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Scripture: Faith over Fear Numbers 13-14

It is hard to believe its Labour Day weekend or maybe it's not hard to believe. For some, maybe the summer has just flown by and for others, this summer has been like the rest of 2020, it has just dragged on and on, like a dark cloud hovering over you. Labour Day weekend has traditionally been one of my most favourite times of the year. To me, it has always represented hopeful, new beginnings.

There is the excitement of school starting for another year. The back to school shopping has been completed. The new backpacks and school supplies have been purchased and the anticipation is building for the kids to see who their teacher will be and what classroom they will be in. There is the angst and the exhilaration of parents dropping their children off at university or college for the first time.

For some of you, Labour Day weekend marks the time when music and dance lessons start up again. For others, it's a new sports season. NFL football is usually back this weekend!

Even in the church, Labour Day weekend is a key marker as it represents the transition from our summer mode into our fall launch with many new and exciting activities planned.

But, I have to admit, Labour Day weekend seems different this year. I can feel it. For me, my usual excitement and hopeful outlook for a new beginning has been replaced by a sense of uncertainty and reservation.

School isn't starting for our children on Tuesday. It has been delayed as school board officials continue



to discern the safest way for them to re-enter the classroom.

University and College students aren't moving in and participating in their Orientation activities in their normal fashion. In fact, most of them will remain home and participate in their classes online.

Many of your dance and music lessons have been postponed or modified and the sports leagues are completely turned around. The NHL and NBA are trying to complete last season, in a bubble.

NFL Football is a question mark and for those who follow Western Athletics, all fall sports have been cancelled. The London Knights' season is delayed.

Here at North Park, instead of the usual hype to launch our fall preaching series and gather together after a summer when people have been on holidays, we continue to meet online.

I think all in all, I have held up pretty well through this whole Covid Pandemic thing. I have tried to keep a pretty positive outlook but the last week has been a little difficult for me. Maybe you can relate to that feeling. Check the various forms of mass and social media and you will soon be bombarded with straight up, bad news. Not just bad news but hopelessness.

Crime is on the increase. The economy is shaky. Our Canadian Government is embroiled in the WE scandal. In the US, there is the backbiting and accusations between the Democrats and Republicans as they are nearing an election. In fact, last week, a category 4 hurricane hit Louisiana and surrounding states and it barely made the news given everything else that is going on.

There is the racial unrest that is boiling over in the streets and full on riots are breaking out in major cities around the US. They are the reactions to the death of George Floyd and then the shooting of Jacob Blake. Both of them, black men and both happened at the hands of white police officers. The Black Lives Matter movement has been gaining traction across North America and the world. Many high profile celebrities and sports stars are speaking out and boycotting their scheduled events, concerts and games as a way of protesting inequality.

Throughout this time, we have also been introduced to terms such as *Cancel Culture*. This is the increasingly popular practice of withdrawing support for or “cancelling” public figures or companies after they have done or said something considered objectionable or offensive.

Across Canada and the US, statues and monuments of past leaders are being removed and names of buildings are being changed because the actions of those people have been deemed to be racist. Popular figures have been shamed online for appearing insensitive and out of touch and some have even been fired for inappropriate comments. Companies such as *Aunt Jemima Syrup* and *Uncle Ben's Rice*, are changing their branding that many find it racist.

If you are on social media on a regular basis you know that the term, *Karens* has been coined for the massively popular videos of white women who go off on inappropriate public tirades.

Then there is *QAnon*, a far right conspiracy theory that states among other things, 5G radio waves in our wireless cellular devices are used for mind control. Bill Gates is related to the devil. Face masks can kill you and there is a ring of pedophiles made up of some of the most powerful leaders in the world. This line of conspiracy thinking is spreading the quickest among what group of people today? Conservative Christians. All of these things have surfaced with a vengeance in 2020 and make no mistake about it, some of them are forcing change that is long overdue.

But it has all been little overwhelming to many. In the midst of it all, we are still dealing with a global pandemic. Covid to date, has infected almost 25 million people and killed close to 900 000. In Canada alone, we have had almost 130 000 cases with about 10 000 deaths.

The way that we go about our daily lives has changed, maybe forever with masks, social distancing and constant hand washing. These are the new norms in the ways that we engage with one another. It makes me weary and depressed just saying all of this out loud. There are times, many times when I long for the *good ole days*, You know, when we could actually gather together in this room and worship together and give each other a handshake or a comforting hug. Many times over the past few weeks especially, I have brought to mind the words of Jeremiah, the weeping prophet in,

Lamentations 3:20-24

*I will never forget this awful time,
as I grieve over my loss.*

Yet I still dare to hope

when I remember this:

The faithful love of the LORD never ends!

