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Race to the Bottom

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29; Mark 9:38-50

It's too bad that today's Hebrew passage has so little relevance for where we find ourselves today.

A people languishing between a romanticized past (that wasn't all that great to begin with) and an unrealized promise of a better future.

At this point they're sustained by mere breadcrumbs, which have long lost their miraculous luster.

And trapped between this people's anxieties and the God who called him into leadership, Moses is a leader completely at wits' end.

No, I think today might require of us a huge imaginative leap to bridge the gap between where we are and where Moses and the Israelites find themselves in Numbers 11.

I'm kidding, of course. Because are we not a people languishing between a pre-COVID reality (that wasn't all that great to begin with) and an unrealized promise of post-pandemic life?

Are we not sustaining ourselves by the breadcrumbs of Zoom calls, masked encounters, elbow bumps, and distanced, outdoor meetings?

And are we not trapped between the anxieties of this moment, the apocalyptic unveiling of all that is wrong with the world, and the unanswered call of our God to live into a more just future?

Isn't leadership in this liminal space just a little too much to bear? Isn't parenting? Planning? Caregiving? Teaching? Work of any kind? Just living in general?

In whatever ways you might find yourself sympathetic to Moses' complaints this morning, I have no doubt that you will find them relatable.

"I am not able to carry all this people alone," he cries to God, "for they are too heavy for me."

The burden is so great, in fact, that we see his mental health deteriorate in real time. Moses, it seems, is even on the brink of ending it all.

But God. But God intervenes. God offers Moses a plan.

"Bring seventy of the elders of Israel to the tent of meeting and have them *take their place there with you*," God says.

God responds directly to the isolation that Moses felt in that moment. The divine surrounds Moses with those who might take away some of his burden.

God commands the creation of a representative body so that Israel's leaders might be equipped and empowered to lead their people alongside their weary liberator. To help him carry the responsibility of leading a wandering, wilderness people.

God descends in a cloud. God speaks. And God takes the divine spirit that rests upon Moses and places it on these elders. And suddenly, they have the power to prophesy—from their tongues come divine proclamations. The weight of Moses' call is shared among the elders of the people.

And yet—just like that (*snaps*)—the prophetic possibility of this moment is over as soon as it begins.

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As difficult as this is for us to understand, how do you think this moment lands on Moses? The deliverance from his desperation having been so short-lived? The hope offered in this divine plan, the promise of the prophetic power he just witnessed among the elders: gone.

How could he return to the camp with news like this? What could he possibly relay to the Israelites that wouldn't engender doubt, or confusion? What could he say to a hungry and tired people—so far from what is familiar yet just as far from the promise of a new home?

But God. But God intervenes yet again. The God of renegade prophets.

We don't know why Eldad and Medad remained back with the people. They were registered for this elder gathering but didn't quite make it. Some scholars speculate that they were ritually unclean. Maybe they just didn't make the original cut for the top seventy among their peers.

But for whatever reason, they remained among the people, and the Spirit of God remained upon them.

But not everyone was pleased to see this. A nameless rule-follower runs from the camp to report this departure from the Great Plan. Expecting, perhaps, to be praised for his vigilance, he breathlessly arrives to the tent of meeting and tells Moses of this breach of protocol.

How surprised he and Joshua must have been to see the look of relief on Moses' face. The power of these renegade prophets *was* the good news Moses most needed to hear.

“Are you jealous for my sake?” he surely laughed at them.

And then, for my money, Moses makes one of the most extraordinary statements in all of Scripture: “Would that *all* the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!”

Moses expands the vision of prophetic power beyond his call, beyond the call of the seventy elders and the divine plan that brought them together, even beyond the reengage prophets among the people to *the people themselves*. All of God's people. No exceptions.

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This is a surprisingly understudied passage, but one intertextual connection between Numbers 11 and the New Testament seems to emerge in what commentaries are out there.

One scholar fittingly calls it the “Old Testament Pentecost,” a sort of scriptural justification for what happened in the second chapter of Acts, where the Spirit of God, like tongues of fire, descends upon and empowers Christ’s followers.^[1]

I’ve even heard Bishop Yvette Flunder, a Black Pentecostal leader in our denomination, preach on the parallels between the Spirit’s movement here and on the day of Pentecost, the very birth of the church as we know it.

