

“Surrendering to the Spirit”

Numbers 11:24-30

Acts 2:1-21

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It may seem strange to hear a sermon based on the Old Testament book of Numbers on Pentecost Sunday. This may be the first and possibly the last time you will hear a sermon about the Holy Spirit based on this particular text.

Like many stories, this is another one for which context is everything. The story of the Holy Spirit coming to the 70 elders happens when the Israelites are on their way to the promised land. The book of Numbers does have a lot of numbers in it, lists and inventories. If you have insomnia, just pick up the book of Numbers. But the book of Numbers is better understood by its Hebrew name, *‘be-midbar’*, which means ‘In the Desert’. ‘In the Desert’ tells the story of the 38 years of wandering from Egypt to the Promised Land of Canaan.

The part of the story we hear today happens about midway through the Israelites’ 38 year journey, when they are heading from Mount Sinai north toward Kadesh (this Hebrew name means holiness). So they are heading from the South to the North, to the Holy Place, or so they hope.

(Let us now listen to God’s word as it comes to us from the book of Numbers, ‘In the Desert’)

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!" And Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.

The Israelites spent a frankly unbelievable amount of time wandering through the desert. It should **not** have taken 38 years to get from Egypt to Canaan. Even if you took the long route, on foot---375 miles down and up through the entire length of the Sinai Peninsula. Even if you took dozens of wrong turns, it should not have taken this long. There are those who say the 40 years in the desert was not literally 40 calendar years. Who knows? The point is not really whether it was 40 days or 40 weeks or 40 years. The point is the Israelites were REALLY lost. They struggled with faithfulness and obedience to God for a very long time.

In the process of their desert wandering, they become disgruntled. And now that I have actually seen the Judean desert, I can understand why they were discouraged. It is a god-forsaken, desolate landscape. Only two inches of rain per year. Very, very dry. Not a place you want to hang out.

Even Moses was down. Moses was tired. Tired of the burdens of leadership, the loneliness of being in charge, being the mediator between the people and God.

And to top it all off, they were lost.

Thank God most of us have never been literally lost in the desert, but we can certainly relate to the feeling of being lost. If you live very long, you cannot escape some kind of desert period. There are seasons we endure; times when we have no idea what will come next. Times when we experience God's absence far more than God's presence. Times like the loss of a loved one, loss of an important part of our identity, loss of goals, loss of dreams. Ordinary times of the day-to-day grind, when we pick up the newspaper and there always seems to be more bad news than good. All these are like the experience of wandering in the desert. All these can lead to discouragement and loss of faith. There is only desert as far as the eye can see.

In a desert-like place, sometimes we try to get control, to map out different strategies. When we are in the desert, we rarely think about surrender. Surrender is hard for us.

I am reminded of the movie, *The Flight of the Phoenix*. This movie came out in 2004 starring Dennis Quaid; it was a remake of a 1965 film starring Jimmy Stewart. In the movie, a cargo plane crashes in the middle of a huge desert. The plane is totally wrecked. The survivors have no means of communication. They don't even know where they are,

or how far they might be from any sort of help. Water is a real issue, because they have very little. The grumbling and conflict between the survivors is a big part of the action of the film. The jockeying for control nearly ends up killing everyone. Some must learn to surrender, in order to survive. Some must lead, and rest must follow.

The Old Testament story of the calling the seventy elders happens after a long period of wandering. The people are upset. And what do people do when they are upset? They start complaining. If you have ever been on a church mission trip, you know what happens when people travel together. People complain about the temperature, the sleeping arrangements, and most importantly, the food.

Well, these Israelites were no different. People were tired of the manna God had been providing. It wasn't enough, it wasn't varied enough, it definitely wasn't the hummus and cucumbers and lamb they were used to. As much as I love hummus and cucumbers and olives, I was ready to get back to Special K and skim milk for breakfast after just two weeks in Israel. I am not sure what I would do with 20 years of manna.

The Israelites were sick of manna, and they were beginning to think they'd been better off if they had just stayed back in Egypt. Funny what our memories can do. They seemed to have forgotten one little detail---they had been slaves.

To draw this story together with the Pentecost story from the book of Acts, we have to remember the disciples probably felt like they were in the desert, too. Even though they were in Jerusalem, they were unsure of where they were headed. They were without their leader. There was no guide to tell them where to go. They missed Jesus and the good old days in the beautiful hills of Galilee. We have to remember they really did not know how this story was going to continue, let alone how it would end.

Here is where the Holy Spirit comes in. The Holy Spirit is not someone who pops up only in the New Testament, who only shows up after Jesus leaves. God's Spirit is alive and well and active even as far back as the very beginning of the whole grand story, and God's Spirit plays a big part in this story in the desert.

In this wilderness of relentless sun, arguing and hopeless wandering, God's Spirit is an oasis. God had been there all along. Scripture actually tells us God was a rock following the Israelites as they wandered from place to place (1 Corin 10:10). This rock had more than once provided water to the people, through the power of God's Spirit. (See

Exod 17:6, 33:21, Numb 20:11). Though the Israelites complained, God was merciful. What God's mercy looked like, what the Spirit of God did, was to take charge.

One small glitch, though. When God takes charge, people have to surrender.

God told Moses to bring him seventy elders. Moses picked people who had been identified as true leaders. God promised he would send his spirit to them, to help Moses lead. I like to think of it as the first Session, committee chairs, and committees of the church. God promised to inspire these leaders so Moses would not have to do everything alone.

Then when the spirit comes to the seventy elders, there is an outbreak of prophesying among them. This was disturbing. Can you imagine? Can you imagine what would happen here if our Session broke out in prophetic speech? Some would worry about the Spirit's wisdom. Things would be a little out of control.

The Holy Spirit is unpredictable, surprising, not exactly what we hoped for. The Holy Spirit requires we let go. We will often not understand it. The spirit might ask us to leap forward in faith, to let go of idealizing the past. To be faithful, we have to let the spirit move within us and in others in ways we might not have planned. Even in ways we don't particularly like. The spirit of God requires surrender.

We surrender because we believe God is out there, in here, above us and within us, alongside us and ahead of us. The rock that followed the Israelites through the desert and beyond is still with us. All we have to do is get ourselves out of the way and surrender.

If you have been grumbling
If you have been wandering
If you have felt God has abandoned you
 or even if you simply feel God isn't there---
If your life feels far more like a dry and weary land than a desert
 oasis---

Join us here. Join us as we journey together. Bring all of who you are.

Your children and your pets
Your baggage and your junk
Your worries and your faults
The Spirit who dwells in us will lighten our load
 Will show us the way
 And will write in our hearts the lesson of sweet surrender.