

Giants in the Earth

June 21, 2015

Scripture:

Genesis 6:4 There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown. (KJV)

First Thessalonians 1:5 For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance; as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake. (KJV)

May God bless the hearing of His Holy Word.

Message:

I am not normally one to discuss literary topics. English class in school was always my worst subject. I was good with the grammar. But the literature part of it, well, you see, the teachers were not content to just let me read and enjoy the story. They were trying to teach me something. I was supposed to analyze it. I had no interest in doing that. My idea of reading was to let myself be caught up in a tale of adventure and exotic places. I liked reading Edgar Rice Burroughs, best known for the Tarzan books. I read Jules Verne, who wrote “Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea.” My favorite of his was “Mysterious Island.” A band of prison camp escapees improvised a bit of civilization on a remote uninhabited island. But how can you stop and dissect and analyze a good story when you are caught up in reading it? I couldn’t.

I mention this, because it was in English class that I first encountered “Giants in the Earth.” My 11th grade English teacher, a Miss Ogden, had one very favorite book. It was “Giants in the Earth”, by a Norwegian named Hans Ulrich Rolvaag. She made this book a point of focus for much of that year. It’s not a bad book. It’s about a pioneer from Norway who makes his way to North Dakota and sets up a homestead. There are difficulties: finding wood, hunger, snowstorms, and more snowstorms. Do you recall the scene in the second Star Wars movie, on the ice planet Hoth, where Hans Solo and Luke Skywalker preserve themselves from the cold by taking refuge inside the carcass of their beast? Yes, the book included specifically that kind of difficulty. But after simply enjoying the book for being a story, Miss Ogden wouldn’t move on; she wanted to analyze it: looking for symbols of the cross and that kind of thing.

At one point it was well into the year. I’d already had enough of this particular book. Miss Ogden gave a quiz. It was one of those informal quizzes where you exchange papers with other students in your row. One of the questions was, “What was the title of the book written by Hans Ulrich Rolvaag.” Now, we’d already been on this one book for months. To me, this seemed like a stupid question. How could anyone not know what book we had been laboring over all that time? If I’d been more mature, I would have simply given the expected answer. But I wasn’t, and I didn’t. I wrote, “Giants in the Dirt.” I don’t know exactly why, answering stupid with stupid, I suppose. Not bright. When we exchanged papers and Miss Ogden told us the answers to be marked, I figured the other student grading it would simply mark it wrong, and that would be that.

But, no. “Miss Ogden,” he asked, “How should I mark it if he wrote ‘Giants in the Dirt?’”

She was horrified. “Who would do such a thing?”

My fellow student could have taken that as a rhetorical question. But he didn’t. I was identified as the perpetrator of this sacrilege. Miss Ogden subsequently collected the papers, but insisted that I correct that answer before handing it in. Later that year my mother had to visit Miss Ogden, and managed to convince her not to fail me in English.

So, you can see why the phrase “Giants in the Earth” is memorable to me. The book’s title is meant to recall these words from Genesis. The idea was that these pioneers who did amazing things and overcame such obstacles were truly giants in their accomplishments, or as the Bible verse puts it, “men of renown.” With the maturity that the years bring, I can appreciate that now in a way I could not at the time. And as I prepared to speak today, Father’s Day, the phrase, “Giants in the Earth,” came to mind.

Genesis 6:4 There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown. (KJV)

This very odd verse from the Book of Genesis sounds almost pagan. Do you recall the Greek myths about “mighty men” of legend? Hercules, or Perseus, for example? By the Greek mythology, Hercules was a son of the god Zeus. So were many others. Many, many others. It was as if, to explain men who did great and heroic things, one had to trace their parentage back to a deity. And so, we see, in this verse from the Hebrew scriptures, a fragment of a polytheistic past before Abraham.

Great men are explained as being children of the “sons of god.” I read this verse from the King James version. More recent versions of the Bible use the Hebrew term “Nephilim,” which doesn’t really convey the meaning in English. The book of Genesis was edited into its current form during the Babylonian exile in about 500 BC. This verse was probably included to explain the origin of the “Nephilim,” the giants that the Israelite spies found when Moses sent them to spy out the Promised Land during the Exodus, in Numbers 13. Even as late as the Davidic period, there were still some from this race of Nephilim left: you recall hearing of the giant Goliath?

Returning to Genesis 6, what we see here is that even in the earliest of times, men and women looked back on the generations of their ancestors, and remembered legends of great men, and their seemingly superhuman accomplishments, “men of renown.”

