

In our Old Testament lesson from the book of Numbers, the children of Israel are whining to Moses. This story takes place about a year after the Exodus, a year after they were freed from slavery in Egypt. They had had numerous trials in that first year.

When they were leaving Egypt, the Hebrew people were afraid that they were going to be killed by the Egyptian army, but God opened the sea for them. Then they complained about thirst, but God brought forth water from the rock. Then they complained about hunger, but God sent manna, the bread from heaven for them to eat.

Those complaints and those concerns are pretty serious. Being slaughtered by an army is a pretty pressing threat. Dying of thirst in the desert is something that would worry anyone. Not having any food to eat is also a serious problem. But at every turn, God took care of the Israelites. Now they've been in the desert a little over a year.

So we come to ch11 of Numbers and see that the Israelites are griping again. But today, what are the Israelites complaining about? Are they worried about the basic needs of life: safety, water, food? No.

Now they're complaining about variety. They salivate over their memories of the foods in Egypt: fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic.<sup>1</sup>

They're whining because they're tired of eating the same old manna day after day after day. They've forgotten the threat of starvation which God's manna has saved them from. And they've forgotten the fact that they were enslaved in Egypt.

Now, notice what they don't say. They don't think to say, 'God, thank you for bringing us out of bondage into freedom.' They don't say, 'Thank you God for keeping our stomachs full, thank you for keeping us from starving to death.' Instead they say, 'God, why can't you set a more interesting table? Why can't we get a decent assortment of meats and vegetables? Why don't you send us a supermarket truck full of produce? Plus I'd like some spice in my diet. How about some onion and garlic? manna is too bland and boring.'

The Israelites have forgotten that God is bringing them from slavery to their own new land. And on the way through the desert, God has kept them alive miraculously. They've gotten rather spoiled. Miraculous daily bread from heaven apparently isn't good enough anymore.

Their response to God is not 'Thank you for all you have done for me.' Instead it's, 'What have you done for me lately?' They've forgotten the very core and center of what's going on: God has saved them. And God sustains them.

That's lesson #1 for us. We've got to keep things in perspective. God has given us many good things. God has brought us through some rough patches in the past, and God continues to bless us, even in the midst of some very tough times. In a real way we've been wandering through a Pandemic wilderness for the past year-and-a-half. And things are tense and divided in our national life. But God is still God. And God is with us. And we're still here,

---

<sup>1</sup> Numbers 11:5

moving forward with life. Hang on to that. Don't lose that perspective. Don't waste time whining about what we don't have. Instead, be thankful for all the amazing things God has done and is doing for us. That's lesson #1.

Back to Numbers. The people have been complaining to Moses. So Moses complains to God. Moses is really on the edge of burnout. He basically asks God, 'Why are you treating me so badly? Why are you laying this burden on me?' He asks, "Did I conceive these people, did I give birth to them?"<sup>2</sup>

In other words, 'I am their mother?' The underlying accusation is, 'No, they're not my children. God, they're your children. You deal with them.'

The bottom line is Moses saying, "I can't carry these people alone—the burden is too heavy for me."<sup>3</sup> And then, Moses says, 'If this is the way it's going to be you might as well kill me now and put me out of my misery.'

And that's lesson #2 for us. It's something we really already know. But it doesn't hurt to remind ourselves of it. If everything that happens at St. Paul's depends solely upon the Rector, we'll be dead in the water. One person cannot carry the burden of St. Paul's alone. If I ever think that I'm the only minister here, or if you ever think that I'm the only minister here, we're in deep trouble.

We do have strong lay leadership here at St. Paul's. And we've got wonderful members who pitch in. And that fact has gotten us through some tough patches in the past.

As I've said before, a parish is not a luxury cruise ship with a few crew members to take care of everyone else. No. A parish is a working freighter. Every member is part of the crew. All of us have a part to play and work to do. And if you're looking for your place—check out the bulletin boards in the hallway with sign-up sheets for a number of different ministries. We need you.

