

“Wind Power” – Num 11:24-30 – Pentecost – May 15, 2005

What fun I’ve had with this text for this morning. It’s Pentecost Sunday, the day the church celebrates the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples as reported in Acts. Now I think most of us have heard that account at least once, the incident where the Spirit descended like tongues of fire, and the excited disciples gathered in that room began to speak in tongues, thus unleashing some controversy that would continue to this day as to just what that meant.

I thought it might be interesting to look at the other texts suggested by the Lectionary for today to see what else was there, and discovered the story in the Old Testament book of Numbers. I admit this story about Moses and the seventy elders caught my attention at least in part because I’m working on a paper for one of my ThM courses about leadership, and Dr. Farris suggested looking at Scriptural references about leadership as well.

In any event, once I read this story it became familiar once more, and once again it also tickled my funny-bone. This incident is, for me at least, one of those vignettes that is so human it could have occurred here yesterday.

To help you get into the right mindset, to help you begin to ‘feel’ this story, recall that it is set in the wilderness of Sinai, as the Israelites began their long trek through the desert shortly after fleeing the oppression of Egypt. The beginning of that journey was exciting: the mystical night of death passing over the houses with lamb’s blood painted on the door lintels, and thus sparing the firstborn inside; the mass exodus with the Pharaoh’s blessing; then the flight from his armies as he again flip-flopped on the issue; their being saved by the miraculous hand of God in the waters of the Reed Sea; and the dancing and celebration once they were safely away on dry land again. But they had no idea just how dry the land was – dry, dry, dry! So dry there was not even water to drink, and so they mumbled and grumbled and complained until Moses in frustration smote the rock with his rod and the water gushed forth.

Now that they had water, the people thought about food, and they were hungry. They longed and pined and whined for the delicacies of the Egypt now far behind, and they mumbled and grumbled and complained until Moses in frustration approached God, and the manna began to fall. And fall. And fall some more. Manna today. Manna yesterday. Manna last week. Manna the week before. Manna this morning. Manna for lunch. Manna for supper. What’s for a snack? You guessed it, manna! And the people got tired of manna, and whined and pined and yearned for meat. Anything, even bologna! Even non-kosher bologna! Even fat-free, tofu-based fake bologna!! And the people complained to Moses, who heard them weeping at the doors of their tents, and again in frustration went to God.

This time his complaint was pretty specific, and long, and pointed. The Lord was angry, Moses was displeased, it was not a pretty sight! “Why have you treated me your servant so badly?”, Moses demanded of God. “Why are you upset with me, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? Did I conceive them? Did I give birth to them that you say ‘Carry them in your bosom’ to the land that YOU promised them?”

God, surely realizing that Moses was near to snapping, offered a solution. “Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them, and bring them to the tent of meeting”, the Lord instructed Moses. And as if the task of having to round up seventy elders wasn’t daunting enough, the Lord further ordered Moses to tell the people to consecrate themselves, for he’d had enough of their whining and meat was coming on the morrow – enough meat to choke them for a month! It was almost the last straw for Moses, who asked in what I’m sure must have been a very sarcastic tone, “What?! I have 600,000 people here, and you’re gonna dump a whole month’s food on us?! Are there enough fish in the sea to catch for them?” To which the

Lord replied, moving right to the central point of the issue, “Is my power limited? Now you shall see whether my word will come true for you or not.”

This is where we came into the story, as Moses gathered the seventy elders, and they met in the tent as instructed. The Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to Moses, took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders, and they prophesied – but only this once. Seems like a happy enough incident, albeit a very important one. We’d all expect things to settle down, now, and everyone to be content.

But of course, the Old Testament is about people, people exercising their faith, people trying to figure out just who God is, and what He want from them, or more likely what He can do for them. And so, because we’re looking at real people, real problems crop up almost instantly out of this happy incident.

The first problem comes in the form of a young lad, running out to the meeting tent with the breathless news that two people are prophesying in the camp. Their names were Eldad and Medad, and worse, the spirit rested upon them as well. This would never do – they weren’t included in the seventy! The nerve! Even Joshua, son of Nun, one of Moses’ key assistants, kind of like a Chief of The White Tent Staff, cried out, “My lord Moses, stop them!”

But Moses didn’t stop them. The text assures us they were among those registered, but they hadn’t gone out to the tent. For me, with a bit of a mathematical bent, and perhaps Philip would agree with me, there’s some comfort in there being an additional two elders. You see, with twelve tribes involved, the number seventy, however a holy number in other ways, being seven time ten, kind of like a holy collection of groups of witnesses, seventy is still a problem with twelve tribes, because it’s not a multiple of twelve. Seventy is two short of a multiple of twelve, and so which tribe(s) would be short their full representation? I guess in a way we could think of these two still in the camp as ‘parity’ elders! (Ask Philip – he, being a parity elder, understands.)

However, as fun as that is, there is a very serious role played by those two (parity) elders. Recall that we are told that the seventy only prophesied the once, and then no more. Why was it important to reveal that little detail? Was it because there was some concern that taking some of the spirit away from Moses and spreading it across another group of leaders would somehow dilute his authority? Or was it because that this story not only reflected the beginning of Presbyterianism with the ordaining of elders but also with a fear that prophesying in the spirit might run rampant if let loose? Prophesying is often considered dangerous, and not without reason. Just as many people confuse being weird with being genius (by being weird, thus trying to give the false impression of being a genius) many charlatans have demonstrated emotional, ecstatic behaviour in the hope of being accepted as a prophet, and unfortunately too many people have bought the fakery.

True prophecy is rightly discerning a call from God to speak with authority what God wants spoken. Most often this is a word of accusation from God that His people are failing to do justice, and oppressing the powerless. But it is also almost always accompanied by a message of hope, and of grace and forgiveness. Prophecy is about providing a communication from God to His people, and is a huge responsibility.

Moses understood the importance of prophecy, and he gave a most appropriate answer to Joshua, and the young lad, and all who would whine and complain that the spirit of the Lord would be given not just to those assembled in the official tent but to those whom God chooses to call. “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit upon them!”

And He did, of course – put his ‘spirit’ upon them. Remember that the Hebrew word translated as ‘spirit’, namely *ruach*, can also be translated with equal legitimacy as ‘breath’ and ‘wind’. And the

next day, the ruach, the mighty and powerful breath/spirit/wind of God blew upon them, and delivered meat in the form of quails – enough meat that the Israelites were up to their, well, deep in quails. Naturally enough, before they had finished eating (literally while “the meat was still between their teeth”), they managed to anger God again, but that’s a story for another day.

The real message here is that the Spirit of God was not reserved for Moses and his key henchmen alone, but was demonstrated by God as being for His people as well, a demonstration confirmed so clearly that Pentecost day in Jerusalem. And again it is good to remember from Moses’ account the wish that the Spirit would be put on all the Lord’s people, for that is the promise made by Jesus to His followers. As awesome and frightening a thought as it may be, the Spirit is a gift to all who believe in Christ, and name themselves His. Each and every one of you sitting here this morning is a recipient of the gift of the Holy Spirit, and I echo Moses’ wish that each and every one of you would be a prophet, discerning God’s word for you if not for others, hearing what God has to say, and passing it on.

Is that a frightening thought? You bet it is! Frightening for you, and for me! But that’s where faith enters in, where trust becomes active, where we begin to really hear and believe and live the promises Jesus made that the Advocate, the Spirit would guide us into all truth, would empower us, would fill us with life new and abundant. The gift is yours. The power of the Spirit is yours – signed, sealed and delivered in the blood of Christ. Breathe deeply of that Wind of life, and feel the power.