Our New Testament scripture passage is more familiar:

First Thessalonians 1:5 For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance; as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake. (KJV)

Now, where have we seen that Bible verse before? This verse should be particularly recognized by all of us seated here at First Presbyterian Church of Wilkes-Barre. (The Pauline Windows.) This is the apostle Paul, writing to his church in Thessalonica. He writes, “ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake.” He’s talking about himself, Paul, as well as Silas, Peter, maybe Mark, and perhaps others of the early church fathers who had visited the Thessalonians and had ministered to them. Now, these words could be taken as boasting. Boasting is common among celebrities in our day. It seems self-centered and, well, boastful. But Paul isn’t giving credit to himself. No, he’s crediting the life-changing nature of the gospel, the good news we have in Christ, that makes us all, all believers, children of God, and capable of great things. Paul is saying, “Look at what the apostles, the missionaries, the other disciples of Christ, have done.” In other places, Paul recites all of the hardships he has endured for the Gospel: disparagement, beatings, imprisonment, shipwreck, and more. Such are the deeds of heroes: giants of our faith.

On this Father’s Day, I would like to recognize those of our forefathers, and that includes women of renown too, who did amazing things, and whose stories inspire us with amazement over what human beings can do and accomplish. Things that seemingly would require superhuman abilities and determination, but real

people did them. I expect you can think of stories from your own family that have been passed down of seemingly ordinary people who did extraordinary things.

Consider the early settlers to this country. Have you ever seen one of those ships on which they crossed the ocean? I recall visiting Jamestown Festival Park as a child. They had, and still do, replicas of the ships Susan Constant, Godspeed, and Discovery, on which the original Jamestown settlers crossed from England. The biggest of those ships was only 116 feet long, the smallest just 38 feet. They looked even smaller when I saw them again as an adult. Before serving as transport to Virginia, Godspeed and Susan Constant were colliers: coal carrying cargo ships. Can you imagine doing that? Crossing the ocean in small, dirty ships, and starting a new life in a hostile, pestilential wilderness? Our forefathers did that.

Recently a friend of mine visited Ireland. He sent me a postcard showing a replica of one of the “famine ships”, the Jeanie Johnston, now on exhibit in Dublin, a ship of about 150 feet length. Many of the ships that carried Irish men and women to America during the great famine were also referred to as “coffin ships.” Death rates during the passage reached up to 30%. The “good ship” Jeanie Johnston was called that, a “good ship,” because she lost no lives on passage. These refugees, these people hoping to find a better life here in the United States, they are our forefathers, truly giants in what they did and endured.

Even now, people are coming to the United States after harrowing dangers. The father of a couple of my Vietnamese students perhaps 15 years ago was held in “reeducation camps” in Vietnam for many years after the Americans abandoned his country. He escaped in a small boat, and eventually made his way to the United States and joined his family.

Now, it’s interesting that what we grow up with is sort of taken for granted as “normal” when we are growing up. We heard things from Grandmothers and Grandfathers, and we often tucked them away without marveling at how extraordinary they were. Later, we finally may come to appreciate what truly amazing people those fathers, and mothers, in our family were.

I was fortunate to grow up knowing all four of my grandparents. My Dad’s father and mother had been in India. Their house was filled with unusual and mysterious objects. These included a pair of rosewood elephants holding up an enormous bronze gong, cobra snake shaped candlestick holders, and a laboratory in the basement with an amazing microscope among other things. All of that was just part of who my grandparents were. It wasn’t until much later that I came to appreciate just what my grandfather had done.

He traveled to India in 1919, to manage an oil plant. He developed a method for hydronizing coconut oil into a cooking oil. This was a substitute for a shortening based on animal fat, that tended to turn rancid. So, that was a big improvement for the lives of ordinary Indians. My grandfather worked to put Indian natives into supervisory positions at the plant. He and his family returned to the United States due to health concerns when my father was four. All of this was documented with notes and photographs he took. Wow.

My other grandfather I didn’t meet until I was six years old. He was a Presbyterian missionary in the Belgian Congo for 43 years, from 1912 to 1956. My grandmother traveled from her family’s farm in Missouri to the Congo during wartime, 1915, to marry him there. She ran a school for the native children, while my grandfather “itinerated” to villages in a wide area around the mission station. He helping churches and preached the gospel. That included visiting the pygmies and the cannibals. Missionaries captained the mission steamboat on the Congo and Kasai rivers, like something right out of Mark Twain. That’s how my grandparents traveled to and from the mission. I recall my grandfather telling me how, when they got stuck on a sandbar, a small boat was taken to bury an anchor in the sand, so that the ship could then pull itself off. From age 6 on I periodically saw slides my grandfather had taken, played with the 30 foot python skin, felt the lion-skin, marveled at the carved elephant tusk, and heard stories about life in the Congo. I heard about my grandfather’s constant witness to the gospel. Whenever we were to leave his house, or someone else was about

to depart, my grandfather would read from the Bible, speak a bit about the passage, and pray. He was a true giant in the faith.

