

**Restless Rabble and Missing Ingredients**  
**Numbers 11:4-29 (selected); Mark 9:38-50; James 5:13-20**

**James 5:13-16**

<sup>13</sup>Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. <sup>14</sup>Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the LORD.

<sup>15</sup>The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the LORD will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. <sup>16</sup>Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.

The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

**Mark 9:38-41**

<sup>38</sup>John said to Jesus, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.”

<sup>39</sup>But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me.

<sup>40</sup>“Whoever is not against us is for us.

<sup>41</sup>“For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.”

**Introduction to OT reading**

The reading from the Old Testament book of Numbers takes place as the Covenant People, the Israelites, led by Moses, are on a seemingly endless journey through the wilderness, well past the one-year anniversary of having been miraculously rescued and brought out from their slavery in Egypt.<sup>1</sup>

After they had left Egypt, almost immediately the people started complaining to Moses about the lack of food and water. So God had begun to provide manna, a “fine flaky substance”<sup>ii</sup> that would show up on the ground each morning and which the people were to go out and gather. Barbara Brown Taylor has compared it to grits.<sup>iii</sup> There would always be enough for everyone, but only if each household would gather up just enough for that household, for that day (or two days over the sabbath).

We who have been through the restrictions and the uncertainties imposed by a pandemic know what it’s like to do without staples and luxuries and things we just want, things we have grown to need.

And in times of community crisis, some people will always complain, and all of us will sometimes complain—the leadership isn’t doing enough, or doing the wrong things, or not doing the right things;

Sometimes the finger gets pointed elsewhere, at other people, sometimes with very good reason, but almost never to any meaningful effect.

Meanwhile, for the mass of people just trying to make their way through the wilderness, day by day, with no idea how long the journey’s going to take—weeks? months? years? a lifetime?—

those weird first days and nights become a week, and then a month, and then another month, and another;

and eventually the first year passes into a second, and we keep making our way through the wilderness, thinking about what it was like before, and wondering when we can finally get back to something like that.

And the Israelites would remember what they’d had back in Egypt—conveniently overlooking the brutality, the oppression, the

dehumanization and cruelty. At least, they would say, they'd had their fill of the "fleshpots" of Egypt, and all the bread you could eat.

**Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29**

<sup>4</sup>The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelite people also wept again, and said, "If only we had meat to eat!

<sup>5</sup>We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons; the leeks, the onions and garlic;

<sup>6</sup>but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at."

<sup>10</sup>Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, all at the entrances of their tents. Then the LORD became very angry, and Moses was displeased.

<sup>11</sup>So Moses said to the LORD, "Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? <sup>12</sup>Did I conceive all this 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,' to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors?

<sup>13</sup>Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say, 'Give us meat to eat!'

<sup>14</sup>I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me.

<sup>15</sup>If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once—if I have found favor in your sight—and do not let me see my misery."

<sup>16</sup>So the LORD said to Moses, "Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over

them; bring them to the tent of meeting, and have them take their place there with you.”

<sup>24</sup>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.

<sup>25</sup>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.

<sup>26</sup>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.

<sup>27</sup>And a young man ran and told Moses, “Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.”

<sup>28</sup>And Joshua son of Nun, the assistant of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, “My lord Moses, stop them!”

<sup>29</sup>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!”

### **The Sermon**

Speaking of Barbara Brown Taylor, I once heard her introduce a sermon on a difficult passage by invoking the Holy Spirit, because, she said, if the Spirit is with us, then nothing else matters; and if the Spirit is not with us, then nothing else matters.<sup>iv</sup>

That seems to be what Moses and the Israelites found in the wilderness.

If God can take some of the spirit from Moses  
and put it on the people whom God has called together,  
even if some of them aren't present at the time,  
that means God's spirit is sovereign over all things, all the time,  
inside the church, outside the church,  
and in between.

And if people prophesy when God puts the Spirit on them,  
but without it they fall back into the feeling  
that the call of God is a deprivation  
rather than a joy and a creator of community,  
then a church that is true to the Spirit  
is not about being a market entity  
designed to please consumers,  
but about a community of disciples brought together  
to be faithful, and to help each other to be faithful.

And if God puts the spirit on those who are called,  
then, as James says, those who need prayer and healing  
know they can turn to their siblings in church for prayer.

And if elders pray in the spirit, in the name of Christ,  
their prayers are powerful and effective.

And if the church is a community of imperfect disciples  
seeking to be faithful and helping each other along the way,  
then, as Jesus tells his followers, anyone who is not against us  
is for us.

