravity chains us and prevents us from living into the fullness of God grace. Fear cripples, faith frees.

“But” .. and this is a good but … “but” thanks be to God, there are saints who have gone before us who have with a courage that can only come from faith stepped out in faith. One writer defined courage as not the absence of fear, but the willingness to act in spite of fear. I like that definition. When faced with giants, God calls us to quell our fears with faith and trust in God.
Today is All Saints Sunday. Today we remember those who have gone before us. I want each of you to wander back into the recesses of your own imagination and wander around there for a while. Remember those who have gone before you – those responsible for you to being here today. I know that I would not be here in all likelihood, were it not for the foundation laid by my own parents. There is an old southern expression, “If you see a turtle on a fence post you know someone put it there.”

My friend, Jim Spivey was that kind of person – he put a lot of turtles on the fence post in his 96 years. Jim was the pastor of a church in Denton, Texas in the 60’s. Denton was segregated city – whites, blacks, Mexicans, all had well defined boundaries.

The library in Denton conducted a reading program for elementary school children – white elementary school children. Jim began to preach about segregation, how it was incongruous with the will of God; Jesus said go into all nations. God had made everyone – black, white and brown, in God’s image. Not a popular gospel message in the south in the early 60’s – but it is the gospel, so Jim preached it.

One man in the town heard about Jim’s message and he got it. He began to speak boldly. He petitioned the city council to end the segregation. There were some who believed that the civil rights movement was part of a Communist front organization and to side with them must mean that you are either a fool, or a communist or least a sympathizer.

As was often the case back then, the man’s life was threatened. He didn’t have many friends as you might imagine, but he remembered about this Presbyterian pastor who had been preaching to end the segregation not only of the library but of all the institutions in Denton. He wasn’t much of a church “goer”, he didn’t know Jim personally. He had been warned that the KKK was going to act against him that night. He called and asked if Jim would come over and sit with him and his wife. Jim did. He stayed with them all night. And like Daniel in the lion’s den, Jim was afraid, but also knew that God was with him. Jim stood against the giants of bigotry and intolerance; these giants fell.

Later the man had a job transfer. He stayed in touch with Jim, mostly through Christmas cards, a phone call here, a letter there. Jim too left Denton to take another call in Eugene, Oregon. A few years later the man died, the Christmas cards stopped. Jim moved to New York City, called as the President of the Presbyterian Foundation. Like with all
moves, he had his mail forwarded, from Oregon to New York it often
too several weeks for mail to arrive.

While settling into his new house, a letter arrived. It was post marked
about 3 weeks earlier. The letter was from the man’s wife. She wanted
Jim to know that after they moved from Denton, they began to attend
church. They became increasingly active in the life of the
congregation. After her husband died, she felt a call to seminary; she
enrolled and was now graduated. She was to be ordained and had
been called to a church in New York City. Her ordination was the
following Sunday. She knew that it would be impossible for Jim and his
wife Lucy to be there but she wanted Jim to know. She would always
be grateful for his faithful witness. This letter was her way of thanking
him.

At an ordination service, all ordained ministers are invited to come
forward and lay hands on the ordainand; you can imagine the surprise
she felt when she rose and saw Jim standing there.

One act of courage, in the face of fear changed two people’s lives.
Image how many lives the woman’s ministry has affected and
changed.

God is calling each and everyone – sometimes the call will come with
fear, fear that you are good enough to teach the middle school Sunday
school class, fear that you won’t have enough money to be generous;
fear that going on a mission trip will be just too much, if you get out of
the boat ... fear ...

There maybe giants in the land, “but” and this is the best “but” ... but
God is bigger. Amen.