

Good morning, Fellowship. We are going to wrap up our *A New Normal* series today, but before I get to that, I want to talk about something that isn't new and should never be normal. As I'm sure you are aware, a black man by the name of George Floyd was savagely and unjustly murdered in the streets of Minneapolis this week. It was another instance in a long line of evil perpetrated against people of color in this country, people who are our fellow man, loved by God, and made in his image. Our response to this should be the same as God's. Genesis 6 says the evil of the world grieves God's heart. It should grieve our heart and lead us to lament the brokenness of this world and the evil that flourishes. We should also respond with revulsion. Psalm 97 says "Oh you who love the Lord, hate evil." This is beyond any politics, there are no qualifiers, there is no need for nuance. This was an act of evil, and as followers of the Holy One who came to defeat evil, it is right and good for us to respond with righteous anger and speak out passionately against it.

We also need to respond with compassion. An event like this impacts each of us differently, but for the black brothers and sisters in our family, it is especially painful. It is a source of grief, fear, anger, and a cry that asks, "When will it ever end?" Scripture calls us to mourn with those who mourn and to bear one another's burdens. Know that I love you, I grieve with you and for you, I pray for God's comfort and peace to overwhelm you, and for justice to be done. Lean into your church family in the days and weeks to come and let us care for you in your pain.

As we respond with anger, and as we care for one another, we must also hold fast to the hope we have in the only thing that will make this right: the Gospel. Jesus came to reconcile us to God, but he also came to reconcile us to each other. Ephesians 2 says he broke down the wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles. We can hear that and think it's two groups from long ago. But the truth is, if Jesus can bring Jews and Gentiles together in love and unity, he can do that for all of us, regardless of what else may try to separate us. I have said this before and it is worth saying again that, in God's grace and providence, he has assembled a diverse family here at Fellowship, people from so many different backgrounds and walks of life. And the world may look at us and say we have no business being together, or it may look at us and tell us it will never work because there's no way we can get along. And they'd be right if not for one thing: Jesus. He who unites us is infinitely stronger than whatever may divide us. That means Fellowship can be a safe place for everyone to belong, and that means we can be a testimony to a divided world that Jesus makes all the difference and he is the answer to the evil of the day.

So let us love him with all of who we are, let us love one another and passionately pursue unity, and let us love our neighbor by showing him or her the love of Christ. And as we do, let us pray for healing, unity, and that the infinite worth of all men would be realized in our day. We will talk about this again.

On March 11 of this year, an NBA player tested positive for coronavirus and the league immediately responded by shutting down its season. That was the tipping point for our nation. Soon, all other leagues followed suit, and within days the vast majority of our country was sheltered at home. Fellowship responded by holding our first online only service on March 15, and we have been virtual ever since. It has been a time of fear, anxiety, loss, and uncertainty. But, for many, it's also been a time of opportunity.

Last week a survey came out that said 43% of respondents have made a positive change to their life during this time. Over the past seven weeks, we have been considering this idea that God wants us different coming out of this season than we were going in. To do that, we've followed the nation of Israel around the wilderness to see how God uses times like these to change us. We began with a challenge to take that first step of trust in God, look to him as our security and satisfaction, expand our prayer life and cry out to God in lament, live life with a new rhythm that includes Sabbath rest, live out our faith based on the New Covenant and, today, we return to this idea of trust. What started with a first step of trust ends with the last step of trust. The question before us is will we trust God in order to take that final step into the new normal he has for us?

We're going to be in Numbers 13 & 14 this morning, and the same question will be before the Israelites. After wandering for two years, they are going to be presented with an opportunity to finally enter the Promised Land. But how they respond will depend on what they believe about three key ideas.

God is for you.

God is with you.

God wants his best for you.

We're faced with the same reality. As life opens back up for us and we step into what's next, how we step into it will be contingent on what we believe about those same three ideas and will determine if we arrive in our new normal or someplace else.

Here we go. Two years into the wilderness journey, God has the nation camped just south of the Promised Land. He tells Moses to send in twelve spies to scout out the land and the people there, gather some of its produce, and report back.

[Numbers 13:25-28] ²⁵ At the end of forty days they returned from spying out the land. ²⁶ And they came to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation of the people of Israel in the wilderness of Paran, at Kadesh. They brought back word to them and to all the congregation, and showed them the fruit of the land. ²⁷ And they told him, "We came to the land to which you sent us. It flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. ²⁸ However, the people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large. And besides, we saw the descendants of Anak there.