His mercies never cease.

Great is his faithfulness;

his mercies begin afresh each morning.

I say to myself, “The LORD is my inheritance;

therefore, I will hope in him!”

What a source of comfort these words have been to me as I am reminded that God is with me. He is with us, when we turn to him, *follow him* as we talked about last week. Throughout history, He has done some of His greatest work in some of the darkest times.

In the first century, during the persecution of the Christians, the teachings of Jesus spread like wildfire across the Middle East and other parts of the Roman Empire.

It spread throughout Europe during the protestant reformation and the martyrdom of the saints.

It spread throughout China during the cultural revolution of the 1960's and 1970's, as many were tortured and killed to drive them from religion. Yet, throughout the outlying regions, Chinese Christianity spread rapidly as people grasped on to the hope that Jesus offered.

It spread in North America just after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 as people jammed churches in the weeks that followed to find some sort of meaning for life.

Jesus will open our eyes to see him in new ways and discover new opportunities to share his message of love and hope with others especially in these uncertain times, when we turn to him and put faith over fear.

If you have been following along with us throughout the summer, then you know that we are in the final week of a message series at North Park, that we entitled, *In the Moment. Decisions that Change our Lives Forever.*

If ever we have been in a defining moment as a church, a nation and as a global community, this is it. The year, 2020 will go down in the history books as the year everything changed. The challenge for us is how we respond to the adversity that has come our way this year, especially as Christians? What has been our response? Has it been fear or faith? Have we turned into Jesus or have we turned away? This is our defining moment.

Today, as we conclude this series and as we ponder the times we found ourselves in, I want to draw your attention to a familiar story in the Old Testament. It describes a decision made in a defining moment that had long term ramifications for not just one person, or one family but for the entire nation of Israel. It is found in the book of Numbers 13 and 14. Let me give you some background information before we jump into the text.

Remember in the first book of the bible, Genesis, God makes this promise to his chosen man Abraham. He says,

Genesis 12:1-2

“Leave your native country, your relatives, and your father’s family, and go to the land that I will show you. ² I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others.

This land, the Promised Land, was to be the place where this great nation, Israel would reside. It would be their forever home. But as we know, somewhere along the line, things go astray.

The Israelites end up enslaved to the Egyptians but God frees them through Moses. Then He has Moses lead them through the parted Red Sea, through the desert and although there are some twists and turns

along that way, it appears as though they will finally enter the land God has for them. As they are on the threshold of crossing into the land, God has Moses handpick 12 men to go and scout it out. They were to determine the viability of the Israelites successfully taking the land from the current inhabitants and to see if it was suitable for vegetation and wildlife to sustain the people. After returning from their mission, listen to the scouting report these 12 men gave to Moses and the Israelites.

Numbers 13:27-28

“We entered the land you sent us to explore, and it is indeed a bountiful country—a land flowing with milk and honey. Here is the kind of fruit it produces.

So, the land itself is rich and fertile, perfect for farming and certainly able to sustain the people but listen as the tone now shifts as fear takes over them.

²⁸ But the people living there are powerful, and their towns are large and fortified. We even saw giants there,

The land is good, but there is no way we can take it with all those giants strutting about. The fear in voices of these men sends the people into a frenzy. A lone voice, Caleb, tries to calm everyone down with a reassuring,

Numbers 13:30

“Let’s go at once to take the land,” he said. “We can certainly conquer it!”

Have you ever been the lone voice? You absolutely believe in something but everyone else around you is shouting you down. That’s Caleb here. Right away the others squelch his enthusiasm.

Numbers 13:31-32

“We can’t go up against them! They are stronger than we are!” ³² So they spread this bad report about the land among the Israelites: “The land we traveled through and explored will devour anyone who goes to live there. All the people we saw were huge.

In fact, of the 12 spies that Moses sent in to explore the land, Caleb and another guy, Joshua were the only two to bring back a positive and encouraging report.

Although they are outnumbered in their opinion, and sensing that the people are actually going to let fear stop them from entering the promise land, listen to the last ditch plea they give to the Israelites in,

Numbers 14:7-9

They said to all the people of Israel, "The land we traveled through and explored is a wonderful land!

⁸ And if the LORD is pleased with us, he will bring us safely into that land and give it to us. It is a rich land flowing with milk and honey.

