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Numbers 11:4-17, 24-30

OUTSIDE THE TENT

None of us like to hear complaints. Complaining people are rarely pleasant to be around. But that, I am sorry to say, is what scripture hands us today: complaining people. The Hebrew people have escaped from Egypt and are in the midst of their wilderness wandering, when they raise a complaint to Moses. And we get to listen in.

The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again, and said, "If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at." (Num.11:4-6)

It turns out that the Hebrew folks were nostalgic for life back in Egypt. Oh how they missed Egypt! Now wait a minute, we think to ourselves. Egypt? They missed Egypt? The land of slavery? The place where they endured the sting of the whip every single day of their lives? Egypt--the land where Pharaoh killed their newborn babies? How could they miss Egypt? Well, it seems that they missed the food back in Egypt. Never mind that Moses has helped them escape their cruel captors, never mind that they were now free people, the people still found reason to complain. They didn't like the food they were given to eat in their new circumstances. Now mind you, they weren't going hungry--they weren't starving out there in the wilderness. For God had given them food from heaven--a new kind of food called manna. What was manna?

Well, our scripture tells us:

Now the manna was like coriander seed, and its color was like the color of gum resin. The people went around and gathered it, ground it in mills or beat it in mortars, then boiled it in pots and made cakes of it; and the taste of it was like the taste of cakes baked with oil. When the dew fell on the camp in the night, the manna would fall with it. (Num. 11:7-9)

Manna was God's special gift to the people so that they wouldn't starve in the wilderness. Every day, God provided this bread from heaven. But it turns out, it wasn't enough for the people. They grew tired of the manna. They wanted something better. They wanted meat!

Now, we could come up with a sermon just on that topic alone: about how God gives us blessings from heaven, blessings to sustain our lives, and how we grumble and complain and find life's blessings insufficient, how we are always wanting what we don't have even when God keeps handing us abundant gifts. That could be a sermon right there. But our story continues, and so will we.

Moses hears all this grumbling and complaining. And so does God. Scripture tells us:

Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, all at the entrances of their tents. Then the Lord became very angry, and Moses was displeased. So Moses said to the Lord, "Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child, to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors'? Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say, 'Give us meat to eat!' I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once--if I have found favor in your sight--and do not let me see my misery." (Num. 11:10-15)

Moses has reached the breaking point. He is exhausted by the burden of his leadership. He is sick and tired and frustrated with all these complaining people who aren't ever satisfied. And so he rants and raves at God. "This whole thing was your idea, not mine," he tells God. "Now I'm stuck playing nursemaid to a bunch of whining babies! Why don't you just kill me now and take me out of my misery!"

God listens patiently to Moses and then God offers a plan.

So the Lord said to Moses, "Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tent of meeting and have them take their place there with you. I will come down and talk with you there; and I will take some of the spirit that is on you and put it on them; and they shall bear the burden of the people along with you so that you will not bear it all by

yourself . . . 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. 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." (Num. 11:16-17, 24-25)

Basically God promises to help Moses build a team--a leadership team. Seventy leaders are assembled in the tent of meeting, and then God's Spirit which was first given to Moses is now shared among the seventy. The burden of leadership will no longer rest solely on Moses but will now be shared among these leaders. This is a great story and we could develop so many sermon possibilities from this story: about how God shares God's Spirit within the community, how God does not leave us alone to carry our burdens but brings us together in support of one another, about the importance of turning to God for help. This story from the Hebrew scriptures about God sending God's Spirit to help create a cooperative leadership team seems appropriate on this Pentecost Day when we celebrate the gift of the Spirit which drew those early Christians into a community that would become the Christian Church. It seems that God's Spirit has always been at work down through the eons to draw people together. That could be a good sermon too.

But wait. The story continues but with a bit of a twist. We are told:

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. And a young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." And Joshua son of Nun, the assistant of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, "My lord Moses, stop them!" 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!" And Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp." (Num. 11:26-30)

This is an interesting development. Two guys, Eldad and Medad, didn't go down to the tent meeting. Why they failed to go to the tent of meeting with the other seventy elders, we don't know. Maybe they missed the registration deadline. Maybe they didn't check their Facebook page. Whatever the reason, they didn't make it to the official meeting where the authority of

leadership and prophecy was distributed. But oddly enough, the Spirit comes upon them any way--right there in the camp. But because they weren't under the tent of legitimacy, because they didn't follow approved procedures and were just doing their own thing, Joshua freaks out. He tells Moses to stop this unauthorized and irregular behavior. But Moses, wise Moses, realizes that something essential is happening. Moses realizes the possibility of God's activity *outside* the tent. Moses, who just a short time earlier had been afraid that God's Spirit was too puny, too small, to help him out of his problems with the people, Moses now realizes that the scope of God's activity is enormous. The Spirit is *everywhere*. And *everyone* can be included.