God sends spies into the Promised Land for them to take stock, catch the vision for what God is calling them into, and get prepared. Their evaluation sees both the opportunity and the challenge ahead of them. I believe it is a gift; a gift of anticipation and also a gift of reality. They get a glimpse of their beautiful new normal, but also see that they will have to continue to trust him after they leave the wilderness.

Has God given you a peek, a taste, a view of what he has in store for you in your new normal? For me, God has been at work on the pace and rhythm of my life. He has shown me the challenges and costs that come with changing it. I will have to prioritize, cut out some good things, and reorder my time. But I also got a taste of what he wants for me last Sunday when my family and I truly Sabbath. We worshipped in the morning and spent the rest of the day sitting

in our driveway talking about hopes and dreams, laughing a lot, listening to music, eating food, and smelling the brisket I was smoking. There wasn't a phone in sight. We had nowhere to be. The time on the clock was meaningless. We delighted in the Lord and rested together. At the end of the day, we all agreed it was a wonderful experience that we should do it more often. In fact, my middle son has even started calling it Shabbat. He's never spoken a word of Hebrew in his life, but he was so enthused by our Sabbath that he's doing that now. It was a God-given taste of what my new normal can be, and it compels me to move forward.

What has God shown you? Is it around relationships? Time? Faith? How could life be different and what will it take to get there? And how will you respond? Well, we have two choices.

[Numbers 13:31-14:4] ³¹ Then the men who had gone up with him said, "We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we are." ³² So they brought to the people of Israel a bad report of the land that they had spied out, saying, "The land, through which we have gone to spy it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people that we saw in it are of great height. ³³ And there we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak, who come from the Nephilim), and we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them." ¹ Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. ² And all the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The whole congregation said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! ³ Why is the LORD bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?" ⁴ And they said to one another, "Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt."

In light of their findings, ten of the spies speak words of discouragement and disbelief, ultimately infecting all the people with the same. Their focus is on the costs and challenges ahead, and their vocabulary includes the doubtful phrase "Yeah, but..." They do not believe God is for them. "Why did God bring us into this land to fall by the sword?" They question God's motives by suggesting he brought them out there just to die rather than thrive. They do not believe God is with them. "They are stronger than we." They believe it's up to their power to conquer the land instead of God's power to accomplish what he is sending them to do. And they do not believe God wants his best for them. "The land is a land that devours its inhabitants." They believe the inheritance God has for them is a death sentence. And the results of this disbelief are disastrous.

Instead of going forward in trust, they go backwards in faithlessness by attempting to select a new leader and return to Egypt. They are so fearful about what lies ahead it causes them to doubt the character and provision of God and try to go back to the way things were. This should astound us. For generations they cried out to God to free them from the Egyptians, yet they are so focused on the difficulty of what lies ahead of them that they would rather return to bondage, abuse, and toil. Ultimately, God will pronounce judgment on the nation and have them wander around the wilderness until the current generation of adults all die off. That will be another 38 years. Their response, and the consequences of it, are a cautionary tale to us.

You might have a sense of where God wants to take you, but it may overwhelm you with fear, doubt, or grief of loss. That's understandable because change is hard. But we can't stay there and focus on that because it will ultimately cause us to doubt God's presence, provision, and power.

And as we doubt, we'll be tempted to go back to the way things used to be, that old life that may not be everything we want it to be but it's comforting because it is known, familiar, and easy. Or we'll just stay where we are because we're too afraid to step forward. Neither option is what God wants for you. One potentially leads you back to bondage and the other may just leave you wandering around for the rest of your life until the day you die.

If you find yourself resistant to go forward, know that God never intended the wilderness to be a permanent destination or a U-turn. He instead uses it to take you somewhere new, and wherever he wants to take you, he's already there waiting for you. Ten of these spies didn't believe that. Two did, and their response is how God wants us to respond.

[Numbers 14:6-9] ⁶ And Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had spied out the land, tore their clothes ⁷ and said to all the congregation of the people of Israel, "The land, which we passed through to spy it out, is an exceedingly good land. ⁸ If the LORD delights in us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land that flows with milk and honey. ⁹ Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not fear the people of the land, for they are bread for us. Their protection is removed from them, and the LORD is with us; do not fear them."

