

“Seeing Our Way Through”
September 14, 2025

Numbers 13:25-14:9
Mark 8:22-25

A while ago, I was thinking about subjects for my preaching in the weeks ahead and it all seemed a little overwhelming. Our nation and our world are veering toward authoritarianism; trust in our government and our institutions continues to fall; abuses of power seem to grow daily; rights are threatened; and as I have said all too often recently, basic human decency is lacking. All of these are issues of gigantic proportion and of gigantic importance.

All of this is happening against that backdrop of great and increasing political violence. One columnist offered a quick history.

In 2020, a plot to kidnap Gretchen Whitmer, the governor of Michigan, was foiled by the F.B.I. In 2021, a mob stormed the Capitol in an effort to overturn the result of the election and pipe bombs were found at the Democratic and the Republican National Committee headquarters. In 2022, a man broke into the home of Nancy Pelosi, speaker of the House at the time, intending to kidnap her. She was absent, but the intruder assaulted her 82-year-old husband, Paul, with a hammer, fracturing his skull. In 2024, President Trump was nearly assassinated.

In 2025, Molotov cocktails were thrown into the home of Gov. Josh Shapiro of Pennsylvania during Passover. Melissa Hortman, the former House speaker of Minnesota, and her husband were murdered, and State Senator John Hoffman and his wife were severely injured by a gunman.ⁱ

All of this puts a heavy burden on preaching in a time unlike any I have known—and yes, I lived through the 60’s.

Then, of course, last Wednesday, Utah Valley University joined the University of Iowa and so many other schools on the list of campuses that have experienced the devastation of gun violence. The history of our city and the university unite us with many other places—tying us to incidents of violence that shake not only a local community but the nation. Old memories, old wounds, old fears mingle with the new dread and foreboding of current events. There was also a shooting at a high school in Colorado this past week, the 47th school shooting this year.

What made Wednesday’s shooting different was that the victim was not a student or a professor or an administrator, but Charlie Kirk, the Republican political strategist credited with bringing the youth vote for Trump in the last election. Before the killer surrendered, the rhetoric quickly grew heated, with calls for retribution coming from the president on down. In the ongoing uncertainty, this shows no sign of stopping.

How will we as people of liberal faith deal with these large issues? How will we see our way through these days?

In its own surprising and strange way, scripture helps us as we deal with the gigantic. It is to these stories that I turn this morning and next Sunday.

We don't read much from the book of Numbers in worship. It tells of a people who found that, in the strange providence of God, the journey from promise to fulfillment took a round about way through the wilderness.ⁱⁱ

At one point in these desert wanderings, the people come close to the Promised Land. Moses, their leader, sends Joshua, Caleb, and others to spy out the land. Are the people who live there strong or weak? Few or many? Is the land good or bad, rich or poor—and does it have any trees? “Be bold,” Moses tells them. And since it was the season for grapes, he adds, “Bring back some of the fruit.”

It makes good sense, really, doesn't it? Going into unknown territory—a new business, a new relationship, a new school, any new venture—requires open eyes.

The spies take forty days—the way the Bible describes a long time. They come back with some grapes and figs and pomegranates—and a mixed report.

The land is good. It “flows with milk and honey.” (My Old Testament professor suggested that a better translation would be “yogurt and grape molasses,” but you get the point.) The people, however, are strong and their cities are fortified. In addition to that—and here's the *real* down side—they “saw the descendents of Anak there.” You see, Anak's descendents were regarded as unusually tall people. They might be giants.

What to do? What to do?

Caleb assesses the situation and advises moving ahead: “Let us go up at once and occupy the land.” Weighing the pros and cons he decides it's best to get any obstacles out of the way and go forward—to finally enter the land of promise.

Note what he does not do: he does not say there's no such thing as giants.

Which is the reality that troubles the rest of the spies.

They tell the assembled people: “This is a land that devours its inhabitants. The people there are so great in size that to ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers. And those giants thought the same thing.”

Maybe it's a matter of how you look at things—or from *where* you look at things. For small children, just some thirty inches off the ground, we adults may look like giants.

And here's the thing: we see giants even as adults—in our national and global political situation, yes, but also in a serious illness, a relationship in crisis, an impossible class

taught by an impossible professor, a job or a business that is threatened. The giants of life are real.

Fear can make the giants seem invincible.

The Hebrew people receive the report of the spies with fear. They are ready to go back to Egypt. It is then that Caleb and Joshua suggest that, even if there are giants, God will be with them as they move forward. That sounds inspiring and encouraging. And that might be just the kind of thing that I should advise as we face the giants in our land.

The next verse after this, however, reads: “But, the whole congregation threatened to stone them.”