And if the Church of Jesus Christ is dependent on the spirit  
and built on people caring for the world and one another,  
then the church doesn't exist to be more attractive  
than its competitors

by doing whatever it takes to lure in customers  
 and trying to keep them happy,  
 but is a gathering of people trying their best  
 to be holy and faithful and loving.

And if the Spirit is with us,  
 then nothing else matters,  
 and if the Spirit is not with us,  
 then nothing else matters.

Just a few days ago I saw a prayer newly written by my friend and  
 colleague who has preached here before, Michael Isaacs.

[O God,]

Your book is full of miscreants and saints  
 who struggle to make sense of humanity  
 and yearn to catch a glimpse of your face.

May we hear their voices.  
 May we hear the weeping of Rachel refusing to be comforted.  
 May we hear the voices of Puah and Shifrah,  
 of wet-nurses, and privileged children,  
 of the dead Egyptians along the seashore.

May we listen to the Canaanites slaughtered by Joshua.  
 Tell us the last words in Haman's head from the gallows.  
 Help us listen for the refusal of the bard  
 who won't play their song in a strange land.  
 And can someone listen to Rhoda with a little respect?

Today, may we hear the tremor in Jonah's voice  
 that caused Ninevites to repent with seven simple words.  
 If that worm has a story to tell, we'd really like to know.

Also, what about frogs from the plague,  
 or the drowning pigs possessed by Legion  
 or the dogs who lick the wounds of Lazarus?  
 Like Balaam's donkey, speak to us.

I beseech you, O Creator of Mystery, that someone attempt  
 the mythical sounds of Behemoth and leviathans,  
 or describe the gait of the Nephilim.

You know, O Lord, that you cannot silence  
 the Syrophenician woman.  
 May we hear the conspiring of friends  
 who cut open roofs to ask for help.  
 May we listen for the musings of the widow  
 that you'll tear down temples to protect.  
 And may we share the stunning joy of a eunuch  
 immersed in the waters of baptism.

May we hear all their voices and more.  
 But, mostly, O Lord, may we  
 have the audacity to add our own. Amen.<sup>v</sup>

Word came to Moses that two apparently renegade or maverick elders,  
 Eldad and Medad, were prophesying in the main camp where the  
 Israelites were.

For whatever reasons, they hadn't made it out to the tent which was set  
 up outside the main encampment. But they were among the elders, even  
 though they hadn't been in the room at the time when God took some of  
 Moses's spirit and laid it temporarily on those who were gathered there.

So the young man ran up to Moses and breathlessly gave him the alert  
 that these two, who hadn't been in the meeting, seemed to be doing  
 something, or claiming an authority, for which they didn't appear to be  
 licensed or authorized.

And Moses's trusted assistant, Josh Nunson, urged Moses: for God's sake, stop them.

Mark must have remembered that event centuries later, when he recorded that John reported to Jesus, "We saw somebody casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us."

And Jesus said, "Don't stop him. Nobody who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us."

In medieval times, women cast aside or downgraded in importance in the established church would be given visions and physical manifestations through which, according to writings from the time, God would show it to them when a corrupt or faithless priest was trying to administer the sacraments.

And the women—Beguines or other devoted semi-monastic servants of the Word—would proclaim Jesus in their own way, even if they weren't allowed to do it in the Church.

The institutional question is always: who is to be given the authority to speak?

Meanwhile Moses, Jesus and the Holy Spirit are always asking us: when God's message is spoken, are you listening? Because it may be coming from places that are surprising, or people who have not been officially authorized by our sacred institutions.

More than 20 years ago in another presbytery, a debate raged over an issue that had come up which sounds shockingly quaint and pathetically out of touch with reality today, but at the time represented a new and questionable thing to a lot of people.

For various reasons, an otherwise qualified woman nearing the completion of the preparation for ministry process had taken all the right courses, but had not lived on a seminary campus for any of her training, and the decision needed to be made as to whether she could be exempted from a presbytery provision that candidates needed to have spent at least one year living on seminary grounds.

It was a lively and fascinating debate on the presbytery floor. Points worthy of serious consideration were raised by both sides. Probably some dumb points were also made on both sides, too, but mainly I remember a general sense of integrity. Along with some crotchiness.

One of the points raised on one side was the idea that seminary training isn't just about the book learning; it's about the community, the journey taken together, the relationships, the worshiping together, not to mention the dining and the group study hours and being there for each other when things get really tough. Somebody had risen and made that point, saying in summary that the seminary is where ministers are formed.

And somebody else rose in response and said, respectfully, no, it isn't.

Tom Long wasn't in the room that day, but in the introduction to one of the many excellent books he's written on preaching, he made the same case as that second speaker did. He wrote:

“Years ago, seminaries were sometimes jokingly called ‘preacher factories,’ and the assumption still lingers that the task of theological schools is to take people and fabricate them into ministers.

