

Never Prophets Enough

A Pentecost Meditation on Numbers 11: 24 – 30 & Acts 2: 1 - 21

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Easter was late the year that Christopher, my youngest, was born. Easter was late and Christopher was later. Which was just fine with Josh, who was a seasoned, four year old big brother already. He'd been through this when our middle son Russell was born and wasn't so sure he wanted to do it again. He made attempts to minimize the impact, to find ways to forgive us for disturbing the peace he had finally re-created after Russell's birth.

"I think we should call the new baby Russell," Josh pronounced one day.

"Isn't one Russell enough?" I said, asked. "Don't you think it would be nice to give him his own name?"

"No. Just *Russell*."

And we would joke about introducing our three sons: Josh, Russell and our other son Russell. Josh knew how to have a "baby Russell" brother. If this new baby brother could also be a Russell, he would know just what to do. He could work with that. But the baby was born, and we named him Christopher as we had planned. And Josh's world shifted.

The mixed blessing was that Josh had enough self control and/or understanding to refrain from taking his anxiety out on the new baby. Instead, he took everything out on Russell... by baptizing him with different liquids. One day I looked out on to the deck to see Josh pouring an entire pitcher of Kool-aid over Russell's head. Another day I watched the two brothers happily digging a hole together, happily turning the dirt into mud, happily filling a bucket with the mixture. Then I made the mistake of turning my back for a minute. In that instant, Josh had transformed Russell into "swamp thing" by pouring the glop over Russell's head. Two huge blue eyes blinked up at me through the mud. Russell took it all in stride, for he adored his big brother. Maybe none of this had anything to do with Christopher's arrival – Josh still enjoys a good prank - but it felt like Josh just needed to know that there isn't such a thing as too many brothers.

This seemingly odd little story from Numbers begs us to ask a similar question: can there be too many prophets? Until a few weeks ago, I wasn't even vaguely familiar with Eldad and Medad. If I had been forced to identify them, I would have guessed that they were either characters from Lord of the Rings or Dr. Seuss. They do remind me a bit of *The Cat in the Hat's Thing 1* and Thing 2, suddenly appearing from nowhere and leaving chaos in their wake.

But before we meet Eldad & Medad we encounter Moses. He is weary. Bone tired. And justifiably so. He has courageously led God's people from slavery into freedom...of a sort. For now, they are wanderers. Freed from Pharaoh's clutches, yet homeless and hungry. Already bitter and complaining. And what's the universal element about which we all enjoy complaining? The food!! They miss the juicy melons and the tangy cucumbers and the fresh fish they ate - *in slavery* – in Egypt. The relentless diet of manna – *in freedom* - is making them cranky and ungrateful, and Moses, like a weary parent at the end of a long day, can. Not. Take. It. Anymore. He would rather God take his life than continue to listen to their misery. God hears Moses' cry and offers a solution. "Gather 70 men," God says. Seventy wise and respected leaders. Take them to the tabernacle, the holy tent outside the camp. Moses follows God's direction. And while Moses is standing in the midst of these faithful people, no longer alone, but completely surrounded, God lifts some of God's own spirit off of Moses and distributes it among the 70. Isn't that brilliant? God didn't need to do that. God could have simply poured out God's abundant Spirit upon the 70. But Moses had acknowledged his need for help, his desire to share the load, and God blesses that request by literally transferring a portion of the Spirit of authority and power with which Moses had been anointed at the burning bush onto the gathered community. Sharing the Spirit

opens the door for the sharing of the burden. One abundant, plentiful Spirit. The recipients of this gift begin to prophesy, but only for the moment...and then they are done.

Meanwhile, our new friends, Eldad and Medad have been hanging around the camp and some of Moses' Spirit has also fallen upon them. These two characters are a bit mysterious. Were they two of the chosen 70 who got distracted and missed the gathering at the tent? Can't you see the 68 standing around, anxiously waiting? Joshua, having counted and recounted, turns to Moses and, under his breath, says, "We seem to be missing Eldad and Medad....why you chose them I'll never know!" Moses just smiling. Remembering that day when God so unexpectedly chose *him*. Does it matter that these two didn't show up? Not to God. God knows where to find them. God, untroubled by their tardiness, goes to where *they are*, *outside* the tent, over in the camp. God gathers them in.

Or another possibility: maybe they didn't make the cut. Maybe they weren't part of the 70 at all, but God was splashing the Spirit about so freely that some of it fell upon these two men...these two men who were *not* among the chosen...these two men who then opened their mouths and discovered that they were prophets. Perhaps God was stirring up a little trouble?

However it happened, Eldad and Medad begin to prophesy outside the tent, outside the holy tabernacle. And some nameless someone just can't stand it and has to run and tattle to Moses. Joshua immediately joins the cause, insisting that Moses make them stop. "Make them stop??!!" Moses says with bewilderment. Make them stop!?! Moses knows that if the Lords' Spirit has been poured upon them, he couldn't make them stop if he wanted to. But he *doesn't* want to. He is thrilled not only that these two voices have not stopped, but that they are speaking *inside* the camp. After all, this is Moses. Moses, who was also taken by surprise by God's call to be a prophet. Moses, a very ordinary man who met God in the unsettling form of a burning bush on what he thought would be an ordinary day on an ordinary mountain. This is the man who took off his sandals to stand on ground made holy by God's dangerous presence. This is the man who knows that all ground is sacred ground for all the earth belongs to God. Yes, the tabernacle is a holy place, but all the world is holy and prophecy cannot be contained. And if God should choose to use two "outsiders?" Who is Moses to question that?

