

Thinking Big

The Rev. Dr.
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Joshua 14:6-12

Sermons Series:
In Christ Together
for the World

“The whole church bringing the whole gospel to the whole world.”

- Lausanne Congress

I returned Tuesday from 10 days in South Africa. Traveling that far can be vigorous, especially if you happen to be wedged into a middle seat for 19 hours next to an inebriated man who blabs on about his big-game exploits. But the trip was well worth the aggravation. Three of us from this church attended the Lausanne Congress for World Evangelization; truly a global church conference bringing together 4,000 church leaders from 200 countries.

I enjoyed the opportunity to worship without having to lead it or watch the time. I had never witnessed the communion elements danced into worship before or joined with so many dialects in reciting the Lord’s Prayer or sang Crown Him with Many Crowns to the accompaniment of 20 conga drums. The first song sung in a Cape Town church is one our youth choir sings. It turns out that Siyahamba (We Are Marching) is actually a South African folk song.

Each morning, I had breakfast with two pastors, Marcel and Samuel, from a country I had never heard of, Burkina Faso in West Africa. It’s the third poorest country in the

world. I took our sumptuous breakfast for granted; they didn’t. I asked them what they usually had for breakfast. Breakfast consisted of maize cereal; so did lunch and dinner. Their humility and gratitude moved me. Prayer seemed to them as natural as breathing.

The mission of Lausanne is “the whole church bringing the whole gospel to the whole world.” First, we are members of the whole church. The Christian church is no longer predominantly Euro-American. The fact that this conference convened in Africa is indicative of changing demographics. Three-quarters of the world’s Christians now live on the continents of Africa, Asia and Latin America. Second, as the whole church, we are called upon to take the whole gospel to the world. We lament that the church has regarded evangelism and social concern as two distinct gospels. The gospel that saves us from sin also saves us from every form of oppression and discrimination. Third, as the whole church, we take the whole gospel to the whole world. We recommitted ourselves to the unfinished task of world evangelization. Forty percent

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of the world’s population lives in societies with no known Christians or only a tiny fraction of Christians.

The church faces enormous challenges in our day: challenges from world poverty and human trafficking; challenges from other faiths such as Islam; challenges from militant, secular governments that resist Christianity. The 200 delegates from China to the Lausanne Congress were denied visas by their government and placed under house arrest for the duration of the conference.

We’ve been reading together John Ortberg’s book *the Me I Want To Be*. We come to the last section of the book, Ask for a Mountain. “Life is not about comfort,” Ortberg writes. “Ask God to give you a mountain.” How appropriate as we think about challenges to the church today.

Our Scripture lesson calls to mind a story from the book of Numbers. Moses appoints 12 spies to go on a reconnaissance mission. Israel has already been wandering two years in the desert. God previously parted the Red Sea to provide safe passage and led them with a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. They now stand at the threshold to the Promised Land.

These 12 spies complete their undercover operation. ‘Moses, we’ve got some good news and some bad news. The good news is that the Promised Land flows with milk and

honey. “But there’s also bad news. The conjunction “but” in the Hebrew language is a strong adversative word expressing opposition. “But the people who live in the land are strong, their cities are well-fortified and besides, we saw the descendents of Anak there” (13:28). The descendents of Anak are legendary for their size. We’re talking nine feet, 450 pound defensive lineman type of people. The Anakites are the biggest, baddest, meanest people they have ever seen.

One of the spies, Caleb, offers a different interpretation of their mission. He doesn’t dispute the facts; the Anakites are indeed large and their cities well-fortified. What Caleb challenges is their interpretation. “Let us go up at once and take possession of the land, for we can do it” (13:30).

There are essentially two versions of this spy report: the majority report of the ten spies and the minority report from Caleb. The majority report offers a human analysis of the situation. It portrays the people as big and God as small. The minority report acknowledges the people as big, but God as bigger still.

The people dismiss the minority report. They grumble in their tents about the well-fortified cities and size of the Anakites. Grumbling will become a favorite pastime in their wilderness wanderings. The next day, they initiate a

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back-to-Egypt campaign. They would rather return to slavery in Egypt than take possession of the Promised Land. God realizes it's going to take another 40 years to get them ready them to take occupancy of the Promised Land.