And that's something Moses was missing. That's why, God tells Moses to recruit 70 other leaders to help him. Leadership is meant to be shared. We mustn't ever forget that.

So Moses gathers the 70 leaders together just as God told him. And Moses brings them to the tent of meeting, the tabernacle, the place where Moses and God talk.

And there, God comes and gives his Holy Spirit to the 70 elders. Numbers says, "The spirit rested upon them, and they prophesied."<sup>4</sup>

The Spirit comes upon the 70 who are gathered in front of the tabernacle. But meanwhile, back in the camp, the Spirit also comes upon Eldad and Medad, two guys who didn't make it to the meeting. And this makes Joshua freak out.

---

<sup>2</sup> Numbers 11:12

<sup>3</sup> Numbers 11:14

<sup>4</sup> Numbers 11:25

Now, 40 years from now, Joshua will be the great mature general and leader who will succeed Moses and lead the people into the promised land. But right now Joshua is still a pup.

Young Joshua says, "Moses, stop them!"<sup>5</sup> 'Things have gotten out of control. This is unauthorized. This is a threat to your authority and status. We've got to get a handle on it.'

But Moses' reply is so wonderful. Moses isn't worried about his status. He's not worried about whether he can keep God boxed up and under control. Instead he says, "I wish all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put his Spirit upon them all."<sup>6</sup> In other words, if God is doing it, don't try to stop it.

And that's lesson #3 for us. God's love is sure. But God's behavior is unpredictable. If something is from God, we have to be careful not to try to stop it. God's gives gifts to all his people. My gifts may be different from your gifts, but that doesn't mean yours aren't valid. The Holy Spirit gives gifts to people in different ways. Our job is to use the gifts we're given to further God's work in the world, not to not hinder it.

And the church word for using our gifts is stewardship. God gives us each unique gifts and talents. And we are called to use them, to give of our time. And in a market economy, a part of our time is something we're paid for. Our time is monetized. So as the saying goes, God calls us to give of our talent, our time, and our treasure.

In years past, I've shared my whole personal stewardship story with you. I'm not going to revisit all of it today, though I may share it again sometime in future years. But today I want to mention briefly my most recent history and struggles with my own stewardship.

As some of you know, we've had been through some tough budget cycles at St. Paul's in the mid 20-teens. And because of that I took several voluntary reductions in my compensation. Those reductions totaled around \$32,000 over the years, though now about \$24,000 of those cuts have been restored. At the time, I offered up these compensation cuts to help balance the budget. And that's a good thing. I always want St. Paul's to be fiscally healthy.

And a back then, I talked about all of this with a mentor who is an expert in stewardship issues. And he suggested that I needed to think of these voluntary reductions as part of my financial offering to St. Paul's. Yes, they were sacrificial. And yes, they certainly totaled much more than a 10% tithe would have. And so I stopped making a pledge to St. Paul's. I figured those reductions were my offering. I still gave some money to help the needy through the Rector's discretionary fund and through some other charities. But I stopped making a direct pledge to St. Paul's.

But all of this had an unintended spiritual consequence. Because it put me in a mindset of "giving up" what I used to have, rather than "giving of" what I currently had. It framed things in my mind in terms of what I had lost rather than what I still had. I was like the

---

<sup>5</sup> Numbers 11:28

<sup>6</sup> Numbers 11:29 NLT

Hebrews in the wilderness complaining about the manna that was sustaining them because it wasn't as tasty as the food they used to have.

And frankly what I was doing was robbing myself of was a sense of the joy of giving. And so three years ago in 2018 I was the first to fill out a pledge for St. Paul's on the day we printed the cards up. Ditto for 2019 and 2020. And that's the plan for 2021. Because I am thankful to God for this place. And I'm thankful to God for all the blessings in my life. God gives to me. And I want to give in response.

It's always tempting to focus on what we don't have. But God calls us to be thankful for what we do have. May God give us all an attitude of gratitude for his gifts to us.