⁹ Do not rebel against the LORD, and don't be afraid of the people of the land. They are only helpless prey to us! They have no protection, but the LORD is with us! Don't be afraid of them!"

In other words, what they are challenging the Israelites with is, *this is a defining moment in our lives. This is a defining moment in the life of our nation. The land that God has promised us, to bless us, is right there. All we have to do was step into it and take it.*

Moses sent 12 men to go on a reconnaissance mission, to check things out and report back, and ten come back terrified. But not Caleb and not Joshua. Unfortunately, their plea, *The Lord is with us, Don't be afraid. We can certainly do it,* falls on deaf ears and what ends up happening? This generation of Israelite people lost their one and only chance to enter into this Promised Land due to one overarching reason – fear. Lack of faith in the power of God to see them through.

I think as the Christian church today in 2020 with all that is going on around us in our culture, we too, are faced with a pretty big defining moment situation. Oh, maybe it isn't as big as the one Moses and the Israelite people encountered in this text but there are definite similarities.

God's promises to us remain the same. He has given us the land and He is with us. He has called us to love Him and to love others. We are to go out into our world and be salt and light for His glory wherever we go. In fact, we have summarized God's call on our lives as Christians with one pithy statement at North Park. This is our Mission. Do you remember it?

To inspire, support and mobilize one another to live like Jesus as a transforming and life-giving presence in our families, communities and the world.

We are to *live like Jesus*. I have been contemplating those three words a lot over the past few months. What does it mean to *live like Jesus* in our world today with all that is going on around us?

We throw that little expression out a lot, don't we? *Live like Jesus* or *be like Jesus* or *What Would Jesus Do* but I really think it is important enough that we need to stop and reflect on what that really means and how it aligns with the ways we are living our lives, as Christians.

Did you know that the word *Christian* comes from the Greek word *christianos*, meaning *little Christ*? It was originally used as an insult in the first century by those opposed to Jesus but the name has become a blessing for us and billions of people around the world.

Why did the opponents of Jesus and his teachings call the disciples, *Christians* or *little Christs*? It was because their lifestyle was so clear and unmistakable. They demonstrated the qualities of Jesus. If you were to come up with a list of the qualities of Jesus what would you say? Do these words come to your mind?

Love. Joy. Peace. Patience. Kindness. Goodness. Faithfulness. Gentleness. Self-Control

Do these words sound familiar? It is the Fruit of the Spirit described in *Galatians 5:22-23*, that the Holy Spirit produces in us as followers of Jesus. So maybe the litmus test for us as to how we, *live like Jesus* in these difficult days is whether these attributes are lived out in our lives. Are they being lived out in the lives of those we are following and the leaders we look up to and take our cues from? Why is this so important?

Here is the thing. On this Labour Day Weekend 2020, I do believe that the Christian Church is on the threshold of incredible opportunity. Just like the Israelites of Moses' Day. God has given us the land and he has promised that He is with us.

This is a defining moment for our generation. Will we move forward in faith or will we be immobilized by fear?

Oh, there are some giants ahead of us, there is no doubt about it. There is that pesky global pandemic. This is racial unrest and violence on the streets. There is skepticism and cynicism. There is heresy and fear mongering and there are even wolves in sheep's clothing lurking about.

There are also many of your family members, friends and neighbours who are searching for answers. They are looking for hope and desperately wanting to give their lives to something or someone who demonstrates that there is a better way to live. There is something more meaningful for them. That is what we have to offer them. We have Jesus to offer them. So, will we move forward in faith in this uncertain time or will we be immobilized by fear.

I recently heard a story from someone of an encounter they had with a person at a market. The person was wearing a shirt that had the words, *Faith over Fear* emblazoned on the front, which was certainly an eye catcher but it was not the only thing that made that person stand out in that crowd. She was also not wearing a face mask even though they were mandatory. She was making a point. That wearing a mask displaces trust in God's protection. But theologically that is wrong on so many levels.

You will not find a single case in all the bible of God wanting people to throw responsibility and common sense out the window in order to demonstrate faith in Him before a watching world.

Oh, there were times when God called people to do things that seemed to make no sense to others, as an act of faith, such as making a large boat on dry land in preparation for a flood or walking around a city for seven days blowing horns. But there are no examples where God's protection is independent of the reason and rationality in which he has employed people to use. In fact, the bible is pretty clear in this matter. We are not to put God to the test. When being tempted by Satan in the desert Jesus says to him in,

Matthew 4:7

You must not test the LORD your God. ”

In that story I told you earlier about the Israelites rejecting God's command to enter into the Promised Land. They had disobeyed God and just a short time later, it says in the text that they had a change of mind. They want to enter the land and confront the enemy but Moses warns them against it. He says in,

Numbers 14:42

Do not go up into the land now. You will only be crushed by your enemies because the LORD is not with you.

