

Steve Jungkeit  
 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme  
 Text: Numbers 13 (selected verses)  
 April 24, 2022

### To Ourselves We Seemed Like Grasshoppers: Why the Stories We Tell Matter

Theology matters. Which is to say, the deep stories we tell ourselves about the world have enormous consequences. Sometimes those consequences are tragic. Sometimes they're empowering. The stories we believe, the stories we rely upon most deeply, wind up shaping how we move through the world.

That was certainly true in the Book of Numbers. Moses commissions several spies to scout out the promised land. When the spies return, they are pessimistic about what they have seen. "There are giants in the land," they say, and we appeared as grasshoppers to them." We don't know what they actually might have seen, but whatever it was, in their estimation, the Hebrew people were no match for such giants. Hang back, they counsel. Take no chances. It's better to remain safe in the wilderness than to risk the future and to lose it. They construct a story, in other words, that diminishes their capacities, that forecloses upon certain possibilities, and that limits their prospects of success. They trust a story in which giants stand looming over the future, and it paralyzes them. One person, however, delivers a minority report. That man, Caleb, trusts another story, in which the future remains open, and the flourishing of the Hebrew people remained a living possibility. "Let us go up at once and occupy it," Caleb says. A controversy ensues. Most of the Hebrews despair, trusting the report about the giants. They wish to resume their captivity, rather than work for their collective future. Caleb, on the other hand, persists, telling a different and more hopeful story. Thankfully, the people come around, and the giants prove to be less formidable than the initial report had it.

Theology matters. The deep stories we tell ourselves, and believe, have consequences. The stories we most deeply trust can make the difference between remaining within a paralyzing wilderness, and pursuing a life of flourishing.

We do well to avoid a literal reading of the spies, of the giants, and of Caleb. It is, ultimately, a story about a settler colonial reality, the consequences of which are all around us. Instead, I would have us understand the report of giants guarding the land as a parable for each of our lives. How many times have we talked ourselves out of opportunities or life possibilities because we preferred to believe that giants stood guard along the way, preventing our access to that new life? How many jobs have we let go by us because we heard there were giants over there? How many life pathways have we rejected because the obstacles were too great - because there were giants there? How many relationships have we not pursued because we seemed as grasshoppers to ourselves? How many righteous causes have we not taken up because the way was too long, because the odds were too high, because the giants would certainly be too strong? Conversely, how many times have there been Calebs in our midst, encouraging us to believe that we were up to the tasks and challenges confronting us? It's difficult, as it happens, to hear the Calebs for all the negative and contrary voices that often surround us.

Theology, the deep stories that we trust the most, wind up mattering for our life decisions and possibilities.

But the report of giants has another significance as well. In addition to our own horizons of possibility, I chose that story because it seems like an apt metaphor for Earth Day, and for the

ecological challenges that lie before us. The story of giants in the land, guarding the way to the future, is precisely how many of us tend to respond when we're asked to think carefully about climate change. It turns out that emissaries and spies have been sent out on our behalf as well. These are the scientists and observers who have accurately reported what's happening to the planet, and what's likely to happen if we don't alter our practices. They report, truthfully, that there are giants that we must confront if we are to have an inhabitable future. For the most part, the public response has been akin to that of the Hebrews. Giants stand before us, we say, and we seem as grasshoppers compared to their imposing size. And so a culture of denial sets in, where some prefer to return to Egypt, which in this case would be the burning of fossil fuels, and others simply get paralyzed by the enormity of the giants. Very few people manage to locate the voices of Caleb, either within themselves or within the culture at large, those voices that suggest that though there be giants ahead, there are ways of confronting those giants, creating an inhabitable future for ourselves and our children.

The stories we tell, and trust most fully, have enormous consequences not only for our own lives, but for the planet.

