

## **Numbers 11:24–30**

*24 So Moses went out and told the people the words of the Lord; and he gathered seventy elders of the people, and placed them all around the tent. 25 Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders; and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do so again.*

*26 Two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the spirit rested on them; they were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. 27 And a young man ran and told Moses, 'Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.' 28 And Joshua son of Nun, the assistant of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, 'My lord Moses, stop them!' 29 But Moses said to him, 'Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!' 30 And Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.*

God of power and grace, fill us with the wisdom of your Word and the understanding of your Spirit so that we may be your church: a people with dreams and visions at work in all the world; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Happy Pentecost to you all. I like Pentecost because it is a major church holiday that isn't inundated with civic family traditions. What I mean by this is that we don't have family gift exchanges like at Christmas, and we don't have big family dinners like many do for Easter. It does sometimes happen during Memorial Day weekend, but it is easy enough to differentiate the two celebrations. In other words, we can just focus on the church and not all the other distractions created by society.

Today's scriptures are interesting as well. For many church holidays, like Christmas, or Ash Wednesday, we get the same scripture choices all three years of the lectionary. Pentecost always has the scripture from Acts, which tells of the Holy Spirit coming to the disciples with the gift of tongues, and there is always a gospel lesson from John, although each year in the lectionary uses a different chapter. But the other scripture options vary each year. Today I want to focus on one of those variable scriptures from the Old Testament, specifically the book of Numbers, which is not used very often in the lectionary. I think there are several lessons we can glean from this scripture for use in the here and now.

First, it should be noted that our scripture starts in the middle of a story. I want to give you some background before we continue. This scripture happens after the Israelites left mount Sinai and were headed to the promised Holy Land. The people were very hungry and complained to God, so God sent them manna each morning with the dew. They had to gather the manna, mill it, pound it, and then they could make cakes out of it. The cakes tasted similar to those made with oil; in other words, they tasted pretty good. But that was all they had, they had no other vegetables and no meat to eat. In other words, they were getting bored because it was the same thing over and over.

It's interesting that in their complaints about not having meat, they actually list a bunch of vegetables and fruit that they had while in Egypt, not meat. I think really what it comes down to was that the people had been traveling for awhile and wanted some variety.

I think many of us can directly relate to this situation as we deal with this pandemic. We are in a situation that may seem tedious and monotonous. We seem like we have the same few options every day. We want the variety that we had before. We have Facebook live services, and mailed out bulletins and sermons to those without computers, which is like manna, it fulfills the needs, and for some it may even be better, but for many, they want the richness of being back

together in person again. The concern is will it be safe for people to come back to worship, and what measures will we have to take to make sure it is safe for everyone? We may end up having to give up more for safeties sake than it is worth.

Moses gets an earful of their complaints, and he is overwhelmed. He also turns to God and complains. He didn't create these people, why should he be the one responsible for them? I'm not sure if you know this or not, but there is a lot of complaining from all the people of Israel through Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, especially in the book of Numbers.

So, God tells him to gather 70 elders, or leaders, from among the people, and he will impart some of the spirit that is on Moses onto them. Now I'm going to say right out that the numbers don't make sense in this lesson. God supposedly asked for 70 elders, and Moses supposedly gathered all 70 in the tent, yet there were two guys who were registered as elders that didn't get there, which would have made it 72. If you think about it having 72 elders makes more sense than 70. After all, how many tribes of Israel were there? Twelve. If you divide 72 by twelve you get six per tribe, which is nice and even, as compared to 70 which means if you are trying to get equal representatives from the tribes you would be two short.

The point we can take from this is that there is nothing wrong with getting some help. In fact, we as Presbyterians have always believed in working together as groups. We will form a committee for almost anything, and ministers are not the sole authority when it comes to decisions about the church. The session has a large amount of authority regarding when, how and where we worship. Ministers do have some areas that are their sole responsibility, like the scriptures used, and content of the sermon, and we have the final decision about hymns we sing, but it would be a poor pastor that isn't willing to work with others and listen to suggestions when creating worship.

