

An Unruly Spirit
Numbers 11:24-29
May 28, 2023
Pastor Sarah Wiles

Today is Pentecost. The word Pentecost means fifty. It comes fifty days after Easter, and it's the day we remember the wild story of the disciples suddenly transformed by the Holy Spirit. As we heard at the beginning of worship, the Spirit is poured out on *all* flesh—young and old, slave and free, rich and poor, in all places and on all nationalities, beyond the bounds of gender, sexuality, race, class, culture, and even religion. That's what the Holy Spirit does.

But that story isn't the beginning of the story of the Holy Spirit. Not by a long shot. The Holy Spirit was present at the very beginning of creation, hovering over the waters. And it has accompanied us ever since. This morning's story comes in the middle of the story of the Israelites fleeing slavery in Egypt.

Moses has led them out of slavery, which you would think the people would be grateful for. But no. They're not. Not for long. They complain, and complain, and complain. Their feet are tired. They're hot. They're thirsty. They miss the cucumbers and melons and leeks they had in Egypt. Forgetting that they were enslaved. Right before our story for today Moses has gone to God and said, I'm done. I can't put up with their whining one more minute.

So God gives a tutorial in delegating. God says, "Get 70 folks together. I'll give them some Spirit, and they'll help you."

So, great. Moses does as instructed. God does as promised. But then... well, the Spirit's never content to just leave well enough alone. That's where we pick up today in Numbers 11:24-29:

²⁴ So Moses went out and told the people the Lord's words. He assembled seventy men from the people's elders and placed them around the tent. ²⁵ The Lord descended in a cloud, spoke to him, and took some of the spirit that was on him and placed it on the seventy elders. When the spirit rested on them, they prophesied, but only this once. ²⁶ Two men had remained in the camp, one named Eldad and the second named Medad, and the spirit rested on them. They were among those registered, but they hadn't gone out to the tent, so they prophesied in the camp. ²⁷ A young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp."

²⁸ Joshua, Nun's son and Moses' assistant since his youth, responded, "My master Moses, stop them!"

²⁹ Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake? If only all the Lord's people were prophets with the Lord placing his spirit on them!"

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The Spirit did what the Spirit does. It overflowed. And Joshua is not okay with it.

And I get that. I really get it.

I love nothing more than a well-organized, color-coded spreadsheet. I like clear job descriptions and org charts. I get itchy when the stuff on my desk isn't lined up at right angles. I mean, I became a Presbyterian pastor for heaven's sake. I like order.

Denominational lines are quickly becoming a thing of the past, but if Presbyterians are known for anything, we are known for doing things decently and in order, by golly. We base all of our polity on the trust that the will of Christ can be reliably discerned by groups of people who have been nominated by the whole congregation. The Spirit works by committee apparently.

And there's a lot to be said for that. This form of organization prevents the kind of abuse that can happen when all leadership is vested in just one person or a very small group. Doing things decently and in order allows for transparency and accountability. If it's clear who has the power and how it's given to them and what decisions they can make and how those decisions are to be made, it's much less likely that that power is going to be abused. And that is good. Deeply good.

But, it can also get a little silly. We have a committee that nominates the leaders of our church. It is aptly named the nominating committee. And last week we had my favorite meeting of the year: last year's nominating committee nominated nominees for this year's nominating committee.

Eldad and Medad have not been properly nominated and duly elected. They haven't passed their ordination exams. No one has given them the authority to receive the Spirit and prophesy. Joshua is not happy about these irregularities.

The way the story is told, it's clear Joshua's response is the wrong one. But I want to say a word in his defense. We need Joshua. Joshua is the one who will keep the people together when Moses dies. Joshua is the one who will lead them across the Jordan and into the Promised Land.

Joshua has essential skills that he uses to serve and help his people. Keeping things organized and the lines of authority clear is incredibly valuable if you ever want to get anywhere with anybody.

But just as it is for all of us, Joshua's skills have a shadow side. In this situation his attachment to the established power structures prevents him from embracing the movement of God's Spirit.

Presbyterians have a long history on this continent, dating back to the 1600's. We were among the first white people to settle along the East coast. Historically, along with Lutherans and Episcopalians, Presbyterians have tended to be wealthier and better educated than most other religious groups in United States, and we've historically been disproportionately represented in business, law, and government.¹

Which, of course, means we're invested in the power structures as they stand. Presbyterians were deeply complicit in slavery. And often, when debates arose over the ethics of slavery, Presbyterian abolitionists were shut down by claims that they were threatening the peace and unity of the church. They weren't being decent or orderly.

When we have some measure of power, our Joshua instincts can keep us from hearing new or dissenting voices. All of us have trouble hearing voices outside of our own echo chamber.

We need Joshua. But we also need Eldad and Medad. I wish we knew what they were saying when the Spirit fell on them. Was it unbridled praise? Or critique? Or a new vision altogether? Or maybe not words at all. Maybe they were dancing, or singing, or in a trance. There's no telling when it's the Spirit.

But what we can count on is that Eldad and Medad are always around us. There are always people outside of our official structures of power who speak with the voice of the Holy Spirit. They're often the

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Presbyterianism_in_the_United_States#Colonial_era

inconvenient voices. You know—the ones who object, who slow things down, complicate things. They go too far. They're the stick in the spokes. Which is precisely what we need.

The Holy Spirit has not agreed to work solely through nominating committees. The Spirit is wild. It's unruly. We all have some of that in us, too. Many of us are taught to squelch it in the name of being "nice," or polite, or appropriate. But the Spirit is poured out and overflows. It rests on all flesh. All flesh. And it often appears in the interruptions.

Last week one of the younger children of our congregation heard me say the word "Joy" at the very beginning of the sermon. Even though they were sitting about halfway back, I could hear them when they piped up immediately and said, "Joy!" Maybe you could hear it, too. It happened several times. They'd hear the word "Joy," and they'd repeat it with real joy in their voice.

I didn't hear this part, but apparently as the sermon wore on, they started demanding that we, "bring back the music!" I feel that way in the middle of my own sermons sometimes, too.

There are those who would say we should shush all such outbursts. It's not orderly. But I say no way. If there's any word worth repeating, it's Joy. The Spirit is poured out on *all* flesh. Especially those who interrupt our carefully ordered ways.

The most amazing part of this story to me is Moses. I tend to think of Moses as being the way Charlton Heston portrayed him. Big and powerful and domineering. And Moses, as the Bible portrays him, certainly did carry himself with a lot of authority. But he was also, as the very next chapter tells us, humble. The Bible remembers him as more humble than anyone on earth. Which is a humble brag, if I've ever heard one.

But Moses really is humble here. And open. And completely not threatened by this power that is outside of what he organized or expected. He welcomes it, even wishes there were more of it.

I want to grow in that direction. We need Joshua, if we're going to get anything done. And we need Eldad and Medad hollering when they aren't supposed to.

And maybe, by God's grace, we can also grow into being like Moses. Taking ourselves a little less seriously. Holding our structures a little more loosely. Letting go of some of our power. Hearing of the movement of the Spirit and reveling in all that is extra and unexpected. Exclaiming with Moses, oh, if only all the Lord's people were prophets!

~ Sarah W. Wiles, 2023