

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

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"Outside the Tent"

Numbers 11: 24-30

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As a veteran of at least 12 Vacation Bible Schools, as a church brat who was there even sometimes when the doors weren't open, as one raised on the innerant, infallible flannel graph, as a former seminarian and now a preacher... I thought I'd heard them all but this story from Numbers was new to me the first time I came across it via the Lectionary.

I'd never heard this story where God does this Spirit transplant. I'd missed this story. By the way, it's one of those desert, exodus moments that happens in response to whining, to complaint. The story may be new to us... the complaints aren't. We've heard them before.

"We're so tired of this manna... Manna in the morning, manna in the noontime... manna when the sun goes down. Manna cakes, manna flakes, manna topped with a manna sauce."

"Remember back in Egypt????

The fish, the fruit, the garlic...

It was a regular smorgasbord... and free."

Everyday they'd complain and Moses joined right in.

"God, what'd I do to deserve this? Did I give them birth? Why am I having to carry them, I'm not their mother? I didn't ask for this job and I'm tired of hearing them whine."

Moses is feeling really burned out and really alone and the story we read earlier is God's response to the angry and desperate prayer of Moses. **"Do something God... I'm weary."**

And God does. He has Moses pick out 70 leaders... elders... and they stood around the tent... which I suppose was... THE TENT. They gathered around God's house... the roving church building, where all the religious stuff happened.

And then God came down in the preferred desert way, in that revelation mode of choice... in a cloud, and God took some of the Spirit, which was on Moses and put it on the Elders and every one of them started prophesying... They all had something to say. It was like a bunch of preachers at a convention... (wouldn't that be fun... talk about a party) all talking at the same time... lots of words.

There is a fairly consistent connection in scripture between the presence of the Spirit of God and The Word of God... Spirit and Word are often a two for one deal. Remember Genesis? The Spirit of God was hovering over the waters... And God said, **"Let there be light."**

In Luke, at the outset of Jesus' ministry, Jesus stands up in the synagogue and reads from Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor."

It happens that way all through scripture... Joel described it like that. In the last days, I will pour out my spirit and your sons and daughters will prophecy.

That's Peter's text in his Pentecost sermon. He's trying to explain what was happening. Wind, fire, words... God's spirit has been poured out and something holy gets said... God's word is proclaimed. In scripture, the Word is the agent... The agent of creativity, the Spirit is given and something is there. Expressed into being. The dry bones in Ezekial's valley were spoken back to life.

That's what happened at the tent. The spirit gets spread around and now Moses isn't the only one with something to say. It's prophetic brainstorming... one thought leads to another... one idea to another... all around the tent, elders are saying things that matter to one another.

And it's not just happening at the tent. Eldad and Medad (probably brothers I would guess... Father's name was Do) were among the 70 elders chosen but they didn't go out to the tent for some reason... And low and behold, if they also didn't get some of that Spirit and they started prophesying.... Right in the middle of camp (imagine that).

Everyone else is out at the tent like good elders ought to be, prophesying in a respectable manner and here Eldad and Medad are back at the main camp preaching up a storm.

And some young tattle tell runs out to Moses, "**Moses, Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp...**"

And Joshua, Moses' right hand man, is incensed. "**My Lord, Moses, make them stop.**" Actually, I picture him like Barney Fife talking to Andy. He's the deputy of orthodoxy.

"Now Moses... Mo... they didn't even come to the meetin'.

They weren't at the tent like the rest of us.

They haven't been certified as official prophets."

If they prophesy, we'll all prophecy... it'll be anarchy. What we need to do Moses, is get a prophetic restraining order and nip this in the bud."

Something in us wants to nip the Spirit in the bud or at least coral it, don't you think? We prefer God's spirit break loose at the tent if it's going to break loose, that way we can keep an eye on it and all. That is in part why Pentecost was such an upsetting day...

Fisherman and tax collectors out preaching in public.

Saying things they weren't equipped to say...

Using words that didn't belong to them.

And it sounded as though they'd been drinking. They looked drunk, which is one reason among others that caused Baptist to be so nervous about this day. Those who worked in "the tent," who are in charge of the religious boundaries, were nervous. Religion functions, in part, to channel and to focus and to boundary those things that are beyond boundary. It's a handle on mystery... a mystery handle. And we tent managers like our handles.

Reminds me of what Agnes Sanford, that Episcopalian mystic and faith-healer used to say. She said when she went into most churches she often imagined seeing Jesus in the back of the sanctuary with his hands tied behind his back... and unable to do any mighty works there

because the ministers who led the services either didn't expect him to do them or didn't dare ask him to do them for fear that he wouldn't or couldn't and that their own faith and the faith of their congregations would be threatened. (Buechner, Now and Then 62) Better to keep things handled.