My father just seemed like an ordinary father as I was growing up. We went on camping trips to “skirmishes.” That’s an event where men representing Civil War regiments competitively shoot at targets. The women would have costume competitions. We’d travel to many interesting places: Camp Perry, Ohio, Fort Dix, New Jersey, Gettysburg, Springfield Illinois, Fort Meade, ... You know, all the usual vacations spots. Didn’t everybody? The shooting matches were interesting. They shot in teams using 1860’s era muzzle loading rifles. They would shoot at clay pigeons, flower pots on strings, shoot down wooden posts, and at sticks of dynamite. The cannon matches were loud.

I didn’t understand it at the time, but my father helped start all that. He was one of the founding members of the North-South Skirmish Association, and was the first National Commander. I thought this was all just ordinary life when I was a kid. I came to understand that not everybody went to Camp Perry on Lake Erie every summer; some went to Buckroe Beach instead. It wasn’t until I was an adult that I understood how extraordinary all of this was.

My father rode his horse to school each day as a boy. During World War II he was in the Third Marine Division on Iwo Jima. I didn’t really understand what that meant until much later. At age forty, with three children and another on the way, he quit being an architect, and went to law school. He practiced in Richmond and eventually in Louisa, Virginia, his hometown, where he served as Commonwealth Attorney for a while. He was in the courtroom when the Judge was shot. Not just everyday things.

Yet, more important, he was a father to me. A good father. He dispensed wisdom on occasion. I still recall him trying to dig holes in our back yard to plant a swing set. He had to resort to “Plan B.” His explanation: “There are more ways to skin a cat than to stuff him full of butter.” What an extraordinary proverb! I never heard it from anyone else. I recall pondering it. The meaning, I figured, was that there are more ways to do some things than others. It’s hard to imagine alternative ways to stuff a cat full of butter. But I did discover one, years later. Somebody left the butter dish out on the kitchen table. The cat jumped up and lapped up half of the stick! He was indeed stuffed full of butter!

I recall particularly my father giving me a talking-to about procrastination. It may have been because of the vocabulary list I was supposed to turn in for Literature class in 7th grade. I didn’t do it. When I read, you see, I never stopped to notice new words; I just absorbed their meaning from the context without thinking about it. I may have had two or three words on my list; I was supposed to have twenty or twenty five. The teacher sent a note home. I buried it in a pile of books. Another note. Finally, the dreaded phone call. I still remember hearing my mother’s end of the conversation from upstairs. A long conversation. I knew I was in for it.

So, there I was, standing in my father’s workshop. He was making bullets. There’s a particular smell from the kerosene camp stove, the hot lead, gunpowder, and the grease.

To my amazement, my father began by saying, “I know about procrastination, because I am a procrastinator too.” I was amazed at my father’s humility, and patience, in dealing with my errant ways on that occasion. Not that there wasn’t remediation in store. Dad was a good example. He loved his wife and children. He worked hard. He didn’t always have to be right. And he was there when I needed him. He was, and is, an extraordinary man. Yet, he would be that last person to think of himself as a giant among men, for all his accomplishments.

This brings me back to our scripture. For, what is the point of these heroics, the extraordinary things that these people, these forefathers or ancestors of ours, have done? There are cynics who would say, that it is

just meeting the needs of survival. “People do what they have to do. The ones that don’t, die.” I believe it’s more than that.

First Thessalonians 1:5 For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance; as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake. (KJV)

Let me focus on those last few words, “for your sake.” Why did my grandfather go to India? It was, yes, to make a life for himself, but it was also for his family. It was for his family that he left his accomplishments there and returned to the United States several years later. Why did my other Grandfather go as a missionary to the Congo, and keep at it for those 43 years? It was God’s love, a love poured out for all mankind, that my grandfather was called to share with those who has not heard the good news of the gospel. Why did Paul endure all of the hardships and dangers? It was for the sake of his family in Christ, the people of his churches, and the people who had yet to hear the Good News.

It’s not being fathered by Zeus, or some other god, that makes for heroes. We find seemingly ordinary people, but actually extraordinary people, among our ancestors. They did amazing things out of love for their family or love for others. They don’t draw on divine genetics. The power comes from God. A power that helps ordinary people do extraordinary things when the circumstances require it.

As this is Fathers Day, I’ve focused a bit more on fathers. Think back: who among your family, among your ancestors, has done extraordinary things? If they are still alive, thank them. But the best thing that we, the beneficiaries of those giants from of old, can do, is to honor them in our words and in our deeds. For if God is in our hearts, we can face the world and its perils and dangers with not just words only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit, and in much assurance. You may not recognize it now, but you may indeed be one of those giants to the coming generations, one of whom people will look back on and say in amazement, “He did WHAT?” “She did that?” Pray that God will make us each a blessing to others. The rest is up to Him. The power to do what is required is promised to us.

Amen.