Due to their disobedience, the Lord was not with them but they go up against their enemy anyway and guess what? They were soundly defeated because they put God to the test. They presumed that He was with them when He was not.

I would consider myself to be a person of considerable faith. Throughout the past six months, I have never really feared Covid for myself, nor have I lay awake at night trembling with anxiety. But I wear a mask whenever I am out and about. I practice social distancing and I wash my hands a lot more than I used to.

Out of fear? No.

It has been out of a deep faith that reminds me to not test God but to use the wisdom and discernment He has given me to honor and glorify Him and care for myself, my family and His people. To demonstrate the qualities of Jesus such as love, kindness, goodness, gentleness and self-control to those I encounter in public spaces. I wear a mask as a Christian witness because I honestly believe that if Jesus walked the face of the earth today, he would wear a mask out of pure love for those around him.

Just as it is faith over fear that prompts me to do other things such as strapping my grandson in his car seat when we go for a ride. Or getting an annual medical check-up. Or locking my doors at night. Or wearing a seat belt. Or any one of the hundreds of other things I do that add safety, protection and health to my life and the lives of others. Purposely choosing to avoid such things is not putting faith over fear, it is putting foolishness over the wisdom and common sense that God has given us. To do such a thing in the name of God, is doing the one thing He said we must never do. Test him.

The year 2020, has posed many challenges for those who lead in the local church. Christianity in its very nature is a movement that was created by God for community. To engage one another face to face. To sing and worship together. To share common food around a communion table and listen to a preacher. All those things, Covid has restricted. We have had to modify and adapt the ways that we do many things as a church in the last six months but we have

trusted that God is still in control and guiding us. We have seen Him do some amazing things through his people during this time. North Park has been able to reach out to people and organizations in our community because of Covid that we probably would not have, if things would have simply carried on normally.

Do you remember the sale of Easter Lilies back in April? We would not have had that initiative without Covid. Hundreds of you purchased them to give to neighbours, friends and coworkers, as a practical demonstration of the love of Jesus during a difficult time and we are still hearing stories of the impact that gesture had on people.

We have collected hundreds of toiletry items, baked goods, bottles of water for the front line works and other organizations in London, some faith based and some not. We have donated over 50 000 dollars in a time when money was short, to those in our community who were experiencing a shortfall due to the effects of Covid.

We have heard stories of many of you who have included family and friends into your bubble as you watch North Park's worship services or other ministry initiatives online each week. These are people who would not normally feel comfortable walking through the doors of a church building on a Sunday, yet will watch a service in the comfort of a home they are invited to.

As much as this Covid pandemic has tragically taken many lives. We have experienced it first hand at North Park. As much as it has caused a disruption to how we normally live and function in our society and in the church, it has also open many new and creative ways for the message of Jesus to go out.

Last month, our leadership made the very difficult decision to postpone weekend services in the building until at least January 2021. I know that was a decision that some of you disagree with especially when you see other churches in the city offering live services again. I want to make it clear that our decision in no way, condemns other churches who are doing something different. Many have found unique and safe ways to gather. As leaders of North Park church, we are tasked with the obligation to do what we deem best for our faith community and at

this time, given our space, the number of people and services we have each weekend, the current Covid protocol restrictions and the potential for a second wave in the fall, we could not offer the best worship experience for our people and we could not assure the best safety practices. Not just for you. Think about it, if we are allowed 30% of our total congregation in our services each week, which is what the regulations allow, that is 400-500 people who would gather in here and then go out and mingle with hundreds of other people throughout the week. Our concern is not just for your safety but also for the health and safety of our neighbours, friends, classmates and coworkers because and remember this always, the church does not just exist for ourselves. It is not all about us! We are to be a light and a witness to our world.

It would have been an easy decision to simply go back to meeting together. It is what we know. It is what we are comfortable with and it is so important for our personal accountability and community, but for now, we are in a global pandemic! As followers of Jesus, we are called to focus not only on ourselves and our own needs but this is the time to think of what we can do to be a blessing to our community. What is our best witness as a church to the people that so desperately need to see the love of Jesus displayed through our actions?

