

18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Sermon 9.26.21

**Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29**

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.” 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.”

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.

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. 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!”

**Mark 9:38-41**

John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.” (567)

Once, when I was preaching, a man charged the pulpit. Raving about things I wasn’t saying, he was sure he had something that needed to be said—and since I wasn’t saying it, he would.

He’d come to church full of disturbance, which I could feel, though he was in the back pew and I was up front. Regardless, when he interrupted the sermon, charged the pulpit, I was unnerved.

People in the pews seemed to be more so, from what I could see in a few startled faces—suddenly awakened from what I hope was a safe place of meditative retreat. The disruption of the settled order: it was so unexpected as to be scary. It was always otherwise a quiet little church.

But I admit there was a moment when I'd have given him way. It took me a moment to decide I had the right to quiet him. Actually, it took me a moment to discern the right to quiet him, to discern then the duty to quiet him. Scanning the faces of the people in the pews, I found it there—that authority, that permission, even some pleading. This is partly what I'm for. As a worship leader, as the one who rightly stands in the pulpit to speak from the pulpit to you the people, it came down to me.

But the fact that I hesitated: it was because of this moment when Joshua objected to Moses that any besides him should prophesy. It's just stayed with me, this moment. Something important happened in this moment.

Moses had been the one in charge—and by all accounts he had done so mightily. From the moment he was called, by a voice from a bush that burned though was unconsumed, simply sustained, and from even before that, he was exceptional—resilient in the face of adversity. Born of an enslaved woman, sentenced as such to die, his short life and early death would have been a matter of policy. The enslaved must not outnumber the masters. Babies born to the enslaved must be put to death.

But his mother saved him, hiding him for three months.

When that was no longer possible, she fashioned a bassinet that would float, made of reeds and bitumen, and she sent him downriver.

The daughter of the Pharaoh saw him floating there when she was, that one time, down by the river herself. She drew him from the water, named him Moses (for she had drawn him out of the water), and raised him as if a full member of the ruling class.

Moses grew into that position. But he retained an allegiance to the enslaved as well—something like the double-consciousness W.E.B. DuBois named. As such, once, when a master was beating one of the enslaved, Moses killed the master—as if he found in himself more relative to the slave.

Then he had to run.

He fled to Midian, settled there, even married there.

His father-in-law entrusted him with the care of his flock.

It was this he was tending when he came to that bush—that bush which burned though remained unconsumed.

Here was God, a burning that was self-sustaining, that is self-sustaining. Life that comes at no one's cost, living that involves nothing dying: here is God.

It sent Moses into service, to free the enslaved, to lead them out of empire. But into what? The barest existence, the meanest estate, the wilderness. Like the Jews of the Forest in the wilderness of Poland. Like the enslaved of the underground railroad in the wilderness of being a fugitive where now every White person might be your master.

The people balked and cried out. Without the comforts of empire, cruel as these comforts are, without the excesses of empire, costly as those excesses are: “Why did you bring us out here to the wilderness, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst—when we could have stayed in Egypt where at least we had enough to eat?”

Eventually it became too much.

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.”

The seventy elders whom the Lord called upon were a gift to Moses, a grace. “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.” Here was Moses’ federation of leaders. Here was Moses’ congregation of the commissioned, to be fully authorized, now fully authorized to speak on matters of God and power and care for the people. They would help allocate resources, such as they had them. They would help tell the story of the people to the people that the people might remember who they were and who they were journeying to become. They would help settle them in to a new encampment, settle them in for rest and rejuvenation. They’d help rouse them for another move, rouse them for another day of lean estate.

They were a gift to Moses, because whatever pleasure there once might have been—whatever pleasure of power, whatever pleasure of being solely the one to speak and to lead, the pleasure of being so mightily and unquestionably in charge, was gone. Moses was over it. He wanted some help. Even if it meant not being in charge, even if it meant not total agreement, even some disagreement with the elders and among the elders, some conflict as they negotiated new terms and new channels of discussion, decision, action. It would slow things down. It would slow things down. The more people you have involved in the projects of society, the slower things move from idea to fruition. But the process becomes the doing. The process can even be the pleasure of it all.

These seventy: they were a gift of the Lord to Moses.

These two more besides, though?

Eldad and Medad?

What about them?

