

Numbers 11:1-29  
Eldad and Medad  
Rev. Jonathan P Cornell  
1-27-19

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There are Sundays when, through no careful orchestration or doing of my own, the Scripture passage falls in perfectly with the moment in which we find ourselves. Today is one of those days. Just a few minutes ago we ordained two new elders and installed the class of 2021. Ray and Maggie and Becky and Cathy are charged with the task of helping to discern God's leading and helping us move toward that goal. So, to our new class of elders I want to share with you a nugget that is, I believe, one of the best definitions of leadership I know of. Leadership guru Ron Heifetz says: "Leadership is disappointing your people at a rate they can absorb." I'll just let that one sink in a bit. Leaders and those who have led anything you life, I hope you see a bit of the humor in that statement.

The truth of leadership in any respect is there are times when it feels as though our impact is deep and meaningful, and other times it feels like we're just trying to keep the team pointed in the same direction. Nowhere is this dynamic more prevalent than in the pages of Scripture. In it we read passages like Matthew 28 that call us to go make disciples of all nations, and 2 Corinthians 5 where it says that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself...therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ. But in the very book we read the account Israel, God's chosen nation, whining and complaining, dragging their feet and being just downright stubborn. But the good news is that God can each scenario to reveal his grace and purpose in our lives—if we are willing to see it.

This morning we're continuing in a series of messages I've called Cameo, in which we're looking at a few of the easily overlooked individuals in scripture who have a great deal to teach us about walking faithfully with God in the real world. Real, honest, flawed people, all revealing God's hand of guidance and his Kingdom in our midst.

Scripture Text: Numbers 11:1-29

When the Hebrews left Egypt to make their journey to the Promised Land they brought with them a group of people called "The Rabble." The Rabble were people who were a part of the journey, but didn't really believe in the journey. Nor did they really believe much of the God who was leading the journey. Their tolerance for discomfort was low, but their capacity for complaint was through the roof.

Every church, at one time or another, has members of the rabble in it. And almost never are these people on the search committee.

In verse 4 it says that the rabble had a *strong craving*. "We remember all the fish we had to eat in Egypt for nothing. The cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the garlic, and now all of our strength has dried up and all we have to look at is this manna. What is this stuff? This substance that rains down from the sky every day for us, what is it?" That's actually a really important point. The word manna literally translates to: *what is it?*

In Exodus 16, when the Israelites grew hungry in their journey from Egypt they complained to God and what God gave them was Manna. But Manna is also the metaphor that Scripture offers for our life of daily dependence on God. The Manna comes each night; there is only enough of it for today; you have to gather the manna yourself, there was no manna grocery or co-op, no Community Supported Manna program. You also could not stockpile manna, you had to refresh it each day. But maybe the most important lesson comes from the name itself, what is it? I can imagine parents gathering up a bowl of *what is it* in the morning, preparing it as creatively as they could with what they had. There was no What Is It Helper. And then placing it in front of their hungry teenager, and having the teenager look at it and say: “What is it?” And the parent would say: “exactly.”

The manna is just the right image for us and for you as leaders and elders. That is what we are to be asking ourselves every day, as a church and as individuals. What is it you are doing, God? Or more particularly in our case, what is it Jesus that you are doing and calling us to be about? And like the manna, it often seems like the answer doesn't come in blazing neon signs or bumper crop abundance, but in just enough for today. Just enough to keep us focused on seeking and following after God, who gives us our daily bread—not our weekly or monthly—our daily.

Fish and cucumbers and melons, the accommodations slavery in Egypt, conveniently distracted the Hebrews from the fact that they were enslaved. It was easy for them to ignore the question, what is God doing, because they had their basic needs met. They were not interested moving beyond to deeper levels of faith and trust, if it meant giving up the creature comforts—never mind that they're still slaves.

But do we know something about this? God has a way of presenting us with opportunities to grow and experience his grace and mercy in ways we could never imagine, but like Newton's Third Law, it always involves leaving something behind, in order to move forward.