If you remember, on that day, the Spirit gives an international cadre of Christ followers the power to speak to one another across barriers of language and culture. The Spirit subverts the horizontal boundaries among God’s people across different nationalities, ethnicities, and customs.

Like today’s passage, Pentecost finds Christ’s followers in a liminal space, trapped between Christ’s ascension and the realization of the Kin-dom he promised. And we are still in that place today, friends.

And while returning to our origin story in Acts 2 is always instructive, I believe Numbers 11 can be equally edifying for the church today.

For while on the day of Pentecost we see the Spirit subverting those horizontal boundaries of difference among many peoples, in today’s text we see the Spirit subverting the vertical boundaries that defined the Israelites’ social order, challenging the very hierarchies and leadership models that divide us.

In fact, despite Christians’ anti-Semitic tendency to be dismissive of Hebrew scriptures’ depictions of God, in Numbers 11 we find one of the most truly democratic expressions of divine power in the whole Bible.

If we get to the scriptural root of Pentecost, we find this extraordinary declaration from Moses. “Would that *all* the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!”

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I think in that moment Moses sees well beyond his dark night of the soul, well beyond the wilderness and the wandering, even beyond the Promised Land to which he was called to lead the Israelites.

He sees a truth at the root of it all: that there will come a day in which the power of God’s Spirit is for *all* of God’s people.

He sees that the leadership needed in this moment of crisis is that most closely connected with and attentive to the needs *in the camp*.

That the same God that he encountered at the top of Mt. Sinai and that called together the elders at the tent of meeting is now sending him farther down the mountain still—to where God’s people wait for God’s power to be revealed.

Moses sees that the Spirit of God he encountered on high is sending him—is sending us—on a race to the bottom.

On a race toward God’s people at the base of the mountain—to get to the bottom of things.

You see, the power of the God of renegade prophets will always and ever be among God’s people: the burdened, the confused, the outcast, and the unclean. The

ostracized, the sick, the misunderstood, and the weak. The poor, the oppressed, the captive, and the debtors.

In these moments of liminality, where what we've known is no more and we've been promised is as yet unfulfilled, the Spirit's power is making a prophetic pivot among this wandering and disoriented people.

And that is good news for us, friends. For those of us who are weary from our wandering, who are thirsty from this dry desert air, who have been driven to our wits' end by this wilderness.

The Spirit is showing up for those who will follow God's call to get to the heart of the matter, to the root of the problem, to the bottom of things.

For those willing to come alongside and recognize the prophetic potential of *all*.

To follow the God of Moses, to follow Christ the liberator, is to join them on this race to the bottom.

For Christ echoes Moses's vision today's Gospel reading. For when John, another of those rule-followers, tries to stop divine power emerging out of bounds, out of place, out of order—Jesus says no! We are never to stand in the way of the Spirit's move, no matter how disorderly it seems.

Like Moses before him, Jesus sees beyond his own ministry, beyond the threat of the cross, even beyond the birth of a church in his name, to a truth at the root of it

all: that there will come a day in which the power of God's Spirit is for *all* of God's people.

And to make the point even clearer, Jesus adds to this vision a rather unsettling warning. Our call is to pursue the welfare of the little ones, and never to put a stumbling block before them. Those who do would be better off with a millstone as a flotation device.

What a grim warning for a society where our little ones are put at greater and greater risk every day.

In a larger sense, of course, by "little ones" Christ means all those at the bottom of our social hierarchies. Christ's call is one of solidarity—to come alongside the little ones in their pursuit of liberation.

And we will receive power to do so, yes, but according to Christ will receive divine judgment if we get in their way.

So take it from Moses himself and forget the mountaintop experience, friends. If you're hoping to follow Christ, to be empowered by the Spirit, to fulfill that extraordinary vision of the great liberator himself, you'll have become a renegade prophet, to break a few rules, and subvert a few hierarchies.

Let's join them, yes, down there at the bottom. I'll race you. Amen.

[1] "Old Testament Pentecost," DT Williams. *Scriptura* 83 (2003), 498-511.