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## The Captivating Case of the Rogue Prophets

a sermon on Numbers 11.24-30

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Have you ever been on a long trip and everybody gets tired and cranky and on one another's nerves? Suddenly little things that would normally pass without notice irritate you. Words take on a sharp edge and drip with sarcasm. No one enjoys that place. In today's scripture reading, however, Moses and the Israelites find themselves there.

In the book of Numbers, chapter, 10, the children of Israel leave Mount Sinai. By Numbers, chapter 11, the complaining begins. Israel is fed up with the wilderness. They look back on Egypt and forget the slavery and oppression. All they remember is the food. Soon Israel is whining like a bunch of SEC fans when their team loses because of a bad call by the officials. If they had had call in shows back then, you can imagine the comments: "Yeah, I'm a long-time listener, first-time caller, and I've just got to say, what's with Moses? I don't think he knows where we're going. Maybe we need someone else in charge." Another might say, "Sure we're free now, but free to do what—starve? You know what they have back in Egypt? Food! When are we going to wake up and turn around?"

For his part, Moses was just as fed up with Israel. They were too heavy a burden—one he never asked for in the first place. Exasperated, he tells God, "If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once—if I have found favor in your sight—and do not let me see my misery" [Num 11.15].

God was also fed up. Israel demanded meat? He promised to give Israel so much meat they would get sick of it. As for Moses, God had another plan. The burden of leadership was too great for any one man to carry, so God told Moses to gather 70 respected elders from among the people. Our scripture reading picked up the story when Moses did this. The Holy Spirit, which had been on Moses, God poured out to a lesser degree on the 70.

This is typical of what we see of the Spirit in the Old Testament. Back then, God's Holy Spirit would come upon a person for a limited time in order to empower a special task. Only a select few hosted God's Spirit more or less permanently: Moses, maybe King David, and some of the more prominent prophets. Usually the Spirit stayed only for a short time. Occasionally, the presence of the Spirit would be marked by ecstatic

prophesying. Another example of this is King Saul. In 1 Samuel 10, the prophet Samuel anointed Saul to be Israel's first king. As Saul went to obey Samuel's instructions, he encountered a band of prophets on the way. The Spirit of God possessed Saul, "and he fell into a prophetic frenzy." Everyone who saw him marveled and asked, "What has come over Saul? Is he one of the prophets now?" When the frenzy ended, Saul went home. This is similar to what happens to the 70 elders in our reading. The Holy Spirit comes upon them with visible manifestations no one can deny. Clearly God has chosen them. God intends to use them to lead his people. The Holy Spirit authenticates and empowers them.

While this was going on, something curious happened back in the camp. Moses had gathered the 70 elders outside the Tent of Meeting, a special tent where Moses went to meet God. It was outside the camp because God is holy, and holiness must not be taken lightly. The presence of God demands reverence. Thus the 70 elders were outside the camp when the Spirit grabbed hold of them. But, at the same time, two other guys were back in the camp. Eldad and Medad may have been two of the 70 elders who for some reason didn't get to the Tent of Meeting. The text says they were "among those registered," and we have no idea what this means. More likely it means something other than they were part of the 70. If so, they are just two normal guys. They are going about their business in the camp when the Spirit falls on the 70 elders. But something amazing happens, something that reminds us that God is sovereign and his grace and power cannot be regulated or controlled by us. God is always too big for our church structure, even when he designs that structure himself. God called Moses. God told Moses to gather the 70 elders. But God also wanted to remind his people that he stands above this structure, and he is not limited by it.

The Holy Spirit falls on Eldad and Medad! They begin to prophesy like the 70 elders, but *in the camp!* As you can imagine, they caused quite a commotion. A young man runs right away to inform Moses. Joshua, Moses' assistant and successor, doesn't like it. Moses ought to be the one prophesying if any prophesying needs to be done. Things ought to be done decently and in order. Who do Eldad and Medad think they are, anyway? Joshua is aghast. He tells Moses, "Quick! You've got to do something about this. We've got to stop them."

Moses, however, ... says no. "We don't have to stop them." His words in the text are: "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!" ... No wonder Moses has a reputation for humility. He's not insecure. He doesn't want to hoard God for himself. He wishes God would pour out the Holy Spirit on all his people. I guess it was Moses' turn to be prophetic, because although no one knew it at the time, that was exactly what God planned to do at the right time. On Pentecost, fifty days after Jesus' death and resurrection, God poured out his Holy Spirit on all of Jesus' followers, and the world has never been the same.