But after Pentecost there seem to be no handling the Spirit. It was loose, unleashed. Peter found a group of Gentiles, Corneilius and his friends, who had been touched by God's spirit and who had come to faith in Christ.

Ironically, those who had preached at Pentecost (and were criticized) were now boundary makers in their own right, now they were TENT people, and they got together to look into Cornelius' conversion... they investigated. They gave it their stamp of approval... **"It seemed like a good idea to the Holy Spirit and to us to let these folks in.** I'm sure the Spirit was relieved.

As if... God would was interested in their okay... As if... the wind awaits your certification to blow... As if... the Spirit isn't always doing things that are mysterious and wonderful and expansive.

That is standard fare when God's spirit comes. It hovers over chaos and turns it into creation. It brings dead bones to life. When the Spirit is present people do things they aren't suppose to be able to do.

Our sons and our daughters prophesy, our old men dream dreams, and people, like Cornelius and Eldad and Medad and God knows who else, end up full of God's spirit, even though they've never even been in the BIG TENT. God does things all over the world that are not "tent dependant."

Which is perhaps a very important Pentecostal clue for those of us who want to see the Spirit at work. Make sure you look some away from the tent... Don't miss Eldad and Medad who are doing something amazing right in the middle of the camp. Anne Lamott says **"it's amazing where we look for salvation and where we actually find it."**

God's spirit is not at all confined to our boundaries... our structures, our orthodoxy. We want to believe they're are the preferred channels for God... and perhaps it's right to say there is a path... a map... that can sure be of help. Sort of like, as someone said, "if you want to get hit by a car stand in the middle of the road." Paths and boundaries help.

But... remember that they are for you and not for God... Religion is for you. But the work of God's spirit in your life is not always going to look so religious. Don't expect the Spirit to look so "spiritual." It will happen... and happen in your life.

Some of the best Pentecostal stuff is the stuff that is happening all around you and within you everyday. Like when some good friends laugh really hard for a long time and once you catch your breath, life seems better.

Good Spirit moments are the moments when you've really blown it with someone, by all rights you should just live in the dog house eternally and they say, **"That's okay... it's okay."**

God's Spirit is upon you when you look at that long list laying on your desk or your counter... it's longer than your endurance is. But something in you,

beyond you, lifts you above that list item by item and you find energy that you know good and well wasn't yours to begin with.

Do you know what it's like to have a deep moment of connection with someone, maybe over coffee or through tears? That's Spirit stuff and it rarely happens at the Tent.

You find peace or courage... or words... or willingness you didn't have. You are illumined... lit up... but not because you were at "The Tent." Just because God wanted to do it. God must express God's beautiful self.

What we celebrate on Pentecost Sunday is that God's spirit has leaked out all over the place and if you'll pay attention, you'll see it.

I remember waking up in a bad mood one Monday... it was the side of the bed hope wasn't on. I don't remember what the weather was doing but I was more than partly cloudy. Don't ask me why... I was just grumpy... Which happens, on occasion. (no Amens from my family please)

But Mondays come and you have to do them, foul mood or not. I did my day and that evening I was sitting at home and realized I felt great. My spirit was high and healed and it occurred to me that I had done absolutely nothing to make that happen. I think that's a hint of Pentecost.

I just think it's kind of neat that the same Spirit who hovered over the deep and that set Eldad and Medad to preaching and blew like warm breath over the face of the disciples and fell like fire on their heads... can change my mood on a Monday.

And this same Spirit is upon you and within you and all around you. Our task is simply to be open to it and celebrate it... and to trust in that.

Pentecost was a day Moses had wished for. It's a wish come true. Remember at the end of our story. **"Don't be jealous Joshua... I wish all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!"**

Part of his wish was for the people's sake... so they could experience what he had, the depth and the encounter. But surely part of his wish was for his own sake. He was tired and he longed for Pentecost... for a time when he didn't have to carry so much by himself because God's spirit was poured out.

This is not something that Old Testament heroes alone long for and wish for.

Stay at home parents long for it. And people who run offices and classrooms. And people who go to meetings and ball games And who write sermons or books or briefs.

Really, anybody who knows what it's like to be under the load. We all need to remember that Moses' wish came true. God's spirit has fallen and will fall upon us again.

Maybe this is a day, a time, when you know you need it, would you join me in praying that it will be so...

**Spirit of the living God, fall fresh on me.
Spirit of the living God, fall fresh on me.
Break me, melt me, mold me, fill me.
Spirit of the living God, fall fresh on me.**