The tattler and Joshua both see the black and white of it all. It works in either scenario. Joshua could complain that since Eldad and Medad weren't where they were supposed to be, then they shouldn't have received God's Spirit! And they should know better than to be speaking in the camp!! Or maybe Joshua is complaining because these two weren't supposed to be speaking at all. They were not *chosen*.

Moses, however, sees the rich complexity. A human had chosen the 70, but God chose Eldad and Medad. There is always room for another prophet – even the ones who don't show up on time, the ones who forget where they are supposed to be, the ones who don't follow all the rules. So Moses' responds, "Are you jealous for *my* sake?" Knowing that's not the case at all. But it is possible that *Joshua* feels a bit threatened by this pair. "No need for jealousy here," Moses steadies him with this calm assurance, "there can never be prophets enough..." "There is room for you, Joshua. There is also room for the Eldads and Medads. There is room for all, and *no one* will take *your* place.

Most of us have known this need that Joshua has, this need to impose boundaries and limitations and definitions on others...it feels so much more comfortable, so much safer to know who your little brother will be. It goes hand in hand with that twinge of jealousy or insecurity that prompts us to say things we later wish we hadn't. How silly Joshua must have felt when he went to bed that night. (If he'd only known the Bible would one day hold the book of Joshua...not Eldad & Medad.) Moses' simple, compassionate response, reminds Joshua that it is dangerous to claim human limitations in God's name. Perhaps that is why Moses longed for all to be prophets, so that there would always be enough voices to go around...enough voices so that someone

would always be capable of asking, "Is this God's restriction or one of our making?" "Is this God's boundary or one we have drawn?" "Is this God's definition or ours?"

A foreshadowing of the Pentecost to come, when limitations would be split wide open? And so we come to the book of Acts, with God's Spirit coming, not in a cloud, but with violent wind and flames of fire. The Spirit comes to Christ's disciples who have been waiting, just as he had told them to do. The Spirit, once embodied in Christ, now set loose upon the world. Luke tells us that it happened during the Pentecost celebration, a Jewish festival that honored both the harvest and also the giving of the law to the Hebrew people on their 50th day of freedom from slavery. Just as God's Spirit was poured out upon those 70 (or 72?) it is now poured out in even greater abundance. And as Peter begins to preach, he turns to sacred scripture, he seeks the words of another prophet, the prophet Joel. Joel, who celebrated a day when young and old, slave and free, men and women will all prophesy. No limitations. No boundaries. No outsiders. Just like the crowd gathered in Jerusalem that day. The Rev. Thomas Long describes this mysterious gathering:

"This conglomeration of peoples is not only a diverse and pluralistic gathering of tourists; it is also a historically impossible collection of folks... Consider the Medes, for instance. They must have had a rather difficult journey to Jerusalem since they would not only have had to travel several hundred miles, but several hundred years as well, Medes having already disappeared from the canvas of history. The same is true evidently of Elamites, who seemed to have wandered over to this Pentecost story not from the Tigris River, where Elamites once lived, but rather from the annals of history and particularly the pages of the Old Testament..."¹

God's spirit knows no limits, is ungoverned by time. Luke gathers the living and the dead, offering us a glimpse into God's richly diverse realm, a realm which history cannot contain. And we are reminded that the prophets of the ancients stand beside us, stand in our midst, their words guiding and anointing us. We speak often of the *priesthood* of all believers, but on this day we proclaim that we are the *prophethood* of all believers.² Whatever limitations or boundaries or definitions you have placed upon yourself or others, let them go. Those preconceived names? Let them burn in the Pentecost fire.

We could have named our third son Russell, but it wouldn't have done any good. He would still have been Christopher. Brothers, like prophets, are unpredictable and do not take well to generalizations. *Thank God for that.* So claim your name. And remember that even Joshua and Moses had some really bad days. If you start to doubt your voice, remember those funny names, Eldad and Medad. Perhaps they were the last two people on earth anyone would have expected God to call, but God did call them. Eldad's name? It means "loved of God," and Medad's? Simply "love." What perfect names for prophets...the very names by which God still calls us all.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

God loves you with an abundant love.
Christ has redeemed you with an abundant grace.
The Holy Spirit claimed you as prophet before you were ever born!

¹ Long, Thomas G. *A Night at the Burlesque: Wanderings Through the Pentecost Narrative.* Journal for Preachers: Pentecost. Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey. 1991, p 28.

² Robert B. Kruschwitz, Center for Christian Ethics, *Would that All Were Prophets.* *Christian Reflection: A series in faith and ethics.* 2003. p. 5.

Let us go from this place knowing, that like Eldad, we are loved of God, and like Medad, we can, by God's grace, be the embodiment of love in a weary world. Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. Amen.