Think about that: The Spirit's presence with Eldad and Medad surprised everyone. It was an aberration, totally out of the ordinary. Moses could only dream that God would pour his Spirit out on all his people. But for us, it's not an aberration. It's a normal part of the Christian life. Normal, *but exciting*. Jesus promised to be with us always, and the Holy Spirit is how he keeps his promise. He promised to send the Spirit to all who believe in him. If you are a Christian, then Christ lives in you through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. That's a little scary, because holiness cannot be taken lightly. But even more, the Spirit's presence is empowering. Let me share with you a couple of confessions.

The Christian church in America faces a tough road ahead. Westminster is no exception. Occasionally people ask me, "Do you ever worry?" My honest answer is: "Of course I worry!" I am the kind of person who sweats the details. My chief worry is not small but large. I worry that I am not up to the task. Am I wise enough, persuasive enough to lead this church to be and do all that God wants us to be and do? Is my leadership up to the task of leading us into new territory? I believe I am a capable leader, but am I really up to the task God has given me? You have to admit, it's a big task.

I was reading a magazine about children's ministry. The article was about identifying and grooming young people who show natural leadership ability. The author, Alan Nelson wrote: "If leadership is about organizing people to work together to accomplish what they could not as individuals, then it is highly unlikely that more than a minority will be effective at leading" ["The X Factor," *K Magazine*, Sept/Oct 2009, p. 55]. Later he wrote: "George Barna's research reveals that over 90% of pastors do not acknowledge the gift of leading in their mix. In my nearly fifteen years of training pastors ... I came to the conclusion that most pastors are wonderful people, but they tend to be teachers, ministry managers, and nurturers, but not leaders. For the most part they don't "get" what needs to happen when their church is stuck" [ibid., p. 56].

That hit me pretty hard, because I do feel that we as a church are stuck. We've had growth in some areas (such as small children), but in most we have plateaued. In fact we have seen a very slow but steady decline over the past few decades. We have tried a lot of things. We have more to try to be effective reaching out to our community with the gospel. But the word *stuck* describes us aptly enough. So do I "get" what we ought to do? Up to a point, perhaps. Am I a nice person, a good teacher, a caring listener, a capable manager, but not a leader? I do believe I have some natural leadership aptitude. In school, whenever there was a group project, I nearly always emerged as the group leader. I have tried to learn to be a good leader. Is it enough?

This scripture reading encourages me in two ways. First, Moses didn't have to do it alone. He had the 70 elders. No one person was equal to the task God gave him. Those

elders were powerful spiritual leaders. They made the difference. You ought to feel pretty good about our church polity right now. We have never pretended everything depends on the pastor alone. Our leadership structure is like Israel's in the desert. We are led by our session, which is the pastor and the elders elected by the congregation. Leadership of God's people is a shared function.

Second, I have to confess, I doubt Moses was much of a natural leader. I've seen books with titles like *The Leadership Secrets of Moses*. Or, *God's Great Leaders*, and Moses is chapter 1. But I'm not convinced. Was he a great leader? Sure, because he achieved great things. But I have a suspicion that if you had been in charge of selecting a leader to bring God's people out of slavery in Egypt, through the desert, and into the promised land – well, I bet you would have found many, many Israelites with more natural leadership potential. That's why God chose Moses. People would know God had done it, because anyone could see Moses was not equal to the task.

So why did Moses succeed? Because God told him what to do! God's Spirit was with Moses. God met with him and told him, "Do this!" "Do that!" And Moses did it, most of the time. That encourages me! Do you know why? Because the future of the church does not depend on my innate gifts or my leadership qualities, whether natural or learned. The future of the church depends upon God ... and upon our willingness (all of us) as his people to do what he tells us to do.

If you think the culture we live in is a challenge or the church budget is a problem, consider the plight of Israel in the desert. Talk about a harsh environment! What did they have? Nothing! Nothing that God did not give them.

I love what God told Moses back in verse 23, right before our reading began: "Is the LORD's power limited? Now you shall see whether my word will come true for you or not." God leads his people. God provides for his people. Whether we succeed in the mission he has given us depends on just two things: his power and our willingness to do what he tells us.

You may be wondering, "OK, that's great, but what does he tell us to do?" That's easy. The cover of your bulletin touches on it, in fact. If you are not sure what God wants you to do next, do the things you know he wants you to do!

