

Passing on the Spirit

Sermon delivered at Christ the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Hamden, CT

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[Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29](#)

[Mark 9:38-41](#)

Our lesson from the Hebrew Bible—the Old Testament—this morning, comes from the 4th book of the Bible. In English we call this book “Numbers.” It’s called “Numbers” because it contains a census, a count, of God’s people after they were liberated from slavery in Egypt. But in the original Hebrew language in which it was written, the title of the book is *In the Wilderness*. A much more appropriate title, considering the stories it contains.

As you might remember, hundreds of years before, God called Abraham and Sarah, promised them a son in their old age, promised them they would be the ancestors of a huge nation and promised them a place to live and flourish. Over the years Abe and Sarah had Isaac, Isaac had Jacob. Jacob wrestled with the angel and his name became Israel. Israel had 12 sons; they became the 12 tribes of Israel. The Hebrew people, the Israelites, became ensnared by Egypt and were enslaved there. They cried to God; God heard. God called Moses to be their leader. Moses led them out through the Red Sea, to Mount Sinai, in the wilderness. There they are given a special law, a special way to live as free people.

Then they depart from the mountain, and they are on their way to the land that God had originally promised to Abraham. They are now, “In the Wilderness.” And being in the wilderness is hard. Walking is hungry work. It’s frightening and sad to leave the familiar behind.

God, you might remember, even gave them food to eat, bread that falls from the sky, called “Manna.” But even this doesn’t cheer up the people for long. They complain. They miss how things used to be in Egypt! Even though they were enslaved, even though they were miserable, at least they were fed, they think, at least it was familiar.

This is the story of God and God’s people, both then and now. God has made promises. Through God’s prophets, and to us through Scripture, God promises us life, love, liberation, and food for the journey. But God’s people have a hard time trusting. We complain. We miss the old days.

But even though we complain, God does not rip up the contract. Even though Moses, too, is fed up, the deal is not called off. The relationship between God and God’s people, we hear, is like that of a mother. It’s tender—it can be tumultuous!—but it’s unbreakable.

When Moses says to God, “What, am I this people’s mother? Did I give birth to them? Do I feed them with my own body?” The answer from God is, of course, “No.” God says, with God’s

actions: "Moses, they are *my* people. *I* formed them. *I* am their mother. *I* will feed them." And if you read on in the story, God does.

But before God feeds God's people something interesting happens. God says to Moses, "Get your leaders, bring them out of the camp where everyone lives, bring them to the special place—to the tent—for God-experiences." And when they're there, God takes the prophetic, the God-breathed authority, from Moses and spreads it around. Lest the complaining and the fearing and the lack of trust continue, God spreads Moses' special gift to *all* the leaders.

But then something very unusual happens: Eldad and Medad did not go out to the special God-place. They stayed home. But they caught the Spirit too. They prophesied **back in the camp** about God's promises of life, love, liberation, and food for the journey. The assistants, the bean-counters, the rule followers cry foul! Joshua says, "Hey! Not allowed!" But Moses settles the outcry and says, "Are you upset on my behalf? If only all of God's people would have God's Spirit of prophecy."

And this is, in reality, what happened. All of God's people, in the end, do have this Spirit. God's Spirit passed from Moses to the leaders. And from the leaders it passed to King David—generations and generations later—once they arrive in the Land. From King David through the generations to Mary and Joseph, and then to Jesus.

From Jesus to the disciples. From the disciples to you, here today, we're *soaked* in God's Spirit.

We hear the same rule-following and boundary-making instinct in our Gospel lesson from Mark as well. Just like Joshua, here, the disciple John says: "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." And the same as Moses, Jesus knows that God's Spirit has been poured out onto all people. Jesus says, "Whoever is not against us is for us."

When Jesus says, "us" here, he means the people who take to heart God's promises, and the people who talk about them, shout about them! These are the people who believe that God is more powerful than the "demons" of the world—more powerful than death and oppression and cruelty. God is not stingy. When it comes down to it, it's not God in Scripture that builds walls around the promises of eternal life, love, liberation, and food for the journey. But it's God's people, the ones entrusted with these promises, who complain and divide.

It's an important question to ask ourselves: Who are the Eldad's and the Medad's of our time? In other words: who is not allowed in our churches and sanctuaries? Who is not in the nice neighborhoods and not in the right schools but who still prophesy about God's promises? Who are the ones casting out demons in Jesus' name, but we don't think fit with our in-crowd?

Are they queer or trans? Are they Republican or Democrats? Did they vote for the wrong candidate? Are they Catholic, Pentecostal or Lutheran? Black, brown or white? God clearly

doesn't care about these boundaries, but God does care deeply that we trust God's promises of life, love, liberation, and food for the journey.

And today, as a sign of God's great and abundant promises, we baptize Charlotte. Not because she's worthy, not because she's in God's special place, not because she's a baby or because she's an adult. But because she has been chosen, like we have all been chosen and called by name. Chosen and called to be part of God's story, she is God's child. She too will be soaked with the same Spirit of God—from Moses to Jesus to Charlotte today.

Amen.