To avoid a similar fate, I will not suggest depending on God—even though I think that is a reasonable thing to do. Before we depend on God, we need to look closely at the situation and recognize that the immense problems we face can frighten and numb us.

We watch as troops move into cities, as immigrant children are seized and threatened with deportation. We watch as calls for retribution increase. We watch as nihilism creeps into the hearts of the young. We watch as illness progresses, as plans collapse. Slowly our souls are deadened and we settle into hopelessness.

I remember watching a television report in the aftermath of another tragedy. It showed a father hugging his daughter as she cried. Over and over he kept telling her: “It’s going to be all right. It’s all right now. It’s going to be all right.”

This is how we long to be embraced.

This is what we long to hear.

In faith we hear, even now, that God does not want human suffering,

that God abhors the evil that we see and do even more than we do.

that God will yet forgive the wrong we have done and hopes for the repentance of all people.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor who knew as much of hatred and tragedy as anyone, helps us when he writes: “God wants to console us. God only consoles when there is reason enough for it; when humans do not know any more, when the meaninglessness of our life scares us. The world, as it is in reality, always scares us. But a person who is consoled sees and has more than the world, this person has life with God.”

In these days we long to hear the consolation of God. What we find is that such comfort is also a call to action.

In this gathering gloom and growing despair, I recalled the words of the great 20th Century rabbi, Abraham Joshua Heschel: “An individual dies when he or she ceases to be surprised. I am surprised every morning that I see the sunshine again. When I see an act of evil, I am not accommodated. I don’t accommodate myself to the violence that goes on everywhere; I’m still surprised. That’s why I’m against it, why I can hope against it. We must learn how to be surprised, not to adjust ourselves. I am the most maladjusted person in society.”

Be surprised.

Be maladjusted; do not fit in.

And in this way, move forward into hope.

It is time to recover hope in a world that can seem hopeless.

It is time to recover hope in society that can create so much despair.

Hope asks the question: “What kind of future are we building for ourselves?”ⁱⁱⁱ In other words, hope is not about positive thinking or wishing hard that something might happen. Hope asks about what we are *doing*.

So the question comes to each of us as individuals and all of us as a congregation: What kind of future are we building? What action can we take—even today—to bring us closer to our desires?

It is not that the giants aren’t there. We are called to move toward the good we want even when facing giants of hatred and despair.

What we need is the clear vision that faith provides. We need to learn to see clearly. Such vision comes slowly.

While I’ve been thinking a lot about national and world events, you might be facing and thinking about other giants today. The scripture lessons invite us to let our eyes be opened. Take a second look.

Jesus touches the eyes of a blind man. He asks, “Can you see anything?”

The man replies, “I can see people but they look like trees, walking.”

A second touch and his sight is restored.

This is the only story in Mark’s gospel of a miracle that happens gradually. And yet this gradual quality is what gives this story its ring of truth.

Little by little, God helps us to see more clearly. Perhaps this is the best expression of God does indeed comfort and care for us. How quickly we fall into going through life with our eyes closed, blind to all that is around us.

Life is still filled with desperate situations, occasions in which it seems like there is no way out, nothing that can be done.

Life is filled with situations in which either weak passivity or aggressive revenge appears to be the only option.

God is the one who, in loving mercy, opens our eyes—gives us a fuller vision.

Look.

Then look again.

Apathy and selfish indifference are not the only options.

In another time, when our nation faced great giants, Martin Luther King, Jr. told us: “We must work unceasingly to lift this nation that we love to a higher destiny, to a new plateau of compassion, to a more noble expression of our humanness.”

We despair—and we are given a charge.

We lament—and we are given work to do.

We work in full awareness of the great temptation to turn back in the face of giants.

No doubt some are here today facing extreme situations in your personal lives: you are not sure what you should do, not sure what you can do.

No doubt there are some here who are discouraged by what you see in the world,

In our sorrow and our despair and our anger we find good news as we gather together. Look around you. Each day the people here seek to make real in the world the peace, the healing, and the comfort of God. Each day the people here live out their faith in difficult and challenging situations, coping with daily experience. Whether you are member of this congregation, or a friend, or a first time visitor—this morning you came to worship God with such people. That is the special gift of this day. Know that whoever you are, wherever you are on life’s journey, you are held in the care of this congregation that values the image of God in you and each one of us.

Together we will see our way through.

This is our peace.

This is our strength.

ⁱ Ezra Klein <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/11/opinion/charlie-kirk-assassination-fear-politics.html>

ⁱⁱ Introduction to Numbers in Oxford Annotated NRSV.

ⁱⁱⁱ Page: 4

Kennon Callahan, "Hope," in *Twelve Keys for Living*