He has told us to believe, to worship him, to love him more than anything else, to love one another, and to tell the Good News. We know what we are supposed to do: Teach the faith, especially to our children and youth. Tell people about Jesus – whether they come to faith or not is between them and God, that's not our job, our job is to tell the story and live in a way that shows its power. Take care of those who are sick, needy, grieving, and lonely. These are the things we *know* God wants us to do. Are we doing them? Beyond them, God may also call us to do specific things. Some churches run a

soup kitchen or a college ministry. Perhaps God has put us here in this time and place for a special purpose. If so, we need to pray that he will make that clear to us.

This story encourages me, and it ought to encourage you too. Especially if you are an elder in the church – but even if you are not, even if you have no leadership role at all. God’s Holy Spirit lives in you! If you have faith in Jesus Christ, if you belong to him, he lives in you! God pours out his Spirit not just on pastors, not just on elders or deacons, but on all believers!

You might object, “I’m not a strong Christian. Surely I’m not fit to be a temple where God’s Spirit dwells.” Scripture replies, “That has nothing to do with it. The Spirit is a gift of grace.” The church in Corinth was full of crazy, mixed up Christians. But Paul acknowledged that they all had the Spirit. Maybe you worry you sin too much for the Spirit to put up with you. But again, the Spirit does not come because we are holy. The Spirit comes to make us holy. Our goodness is a consequence of God’s presence in our lives, not the cause of it. The fact that the Spirit lives in you ought to motivate you to do better.

The power of God’s Spirit encourages us as we think about our church, but now let’s think about your life. The Spirit empowers you. If the Spirit of God lives in you, you have resurrection power. The Spirit makes you strong to do the things God wants you to do.

So what does God want you to do? I always say that God cares more about the kind of person you are than about the things that you do. We know God wants you to believe and to love him. We know he wants you to worship and meet with him in the sacraments. We know he wants you to be an honest, moral, caring person. Really, this is quite a lot already. Most people struggle to get this far. We know we are supposed to be a blessing to other people, but like Israel in the desert, we dwell on the negatives, think of ourselves first, and feel cranky a lot. Learning to live as a Christian is like Israel’s journey from slavery to the promised land. It doesn’t happen overnight. You love God. You try to grow in your faith. You experience his presence in your life. You keep going, through the amazing times and through the dry, lonely times. You keep believing that he is leading. You may not feel the presence of his Spirit, but you trust that he is there because God has promised.

Those are a few of the things you know God wants you to do. What else do you know God wants? God wants you to share your faith. I know that is a terribly uncomfortable thing in our culture where the rule is “don’t ask/don’t tell” in matters of religion. But our culture is wrong. There is no reason why two friends can’t talk about what they believe about the things that really matter.

God also wants you to serve others in his name. The church word for this is *ministry*. God's Holy Spirit gives gifts to his people. He has given you some spiritual gift. Your job is to use that gift for ministry.

OK, that's what God wants you to do. You can be sure of these things. Maybe God has some special task for you as well. If you suspect so, pray about it. God's Spirit empowers you to do the things God asks you to do. The Spirit also sustains you day-to-day. What challenges do you face in life? The death of someone you love? Loss of health or independence? Some of you are raising children. Many have jobs and careers. A few are still in school, contemplating a future career path. As you face whatever challenges and opportunities your life offers, does the presence of God's Holy Spirit make a difference? Of course it does! It has to. I'm not saying the Spirit makes life easy or pleasant. I'm simply saying that the presence of the Living God sustains you. You are not up to the task God has given you. You may not be up to the challenges that stand in your way. Israel wasn't. Moses wasn't. The church isn't. You aren't either. Why then do you press on? What makes you think you will reach your God-appointed destination? Just this: God is with you. He is leading. He will see you through. The presence of his Spirit is God's guarantee that you are his child and he will see you through.

Will you join your hearts in prayer:

*Heavenly Father, we rejoice and give you thanks that what was only a dream for Moses has become a reality for us. You have poured out your Spirit on all who believe. By graciously choosing to dwell in us, you empower us to be who you want us to be and to do what you want us to do. Make us aware of your presence; and when we are not aware, help us to trust your promise. By your Spirit sustain us and give us a bold witness. May our love for you grow, and may we live for your glory alone. In Jesus' name, amen.*

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