

PENTECOST

The Spirit is Pushing Us Outside

Numbers 11:24-29, Acts 2:1-8

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Eldad and Medad are two men mentioned in the scripture that Pastor Tom read to us today. How many of you had heard of them before? No judgment there. It actually makes me gleeful to introduce you to new characters in the Bible and these two men are very obscure characters from the Bible. In Hebrew, Medad means “my father’s brother” and Eldad means “God is my father’s brother.”

I don’t usually preach from the Book of Numbers. It doesn’t have any of the texts that make the top 40 hits when it comes to scripture. We call it the Book of Numbers because it describes two different times the Israelites took a census after they leave their encampment near Mt. Sinai. But the Hebrew Bible titles this book “In the Wilderness” because of the 40 years they spent wandering there – a time that deeply shaped who they were as a community...as a people.

Imagine what that was like. They had run from captivity while Pharaoh’s army was hot on their heels. They were running for their lives. When Egypt is finally in their rearview mirror, they realize they didn’t have a plan beyond escape. They want to trust that God is guiding them but suddenly they are without the structure of Egyptian society. They are homeless. They are hungry. They are tired. It is hard to live in this limbo -- between liberation and promise. It is a time of great insecurity, and it lasts for a whole generation. Only two adults who left Egypt and ran towards freedom entered the Promised Land.

This time of wandering is not what they had hoped. They complain all the time. When they cry out in hunger, God sends them manna to eat. But they grow tired of manna, and Moses is the one that has to listen to their gripes. They whine when they remember the meat they ate while they were oppressed in Egypt. They dream about food -- cucumbers and melons and leeks and onions and garlic. (I know you think I made up that part about the specific food of which they dream but go read Numbers 11 for yourself.)

Moses gets so tired of the constant complaints and demands of his community that he lets God have it.

Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all these people on me? Did I conceive all these 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...Where am I to get meat to give to all these people? For they come weeping to me and say, ‘Give us meat to eat!’ I am

not able to carry all these 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...

God says, "Okay, Moses. I hear you. Go gather together seventy of those who are seen as leaders by the people and take them to the tent of meeting. I will come down and take some of the spirit that is on you and spread it on to them and they will prophesy."

So, sixty-eight of the men chosen for this responsibility came to the tent of meeting as instructed. Who are the two who didn't show up? You guessed it -- Eldad and Medad. They were still back in the camp. We don't know why. They could have been the chief complainers, and tired of Moses telling them what to do. Or maybe they were dealing with an emergency. Or maybe they had simply forgotten. But, as it turns out, they also got a share of the spirit without being present inside the tent of meeting. Eldad and Medad start prophesying right there in the middle of the camp – away from their house of worship. They aren't in the confines of the tent of meeting. They are outside, receiving the spirit. I would love to have seen Eldad and Medad's faces when, out of the blue, the spirit of God rested on them.

This so upsets Joshua, Moses' assistant, and so he runs to tattle to him. "Aren't you going to stop Eldad and Medad?" he says. Moses says, "Why would I? I wish all of God's people were prophets and would have a share in the spirit." Moses knows that God will not be contained, and you cannot avoid where God chooses to send her Spirit.

Let's jump ahead to our other scripture for today, the one that Valerie shared with us in Spanish. Acts 2 tells the story of Pentecost, which you already heard is my favorite liturgical holiday. This scripture tells of that time after the resurrection when the followers of Christ tried to figure out how to shape themselves into a community without their Rabbi there to lead them. Jesus had ascended. Judas was dead. They decided that their first act would be to replace Judas. Using Robert's Rules of Order they nominated two men for this twelfth spot: Joseph Barabbas and Mathias. Then they drew lots and Mathias' name was chosen.

With that task done they found themselves in a holding pattern. Jesus had told them that they should wait until God sent them the Spirit. "When will that be?" "Only God knows," Jesus said. So, they were hanging out. Trying to be patient. Living in limbo between resurrection and the promise of what comes next. They were praying to God to send them the Spirit so they could get on with it. Then without warning, the Spirit showed up during their Festival of Shavuot – which is celebrated fifty days after Passover to commemorate the giving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai while their ancestors were wandering in the wilderness. Because it was Shavuot, the streets were packed with Jews from all over the Middle East who had travelled to Jerusalem for the festival.

The followers of Jesus were all together inside where they felt safe from prying eyes when the spirit, whose presence they were invoking, came on them like the rush of a mighty wind. It landed on each of them like tongues of fire. They began to prophesy in other languages. It propelled them right out the doors of the house. Festival goers from all over stopped and stared. They couldn't believe what they were seeing – a band of Galileans speaking their language and preaching about the power of God. The Spirit-filled Galileans were also perplexed. They didn't know what they expected but this surely wasn't it.

American author, Annie Dillard writes:

Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return."

On that Pentecost, the waking God sent the Spirit and blew those early followers right out the door and into the streets.

I don't know if you or how many of you have been invoking God's Spirit once again, but it has been a Pentecost year. I didn't see it coming. I didn't have my crash helmet on. All over the world, people have been pushed right outside the doors of our homes and our houses of worship and into the streets...and parks...and backyards...and onto Zoom and YouTube. We have been propelled outside the buildings that we have used to provide us security, comfort and polite distance. In a most dramatic way, we have learned that the church is not a building. We don't go to church. We are the church.

We have been sent spiraling into the virtual world where we have honored our saints; spoken out against injustice; learned new ways to pray; prophesied and preached a message of God's power and love; and connected with people around this globe and in our own community who said to us, "Oh, I didn't know who you were when you were so safely ensconced inside your lovely building...safe within your geographical bubble". We were forced...pushed outside to worship, to connect, to march, to serve, to stand in awe of God's creative power, to meet new people, to speak a relevant message of God's justice and to learn fresh ways of following the call of God on our lives.

We stand at a critical juncture. What do you think happened on the day after that first Pentecost? Do you think those Spirit-filled followers of the Jesus Way went back inside their house and went back to making sure they followed Robert's Rules of Order? Or do

you think they got on their crash helmets and picked up their signal flares and moved permanently outside their comfort zones. You know they did.

Our county and much of the United States is beginning to open up our indoor spaces. People are breathing a sigh of relief, eager for things to get back to “normal”. On this Pentecost Sunday I want to serve as a sign pointing you and me in the direction of the Spirit. We must not be like the ones that complained to Moses as they looked back towards Egypt wistfully, dreaming of the tastes of the familiar. We must continue to invoke the power of the Spirit of God and refuse to hide indoors. It is going to look different as we figure out what to hold onto and what to let go.

May this Pentecost year shape who we are and who we become as a community. May we expect to be surprised by the Spirit of God. May we allow the wanderings in the wilderness of this pandemic year to open us up to newness. May we turn our bodies away from what we have known and lay down our resistance to what we do not yet see. May we lift our hands and our hearts in praise to the source of our strength and the promise that awaits us. Amen.