So, Moses gathers up the elders in a tent and the Lord imparts some of the Holy Spirit from Moses onto them, and they prophesied with this gift of the Holy Spirit, but just then, never again. I wonder why they were gathered in the tent. Was it easier to impart the spirit if they all were in one place? I don't think so, because two didn't come, and they still got the spirit.

Maybe God didn't want the prophesies that were spoken to be known at that time, so gathered the elders in one secluded place? Or, maybe it wasn't just about the spirit, but was also about Moses explaining the new roles and responsibilities these elders would have, and not having to repeat himself 70 different times?

Whatever the reason was, there were two guys that were late to the meeting, Eldad and Medad. Being on time is such a cultural thing, whether it is a family trait, or something from a wider culture. I had a friend in high school that was 30 minutes late for everything except work. When I say 30 minutes, I mean almost exactly 30 minutes. You could set your watch to it. If you told him you needed to be picked up at 7 pm he would show up at 7:30 pm. I finally realized that if I told him to show up half an hour earlier, he would end up being right on time for when I actually needed him to be there.

Sometimes it a cultural thing. Last week I mentioned the Indonesian fellowship that my home church had. They would start their service at 11 am, but it was mostly just singing praise music for a half hour or so, because people were consistently late.

I was raised in the belief that lateness was a sign of disrespect, but that wasn't the case for them. I've also noticed this in my travels to Mexico and Guatemala as well. My conclusion is that in warmer climates it's not a big deal if you are waiting on the corner for a while. Sit and relax and enjoy people watching. For those of us from colder climate cultures punctuality

becomes more important because nobody wants to stand outside waiting to meet someone in the middle of January when it's -20 degrees!

Well anyway, Eldad and Medad either didn't get the message, or were for some reason not invited, or just were slow in getting to the tent. They ended up receiving the Holy Spirit in the middle of the busy camp and prophesied for everyone to hear. A young boy ran to tell Moses and Joshua, his right-hand man and eventual successor, tells Moses to stop them.

Although the text does not say why Joshua is concerned, we can maybe guess based upon Moses' response that he thinks Joshua is concerned their prophesying will somehow undercut his, and the groups authority. Joshua represents all the folks that want to keep things organized, neat and orderly. There is a system and hierarchy in place, and he doesn't want it to be upset.

Here's the thing. God certainly can and does work through the institutions we create, and the people we put into leadership, but God isn't limited to only using them. God ignores the lines that we draw, God uses the people we think are useless. God can and does work through anything and everything, and we must remember this.

Moses recognizes this. That is one of the reasons that he's such a good leader. He knows when he is overwhelmed and needs help from others. He isn't worried about someone else "taking" his authority or credit. He wants and needs all the help he can get, and if God has chosen Eldad and Medad to help him, he will attempt to work with them as well.

I seem to say this every week in some way, but it's important for us to recognize that we are in a very different situation than what we have called normal. It hasn't been that long, but many, if not all of us, are tired of the restrictions that have been put on our lives. The government is starting to lift restrictions and many of us see this opening as a chance to give up the manna of relying on Facebook live and return to the fulfilling meals of in-person worship. We have to weigh meeting in person with many restrictions and guidelines for keeping everyone healthy. It may be safer and more freeing to continue with services the way they are. Just because we do not have many cases in our region, at the moment, does not mean that it couldn't blow up at any time. In fact, most research says it will at some point. The restrictions aren't being lifted because it's safer now, it won't be safe until we have a vaccine. They are being lifted because we have flattened the initial curve and are better able to treat those who get sick, for a while at least. The government also recognizes that we need to ease things up to give people a break.

Whether we meet in person or we continue with things the way they are, the Holy Spirit will still be at work within us, within this congregation, and within our community. The Holy Spirit is still with us, just like it was with Edad and Medad outside of the tent. The church is not the building it is the people. The Holy Spirit is with us just like it was with the disciples on that first Pentecost, and it will continue to be with us just as Jesus promised. Amen.