The voices of Caleb are out there. They're the voices that keep encouraging us to shift our practices, even in small and personal ways. Switching to a plant based diet, for example, is one of the best ways that we can all make a difference, since meat production accounts for a huge portion of global carbon emissions. They're the voices that keep encouraging us to transition to solar energy, or electric vehicles - though it's worth noting that those too require minerals and materials currently being strip mined from places like Congo, and Bolivia. They're the voices that help us to understand that we can consume less, purchase fewer plastics, walk more, compost, collect rainwater, recycle, refuse fast fashion, simplify our lives, take public transport, divest from fossil fuels and all sorts of related things. Those are all ways of confronting the giants, and if it is in your power to do some of those things, it's all to the good. If it's not in your power to do those things, it's also worth saying that it might not be your fault, and so I hope you won't hear this as a harangue. We're all embedded within a context, and that context doesn't always allow for the flexibility to alter our habits in the ways we might wish.

But there's another way that Caleb works within the story, a way that pertains to our situation. Caleb doesn't merely offer tactics and solutions for confronting the power of the giants. What he does most forcefully is to change the story that had previously been circulated. In other words, his most important work is to shift the imagination of those around him, to alter the deep stories the Hebrews were telling themselves about the world and its possibilities. He goes to work at the level of theology, at the level of ideology, where the structures of the possible reside.

In truth, I think that's one of the most powerful lessons we in the churches can absorb from this story. What power we have is not that of the engineers or scientists, entrepreneurs or inventors, lawmakers or economists. But that doesn't render us powerless. Our power, if we choose to exercise it, is that of Caleb. We have the power to interrogate the stories that have come to define us. And we have the power to change those stories by offering better, and more life affirming stories about what might yet be possible. That's the singular power expressed throughout the pages of the Bible. The power of the prophets is found not in legislation or technological innovation. Their power was to change the story around them. That's the same power that Jesus exercised - he was, above all, a storyteller after all. Indeed, the story of Easter and its aftermath is a struggle over the power of competing deep stories - on one hand, a story of fear and resignation, where those clinging to an older story can stamp out a movement through

violent suppression, or, on the other hand, a story of renewal, where there is no giant strong enough to suppress the resurrection power of faith.

Theology matters. The deep stories we believe and trust about the world have the power to move and shape us in profound ways.

Something I believe to be true is that the best theologians working today do not operate under that name. Nor do their works sound anything like what we've grown accustomed to calling theology. If theology has to do with the deep structures, the deep stories, that we use to guide ourselves, it stands to reason that our best theologians are actually our most compelling and hopeful storytellers, the Calebs who are offering us different ways to construct the future. By far, the most exciting such voice I have encountered in a long time is that of Kim Stanley Robinson, in a novel entitled *The Ministry for the Future*. I just finished it, and I loved it. It's a book that all of us who are searching for hope right now would do well to read. Robinson gets categorized as a science fiction writer, but he's really invested in thought experiments, creating plausible "what if" stories that attempt to intervene, Caleb like, in our sense of what's possible. That means that he's trying to access that place within us where our guiding stories, our theologies, become apparent, and changeable. He's gaining an audience. Barack Obama called it one of the best books of the year; the *Times* columnist Ezra Klein said that all policy makers should read it. Christiana Figueres, who led the UN effort to create the Paris agreement, listened to the novel in her garden and wept. He was invited to meet with government officials at the Pentagon, and he was also a featured speaker at COP26 - the 26th Conference of the Parties to the Paris Agreement.<sup>1</sup> In the time that remains, I'd like to share a few of Robinson's insights, recognizing that he is one of the Calebs among us. People of faith need to read him seriously.

The novel begins with a catastrophe, one that feels all too plausible. A heat wave breaks out in India, where record temperatures combine with record humidity levels, such that sweat ceases to evaporate. In those conditions, even healthy people will cook and die. Such heat waves have actually occurred in recent years in India, but also Australia, Mexico, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia. In the novel, the only safe places are in the air conditioning, but then the power grid fails. In the end, some twenty million people die, in what the novel calls the worst week in history.