There's a scene from my favorite movie *Interstellar* in which Matthew McConaughey who plays Dr Cooper and Dr Brand played by Anne Hathaway are hurtling toward the black hole Gargantua, in a distant galaxy in which they find themselves. The team has depleted its fuel resources to the point where they only have enough fuel for one of their pods to make it beyond the black hole to the last possible habitable planet. As they slingshot around Gargantua, Cooper detaches his ship from the Dr Brand's—meaning that he would be sucked into the black hole. And just before detaching, he looks at her and says “Newton's Third Law Dr Brand, you have to leave something behind to go forward.”

The journey of growing in our life with God will always involve leaving something behind. It is always a question that forms and deepens faith. But the rabble are not always interested in the questions: What is it you are doing God? what is it you are doing Jesus? What the rabble want to draw our attention to is one of our favorite laments: if only.

If only we had meat to eat; if only we had never left Egypt, if only we didn't have so many questions, if only we could get some more certainty. These questions cross our lips as well, if only I had more free time; if only I could lose that 10 pounds I've been trying to lose; if only we had more money; if only our kids would appreciate what we've done for them; if only. And do you see the direction of these concerns and anxieties, it's always longing for the past or preoccupied with the future. The biggest risk is that it makes you miss the present tense, which is the only tense in which the Manna is found—in the day that you have been given.

The grace of God and the gift of his Spirit is only given to us day at a time. And without that recognition, when we do not live in the blessing of God's provision for today, we are always anxious and never joyful.

Now to be clear the most dangerous rabble is not the kind that live around us, but it's the kind that lives within our own hearts. One of the disciplines of our life with God is to still ourselves and calm the voices that rise from within us, so that we can hear the still small voice of the one who offers us manna for today.

At this point in the journey from slavery Moses has been an exemplary leader, he has been patient, non-anxious, he has held the hands of a frightened and backward-looking people. When they were standing at the shores of the red sea, he lifted his staff and parted the waters; when they were hungry and thirsty he found water and bread in the wilderness; when he was up on Mt Sinai receiving the law and they were down at the bottom dancing around a golden idol, God's anger burned towards them and God said I'm going to consume the lot of them and give you a new congregation Moses, Moses interceded on their behalf.

In our text today they are a little further along, and once again they start complaining, but this time God only torches a few of them on the outskirts of the camp—would have burned more, but Moses interceded once again. But later in the chapter, when the rabble get the people worked up about the Manna thing, Moses snaps. He says to God: why did you lay this burden on me? Verse 12 he says: Am I their mother? In verse 13 he says: where am I going to get meat for these people? Verse 14 he says: How am I going to carry this people? Verse 15 he says: if this is how you are going to treat your servant, just kill me now. This is a leader who has finally gone over the edge.

So God has Moses bring the 70 elders to the Tabernacle, and God places some of the Spirit on them that was on Moses, and they begin to prophesy. But for some reason there are two elders Eldad and Medad aren't there, they miss the ordination service, they stayed in the camp. But the Spirit still finds them anyways, and they begin to prophesy in the camp. When Joshua heard about this, he's livid, he demands that Moses stop them from prophesying, they didn't follow the rules, they didn't even go to seminary. There they are out in the camp, they're not even in the tabernacle, prophesying. There's nothing in the Book of Order about this.

Moses said no. Would that all the Lord's people were prophets. The goal of the Church is not to organize the prophesying of the Holy Spirit, the goal is for everyone to be able to speak and proclaim God's Word in their part of the camp. It's not up to the leaders alone to get us, to get the people to the Promised Land. But there is always a Medad and and Eldad, some other prophesy that's coming from another part of the camp. And these people are not the rabble, these people are on team Holy Spirit, and they are working towards the same goals we are.

It's not our job alone to get people to the Promised Land, that's God's job. Our job as leaders is to bear the burdens of the people we walk alongside each day, we carry their burdens in our heart, and in doing so we look for the strength and the courage to do so from the Holy Spirit, one day at a time.