So, fast forward with me another 40 years to their arrival at the Promised Land. The previous generation has now died off, except for Caleb and Joshua. When it comes time to allocate the land, Caleb, now an old man, is still as feisty as ever. "Here I am today, 85 years old. I'm still as strong today as I was on the day Moses sent me; my strength now is as my strength was then, for war, and for going and coming. So now give me this hill country of which the Lord spoke on that day for you heard on that day how the Anakim were there, with great fortified cities, it may be that the Lord will be with me, and I shall drive them out, as the Lord said" (Joshua 14:12).

Where is this hill country? It's where the Anakites live! Caleb doesn't ask for beach front property in the resort section of town. Hill country is much more difficult to occupy than flat land. He asks for the biggest challenge.

Caleb refuses to listen to mere human analysis. Sure, the Anakites are big, but God is bigger still. It's all a matter of perspective. Are you facing your mountains with human

resources or with the strength God supplies?

I don't want to give the wrong impression. It's not as if God removes all the obstacles from Caleb's path. When Israel arrives at the Promised Land, God doesn't roll out the red carpet as if to say, "Welcome to the Promised Land. May I take your bags and show you to your room?" God's people must do their part. But God will cut their challenges down to size.

The Christian church faces enormous challenges in our day. Witness the rise of militant secularism. Perhaps you heard about Jon Steward's "Restore the Sanity" rally yesterday on the mall. This rally was co-sponsored by the Coalition for Reason, an umbrella organization for several secular human groups and atheistic causes. This coalition used this rally to launch a campaign you will be seeing on buses and bus stops: "Don't Believe in God? Join the Club."

Some believers will take offense to this campaign. I say, let them promote their godless agenda. There is something deep within the human heart that longs for God. People come to church weary of living life strictly in the horizontal dimension. They seek a transcendent meaning to life.

Today is Reformation Sunday in the church, the day Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the Wittenberg door, thereby setting into motion the Protestant Reformation. Talk

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about climbing mountains! Luther resisted the sale of forgiveness called indulgences and the peddling of papal offices called simony. Money from these efforts was used to build lavish cathedrals. Yet, Luther persisted in challenging these abuses, not by relying on human resources but by trusting in God's capacities.

I visited Sweet Home Farm while in South Africa. Don't be deceived by its idyllic sounding name. Sweet Home Farm is a virtual shantytown. Apartheid may be officially over, but segregation by class and economic status is still with us. Sweet Home Farm is home to 17,000 blacks living in a virtual flood plain.

Christians in Cape Town decided recently to plant a church there. They worship in a tin building that had its roof blown off the day before we arrived.

The needs in Sweet Home Farm are staggering—grinding poverty, the epidemic of AIDS, gangs, you name it. I asked one young man why he chose to leave his comfortable job with the BBC and move there. He said he was tired of climbing a ladder he really didn't want to climb and decided instead to pursue God's call for his life. He trusts God's capacities, not mere human resources.

You were handed a letter from our Session as you entered worship today, with an accompanying one-page synopsis of our budget. Vienna Presbyterian is a church that believes in full disclosure. We publish where we allocate every dime you give to our mission. You will notice our

leaders are proposing a 6 percent increase next year. Some will undoubtedly ask how we can justify such an increase in the face of uncertain economic conditions. Some are forecasting our economy will actually get worse before it gets better.

The reason for the increase is rather simple. As leaders, we believe God has a bigger plan for VPC next year. We don't listen merely to human opinion, we rely on God's capacities. God has bigger plans for this church than we have yet realized.

Let me bring this sermon down to the personal level. Maybe you're facing a huge mountain in your life right now. It may be a pile of debt, falling out of relationship with a family member or friend, a failed marriage or dating relationship, a dead-end job going nowhere or facing an ominous medical diagnosis. You have essentially two options: you can either focus all your attention and resources on your human resources or trust God's capacities.

I've entitled this sermon "Thinking Big." Thinking big is contagious. So is thinking small. If we surround ourselves with small-minded people, we're going to think small thoughts.

We need more Calebs in this church, who are willing to think big. "With God's help we can do it." After all, we serve a big God!

Thinking big is contagious.