Our non- Christian friends hear us preach a lot about how Jesus loves them and we love them, but now is our chance to prove it. Would we be willing to sacrifice something we love and value short term, for them? Do you know what they are seeing on the news? Maybe not so much here but in the U.S. they are seeing thousands of Christians pouring into churches each Sunday without masks and without social distancing. Why? Because, *it's our right! We will not let fear stop us. We have faith that God will protect us.* What they are doing with that attitude is putting God to the test.

In some cases, they are spreading the disease to the very ones they were called to reach in love. In one situation, a churchgoer in Ohio sparked a Covid outbreak that spread to 90 other people in the church and in the community after he insisted on attending a worship service. I would suggest to you that fear is actually the underlying reason that drives

this type of behaviour. Fear of losing something and not believing Jesus will show them another way.

Let me ask you again, what would Jesus do? How would Jesus live today during this pandemic? The Jesus that we know and preach from the gospels, would he be in the masses demanding his right to gather or would he be thinking of the best way to reach out to others with love, compassion and grace?

Throughout this fall, North Park church, you will continue to receive the best online worship service experience that our gifts and talents can bring to you because it is important. All of our ministry areas at North Park will also be offering online and there will be many in person, in the building activities following appropriate protocol, for community, spiritual growth and development. Our Young Professional ministry had awesome outside gathering for 20 people last Sunday night.

Here is my challenge to you this season. Don't let fear paralyze you. Don't let fear drive you back to the comfortable. I have heard rumblings of a few people who are concerned about what their friends from other churches think, because we are not offering a service in the building at this time. I have heard of a few who are thinking of leaving North Park and going to a church that is offering an "in person" Sunday worship service. Let me just say, that's too easy. That is too comfortable and I may even suggest that that attitude is letting fear take hold. Have faith, settle in and be open to perhaps something deeper that God wants to do in your life and the lives around you during this once in a lifetime occurrence. Pray for opportunities not the status quo. What new thing does God want you to do during this time? How is He stretching you and your faith? How can you leverage our online worship service to reach out to those around you who wouldn't normally go to church?

Have a viewing party within your bubble or watch the service at a time of your choosing and then use Saturday night or Sunday morning to volunteer in your community, research the issues of poverty, homelessness and discrimination in our city, take an elderly neighbor for coffee or call your mom. All examples of Jesus' love in action.

I am someone who loves routine so you can imagine that the last six months for me has been very disconcerting. There are times when I have realized that I was letting fear overcome faith that God is still in control. He has given us the land and He is with us. He is with us not just for one hour every Saturday night or Sunday morning but each day, leading and guiding us to take His hope to a needy world.

Do you know what? I am starting to get a little excited for this new season and the new opportunities God will bring our way. Is that what you are anticipating and praying for as well? We are standing on the cusp of a new opportunity. This is a defining moment for us and for our church. The next move is ours. Will fear stifle us because we deem the obstacles to be too big or too uncertain?

Or, will faith propel us, assured that God is out in front, leading the way, just as He always has.

Amen? Amen. Let's pray.

In the Moment

Decisions that Change our lives Forever

Faith over Fear ~ Numbers 13-14

With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.

1. What does Labour Day weekend mean to you? Does it represent a launch of a new season? How are you viewing Labour Day weekend this year in light of all that is going on?
2. If you feel comfortable, share some of your thoughts about things that are going on in our world today. How are you processing the civic uprisings and racial unrest? What does *Cancel Culture* or *QAnon* mean to you? How have you been impacted by the economic situation? Where have you seen God at work during this difficult time and what is the condition of your faith?

3. The Israelites let fear stymie them from entering into the land that God had promised them. Can you think of a time when you let fear stop you from doing something that you believed God wanted you to do? What did you learn through that situation?
4. Brainstorm some qualities of Jesus that we get from the bible. How do you think Jesus would respond to the Covid pandemic if he walked the earth, today?
5. Have you ever put God to the test? In what ways do you think as Christians we put God to the test? Discuss how faith and wisdom/common sense weave together. Can you think of an example where the collision of faith and wisdom/common sense has played out in your life?
6. What are some opportunities that God has placed before you to grow your faith and share that faith with others, this fall?

Prayer and Action Item

Pray for one another out of the key points that were discussed. Invite God to replace your tendency to fear with an appetite to grow your faith this season. Recognize your tendency to default to the comfortable and invite Him to give you new opportunities in your faith journey.

If you have never fully surrendered everything to follow Jesus, make it a defining moment prayer to him this week. If you know there are some things that you are placing in a higher priority than your relationship with Jesus, surrender those in prayer.