We church going people can learn something from this story. We are used to operating from the assumption that God's activity takes place here--here inside our tent. It is from within these church buildings, and from within our familiar worship services, and from within our organizational structures that we all these decades and centuries have sought God's presence and tried to carry out God's work. And a lot of good work has been done down through the years, for sure. But we all know that things in our society have radically changed. We may struggle to understand why, but we know that things have changed. People are not drawn to our churches as they once were in previous generations.

As a church leader, I will admit that I share a certain sympathy for Moses' frustrations and fatigue. And I know a lot of you who are engaged in leadership within this congregation feel this same way from time to time. Leadership in the midst of challenging times is not easy. We work, and organize, and plan, and yet we do not always see the fruits of our labor, or know if our efforts are even pointed in the right direction. And sometimes it can seem as if all we are doing is propping up the tent poles to hold up the structure.

But today's story offers us something hopeful as well as something audacious to ponder. It offers us comfort in knowing that God does not leave us alone in our efforts. First of all, God gathers us into community. God's Spirit rested on those seventy elders who gathered to help Moses lead the people. Then centuries later, God's Spirit rested on Jesus disciples and friends and drew them together to become the Church. We are not left alone because God gives us each other and, more importantly, God gives us God's own Spirit. Doing God's work in the Church is not going to be accomplished through our efforts alone--but the Spirit comes to us to equip us for this challenging task.

But there is also an audacious prospect found in our story today. Maybe the Spirit of God is active *outside* our tent. Maybe it is active among people who are not church going people. Maybe it is active in places that are not as beautiful as this building. Maybe it is active in forms that are not as efficient as our structures of church governance. But here we stand inside our tent, our familiar tent, the tent of legitimacy, here we stand still expecting God's Spirit to be moving and acting among us as it always used to do.

Notice, God does not *withhold* God's Spirit from the seventy elders inside the tent. They do indeed receive the gift of God's Spirit. But God's Spirit is not confined to those within the tent. It spills outside the bounds of human structures. It does a new thing. It lands on unexpected people. It pops up in unexpected places.

The Pentecost story from the Book of Acts is a story of the messy, chaotic behavior of God's Spirit. Those people who received the gift of the Holy Spirit on that first Pentecost were not the respected, established religious leaders of their day. They were fishermen and uneducated laborers. They were women and foreigners. They were the poor and the underclass. All of them existed outside the tent of proper religious structures. And yet, the Spirit comes

upon them. And it was a crazy, wild scene of noise and languages and wind and fire. People observing this scene thought they were drunk! And from this messy chaos, something new was born: a community devoted to living and loving in the example of Christ.

The thing we learn from scripture is that the Spirit is uncontainable and unexpected. It goes where it will and falls upon the most unlikely of people.

So what might it mean for us if we were to consider that God's Spirit is active *outside* the tent? On this Pentecost Sunday, as we celebrate the birth of the Christian Church, but as we stand in the midst of the decline of the Christian Church as we have known it in our lifetimes, what might it mean if we considered the possibility that God's Spirit might be unleashed outside the tent? Who might God's Spirit land on? A Muslim? A refugee? An undocumented resident? Where might it pop up? What form will it take?

I don't pretend to know what the outcome will look like for the Christian Church in the United States, but I know that God's Spirit never stays inside the tent. So why should we? I know that I need help in figuring out how to leave the tent. Our buildings, our style of worship, our ways of organizing ourselves--this is the only way of being church that I know or that you know. So, when I say we need to step outside the tent, I don't completely know what I mean by that. Maybe, at the very least, it means we don't stand in the way of God's messy Spirit when it crops up in unusual ways. Maybe we open our buildings to greater use by those who are filled with God's Spirit. But I want to try to let go of needing to hold on to what has been familiar, and to recognize that God is doing something new and it may very well come from outside the tent. Let's join the example of Moses and the other elders who left the tent and headed back to the camp where Eldad and Medad were prophesying--even though they weren't supposed to be.

Let's go find the places for ourselves where God's love is lived out, where God's grace is being shared. Because wherever God's Spirit is doing *that*, that is where I want to be.