Because they spoke among the people though they hadn't been appointed to. They spoke, and people listened, though they hadn't themselves been among the seventy elders whom Moses had gathered, whom the Lord had told Moses to gather. They hadn't gone up the mountain, been enfolded into the cloud. They hadn't withstood the terror and beheld the mystery of being in the Lord's presence., They hadn't been visited upon by the Lord with portions of his Spirit. They'd remained in the camp. They'd done nothing, and had had done nothing to them, to indicate that they had any authority to speak at all.

So, who were they?

Of course, Joshua objected. Of course.

Moses, though...

I took part in a racial justice training this week, a new offering by the conference of our denomination. The Southern New England Conference of the United Church of Christ: it's a new conference, made up of what were once the Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut Conferences. So, to go with our new conference, we have new conference staff, and for the first time a Minister of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. A Black man, Rev. James Ross II led us clergy of local churches—twenty of us, mostly White—in two mornings of thinking about race matters, mostly as they stem from anti-Black racism and Native American genocide and marginalization.

It's an ugly past, we have.

That said, most pasts are ugly in their way, though some more than others.

Chattel slavery was of another order of evil. It's going to take a long time to account for that, and to repair.

Clearing the land of its native residents strikes me as only slightly more subtle, but maybe that's just because I've spent less time thinking about it.

An ugly past: we'll have better future only if we come to terms with that ugly past.

Come to terms: this is largely what we did, in those two mornings spent together. Come to terms, define the terminology by which we tell the story of how we as a society came to this moment: this is largely what we did. What do we *call* the ephemera that make up our current social imaginary—the policies, the assumptions, the values, the standards, the conventions and traditions and styles and dialects? What do we call them, and who gets to decide, and can we call them out when they seem to be laden with bias, or blindness?

If so, who gets to do that? Who gets to name the reality in all its blunt presence and dodgy self-denying?

And why is it so upsetting to some when such things are called out? What's with the defensiveness that comes with the naming of things hidden? Why do people seem so injured when something unspoken is given word?

One person, a White man whom I'd guess was around sixty, wondered if we could at least just agree on "terms of engagement." Could we get everyone to agree simply how to engage, what words mean and which to use? He was asking what he seemed to think was a basic question: "Can't we all just agree on some terms of engagement?"

Rev. Ross asked kindly, gently, "Who's 'we all'?"

"Everyone," he poked toward some vague wish he had.

"That's called 'authoritarianism,'" I said.

"See," he said, defensive. "There you go."

I hadn't meant to make him angry. I'd only meant to point out how persistent a problem it actually is, this simple thing he meant to ask, this most complicated a question, though, to put into practice—because it's the very function of power, the very capacity of true power: to establish what words mean and what shall be used to name what's real and who shall be empowered to decide, define, deploy. Who gets to exercise that power?

We are in a moment in our society where that question is more on the loose than it's been in a long time. Maybe since 1968? Maybe since 1861. Maybe since 1776. I don't know. Help me out here.

Or maybe don't. Maybe I'll just hold forth from this pulpit because I trust myself to talk more than I trust you. You might say something I don't want to hear. You might say something that spurs someone else to say something and then where would we be?

Plus, after a while, it just feels good to be the one.

"Teacher," John said to Jesus, "we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us."

Jesus said, "Do not stop him...for whoever isn't against us is for us."

But, as to the project of discerning where exactly falls the line between "for" and "against," where exactly does a cooperative spirit become a combative spirit: that's the question. Where does a "team of rivals" such as President Lincoln's remembered to have relied on become simply a bunch of rivals fighting over who comes first? And what of these rivals once the likes of Lincoln is shot?

Or crucified?

We of the church are courting disaster. In the name of freedom in the Lord, in the name equality under God, in the name of a body of many members, each of whom is essential in the loving and living of the whole, which body is the mystical body Christ crucified yet alive for the sake of justice and peace, for the sake of truth and abundant life, we're courting disaster, we're just asking for trouble.

We're also courting the Holy Spirit, that most restless aspect of our Triune God.

It's all the riskier when you consider what is our aim. To make manifest in the living of our days the very Reign of God, a whole and healed creation. How we do it is what we do. The means of getting there are the end, the where we are going. What slowness there is about us finds remedy in the immediacy of God who makes that reign possible starting now.

Which means I should stop talking and let your hearts go as the Spirit leads.

So I will.

Thanks be to God.