“This,” he said, “is not the case at all. Ministers are not ‘made’ in seminaries. Seminaries and other programs of theological education *train* ministers; ministers are made in and through the *church*.”

“Women and men may for a season engage in formal theological education to gain deeper knowledge of the Christian story, but they were first taught that story and they are sustained in that story by Christian people in the church.

“They come to schools to wrestle with the great theological ideas, but it is the church’s theological heritage they will encounter.

“They come to places of theological training to acquire the skills of guiding, teaching, counseling, and speaking, but they come because the church, in some way, has already discerned in them gifts for leadership.

“They leave seminaries not to create the church but to take their places of service in its ongoing ministry.”<sup>vi</sup>

It was a pulse-poundingly close vote in the presbytery that day, and the motion to provide a special dispensation to allow the candidate to be ordained without a residential year on a seminary campus did not pass, meaning she had either to spend another year of her life living on a seminary campus—despite having already taken all the right courses—or decide that she was not being called after all. At least, not in that presbytery.

In retrospect it feels like that was the last gasp of a certain dying era, and to be sure, it was a lot of old men, pastors, who had voted against something that simply didn’t make sense to them; they’d been asked to take something that they had understood as an essential necessity and now regard it as anybody’s option.

I remember that the woman’s mother, who was also a presbyter and voting delegate that day, rose immediately after the vote and said, “Mr. Moderator, may I say something?”

And the moderator said, entirely correctly, “No.”

It sounds cruel, but in Robert's Rules, there is no opining after a vote—well, not in the meeting, I mean. Otherwise you'd be there all day listening to people making cases for decisions that are already in the books. You hold the debate, vote on the question, and then go on to the next matter.

But the kind of day it was at the presbytery meeting was probably best encapsulated in the awkward silence that permeated the room in the seconds after the moderator said, "No."

A bit like the kind of day Moses was having.

A word was coined a few years ago that hasn't completely caught on yet, but everybody knows the phenomenon: the word was "hangry," a portmanteau of "hungry" and "angry:" that feeling when the growling in your stomach makes little irritations into big ones.

The People of God who were miraculously rescued from slavery in Egypt have been hangry since literally Day One, and it's hard to blame them.

I have to say I love these people, so specific with the grocery list of what they long for and can't have.

And I love how Moses responds with this fabulous melodrama: "If this is how you're going to treat me—making me listen to these people all day—just take me right now. Sick of it."

I love how literally everybody is hangry, apparently including Almighty God: "Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, all at the entrances of their tents. Then the LORD became very angry, and Moses was displeased."

And I love how it's not even *eating* the manna, but just *looking* at it that they're, ironically, fed up with.

This is nobody at their best. You know what this looks like to me? This is me. Us. Regular people, when they haven't had a melon or a cucumber in a year and a half and can't stop thinking about what you could do with a skillet full of leeks and onions and garlic.

Exactly the kinds of people that every so often God chooses to anoint with the Holy Spirit, whether they're in the right place at the right time, or they missed the meeting, or took a wrong turn, or were never invited in in the first place.

On any given day that might be me, or you, or literally anybody else.

We are the church.

Because if "church" isn't just the name  
of a governing institution,  
but is something embodied by each honest disciple  
seriously trying to be faithful  
and help other disciples trying to be faithful too,  
then the tie that binds us together isn't one  
that confines us to one place  
or is only real in one kind of circumstance,  
  
but it sends each of us, and every one of us,  
out into the world to be the church wherever we are.

"Lift every voice and sing."<sup>vii</sup>

"For everyone born, a place at the table."<sup>viii</sup>

"All creatures of our God and King,  
lift up your voice and let us sing, Alleluia!"<sup>ix</sup>

And "Blest be the tie that binds."

Because here in this place,

if the Spirit is with us,  
then nothing else matters,

and all of us are marching in the light of God.

Will you pray with me?

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<sup>i</sup> Numbers 9:1; 10:11-12

<sup>ii</sup> Exodus 16:14

<sup>iii</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, "Bread of Angels," in Taylor, *Bread of Angels* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 2007), 8-9

<sup>iv</sup> I have forgotten which of the Festivals of Homiletics it was, somewhere in the late 2000's/early 2010s, in which I heard her say this.

<sup>v</sup> Michael Isaacs, Facebook post, September 23, 2021

<sup>vi</sup> Thomas G Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, Third Edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 5

<sup>vii</sup> James Weldon Johnson

<sup>viii</sup> Shirley Erena Murray

<sup>ix</sup> Francis of Assisi (composite translation)