That event catalyzes the creation of the Ministry for the Future, a UN agency charged with solving the climate crisis. It also leads to an array of Robinson's thought experiments, all of them based on real science and economics. One thread of the novel features a group of glaciologists in Antarctica, who are busy preventing melting glaciers from sliding into the sea. They do so by pumping meltwater out from beneath them, allowing the glaciers to settle back onto bedrock, thus preventing the rise of sea levels. Robinson was presented with the idea by a researcher at a scientific conference, and so he created a scenario in which it was actually practiced. Now scientific journals are analyzing how it might be accomplished in our own time. In another thread of the novel, airline travel becomes unthinkable after drones, operated by ecoterrorists, force dozens of commercial flights to crash on a single day. Nobody's willing to risk huge carbon burns like air travel anymore, which propels the development of photovoltaic cells on the sails of ships, and on dirigibles like blimps. Transatlantic crossings become possible again, and while the duration of travel spreads across several days, rather than several hours, humanity adjusts. That scenario too is based on real science. Those types of water and aircraft are conceivable in the very near future. Yet another thread of the novel concerns global finance. Robinson accurately notes that corporations and governments have already identified vast

---

<sup>1</sup> All cited in "Best Case Scenario," by Joshua Rothman, a profile of Kim Stanley Robinson published in *The New Yorker*, January 31, 2022. Many of the insights of the following paragraph trace those offered in Rothman's article.

amounts of fossil fuel that have yet to be extracted. And yet those deposits are listed as assets on balance sheets that are worth trillions of dollars, creating an enormous stimulus toward extracting and burning those deposits. If even a sixth of those deposits are burned, we'll burn too. Robinson includes a list of the actual nineteen largest holders of those carbon assets, among them ExxonMobil, Chevron, BP, ConocoPhillips, and others, and then he describes a way that those companies could be paid *not* to extract those fossil fuel deposits. A real version of this idea is currently circulating by a real nonprofit.

A recent article in *The New Yorker* puts it like this: "The map on the inside of your hotel room door becomes suddenly riveting once the alarm goes off." That's one way to think of *The Ministry for the Future*: as a map to guide us now that the alarm bells are ringing. But another way to conceive the novel is the one I've been pushing all along: as one of the voices of Caleb, persuading us that though there are giants in our path, they are not invincible. By the time the novel closes in the 2050's, carbon emissions have begun to decline, and the earth and its populations are beginning to heal. That's not a foregone conclusion, of course. But the process takes shape because enough people begin to shape their imaginations in such a way that some of the required course corrections can take shape.

In just a few moments, we'll have an opportunity to witness how young people in our Sunday School are beginning to imagine a future of flourishing. I hope you spend some time in the Fellowship Hall, and out back as well, visiting their displays, and asking them about their work. I'm grateful that Lisa Doggart, together with Mary Bradford and Laura, have been helping our young people shape their imaginations. That is, truly, a ministry for the future, an example of the voice of Caleb raised in our midst. But I'm also grateful, and quite honestly very proud, of the steps this congregation has taken for a long time now in its own effort to create a ministry for the future. Over the last decade, we've divested of our fossil fuel stock holdings. We've got solar arrays on our parish house, which generate an enormous amount of our electricity. We've replaced all of our lighting fixtures with extremely efficient lighting technologies. And at the Trustee's meeting this past week, we opened a discussion about ways to do more, perhaps by helping to finance solar arrays for houses out at Green Grass. It's exciting to be a part of a faith community that actively searches for ways to take part in a ministry for the future. I hope we continue to discern the voices of Caleb who are speaking in our midst.

Theology matters. The deep stories we tell ourselves about the world matter. When we trust the stories that assure us that we are doomed to destruction, the stories that tell us that we are grasshoppers compared to the giants staring us down, you can be sure that someone somewhere is making a profit from our credulity. Conversely, when we choose to trust a story of our own empowerment, believing that we ourselves contain the power of giants, the gates of the future swing wide once again.