Unlike the other ten, Joshua and Caleb are ready to go. They do not dismiss the challenges they observed, neither should we, but their vocabulary included two words all who would live courageously for the Lord need: "But God!" They believe God is for them. "If the Lord delights in us." They believe his is with them. "he will bring us into this land and give it to us." They know there are large people groups, fortified cities, armies, but they trust in God's power to overcome, not their own. And they believe God wants his best for them. "It is an exceedingly good land." The grape vine they brought back was so abundant they had to put it on a pole and have two people carry it. They see the new normal God has for them and they trust him to make it a reality. Their focus is not on the challenges and costs, it's on God. And as they focus on God, their trust grows, and they say let's go forward. If this sounds familiar, it should. It's the same decision they had to make at the Red Sea. When they focused on the Egyptian Army, they feared and doubted. But when they focused on God, they trusted and were able to move forward. Caleb and Joshua focused on God and trusted him because of that. For their faithfulness, they will be the only two current adults who actually make it into the Promised Land 38 years from this day.

As you consider the costs and challenges of your new normal, does your vocabulary include the phrase "But God!" Martha and I told you about our wilderness experience a few weeks ago. What I didn't tell you is that I came out of that season believing something about God that wasn't true. I was pretty sure that God wasn't concerned with allowing anything good in my life. My eternity was secure, but I was convinced this life was just about one refining trial after another. And it prevented me from going forward. What ultimately shook me loose was when I began to look back and remember how the goodness of God showed up in past times of my life, starting with my salvation, and that allowed me to once again believe he is for me, with me, and wants his best for me. In a few verses God will say to Moses "How long will this people not believe me in spite of all I've done?" We are propelled forward when we look back and remember what God has done for us. And if you struggle with finding evidence in your own life, remember what Jesus tells us God has already done for us.

[John 3:16, 10:10] “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life....¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”

Is God for us? Jesus says he loves us so much that his love is sacrificial. Yes, he is for us. Is God with us? Jesus says God gave his Son to us. He shall be called Immanuel, God with us, and he came to secure our eternity that will be spent with him. So yes, he is with us now and will be forever. Does God want his best for us? Jesus says he came not only to secure eternal life, but to change our lives here and now, that if we follow him it will be a life overflowing with blessing that starts with being in his presence. The life he gives is infinitely better than anything the world has to offer. So yes, he wants his best for us. To make all that possible, he lived the life we could not live and climbed upon a Cross to die the death we deserved. If you’ve never believed that before, do that this morning. Your new normal will start today and last for eternity.

What glimpse, vision, or taste has God given you of your new normal? What will it cost? How will life be better?

Have you been able to dream with God these last couple of months? Maybe he’s shown you some things that need to change, things you need to let go of, and new things you need to hold on to. Perhaps he’s helped you see the people or the pursuits in your life a little differently, and it’s time to reorder your priorities. Maybe he’s asking you to practice the spiritual discipline of saying “no” more often. Maybe he’s shown you there is a depth of intimacy he wants with you, and he’s inviting you to come closer. Whatever he has shown you, thank him for it, and keep going. He is preparing you to walk into it.

Do you believe God is for you, with you, and wants his best for you?

We finish where we started. The wilderness is an opportunity to answer God’s question “Will you trust me?” It’s the question he asked of the Israelites over and over again. And now it’s your turn to answer it. How you answer it will determine if the new normal God has for you actually becomes your new normal. I pray you find him trustworthy.

If you are not comfortable with your answer to that last question, let me close with some encouragement. 38 years from this moment, after this generation of Israelites dies off and the nation is on the banks of the Jordan ready to finally enter the Promised Land, to enter their new normal, our faithful God makes a promise to Israel’s new leader, Joshua. If you’ve been around Fellowship for the last year, it should be familiar to you.

[Joshua 1:9] 9 “Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.”

It is the promise God gives to anyone who seeks to follow him. It is a promise he repeats throughout Scripture, and a promise Jesus himself gave to us before ascended to heaven. I. WILL. BE. WITH. YOU. **He is with us because he is for us and because he is for us, he wants his best for us.** There is a new normal he is calling you in to. There is a beautiful new chapter in your life, and our church’s life, that he has been writing, and it’s time to turn the page. Let us all take that step of trust, knowing we too have been given this promise, and see what he has in store. It’s going to be good.