

Is the Lord's Power Limited?
Pentecost Sunday
June 12, 2011
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
Rev. John Cleghorn

Scripture: Numbers 11:24-30
John 3:1-10

Last week in Sunday school we had a good discussion. The question for the group was this: If we, the people of Caldwell church, were to write a creed or confession about a critically important issue facing the world, what would it be?

That's a mighty big question, we knew. There were all kinds of ways to go.

Would we delve into our understanding of God in this multi-faith, pluralistic age?

Or, would we address a pivotal social or economic question to which the Gospel of Jesus Christ should speak today? Perhaps it would be the growing chasm between the haves and the have-nots in America or the world, what some call the "economic apartheid" of our time, which, if left unaddressed, will leave deep, permanent scars of separation along lines of class and race?

One idea that caught our imagination was the question of technology and how it is transforming everything from healthcare and science to social interaction, some for the good and some for the bad.

Another idea came from Jeff Mitchiner, the retired pastor who is such a deeply involved, highly committed and much loved member of our church family, thanks be to God. Jeff spoke compellingly about how, for too many years, we Presbyterians have underemphasized our understanding of God in the Holy Spirit. Our historical creeds and confessions contain many expressions of how we know God the Creator and God the Redeemer in Christ. But we owe a debt, so to speak, to the Holy Spirit. Whatever issues or crises a new creed or confession might address, it should do so through the lens of the Spirit as a life-giving force and source of hope and inspiration in this often discouraging world.

I hope he doesn't mind me quoting him, but Jeff put it this way: "Every day I am more aware of the challenges in the world and how so many of them seem out of sight and out of my reach. Sometimes the only thing that allows me to get up and fight the worldly powers that I can't see is the Holy Spirit."

"... The only thing that allows me to get up in the morning and fight the worldly powers that I can't see is the Holy Spirit."

Perhaps that should be the first line or the refrain of a new confession for our church.

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Today is Pentecost Sunday. It is the day when the church celebrates God's gift of the Holy Spirit, the every-day presence of the Spirit and the unique power the Spirit gives us. Today concludes the Easter cycle on our church calendar. Last Sunday we considered Christ's ascension, Christ's return to God the creator, in whom the nature of Christ exists for all time as our advocate. Before Christ said his final earthly 'goodbye' to his followers, he promised the Holy Spirit.

The scripture we're used to hearing is the wonderful account of what the book of Acts calls "the day of Pentecost." That was the day when the Spirit arrived with "a sound like the rush of a violent wind." It filled a house full of people, each of whom begins praising God in their own native tongues. There and afterward in the New Testament, scripture describes how the Holy Spirit empowers the church for its mission – to proclaim the Gospel. The Spirit equips the church through baptism, brings a variety of gifts to God's people and makes all who follow Christ "one" in the Spirit.

But the Spirit blows through the Old Testament just as freely, and we can lose sight of that. In the Old Testament, we know the Spirit as a life-giving wind. It is present at Creation. It inspires God's leaders, from judges to kings to prophets, to speak with authority and power. It binds God's people together as a covenant community, bestowing a unique identity and delivering them through their wilderness times.

While we Christians tend to dwell on the Holy Spirit accounts in the New Testament, the Spirit in the Old Testament is part of our heritage, too. Today's reading from the Old Testament book Numbers provides a timely description of how God moves through the Spirit in ways we can never predict nor control.

Numbers gets its name from two lists of the tribes of Israel. One list is of the older generation of Israelites that Moses led out of bondage in Egypt and toward the promised land. The second list numbers a new generation, the generation that God eventually delivers to the promised land. But don't judge this book by its name. Numbers is about far more than lists. It is about the failure of one generation to trust God, how God reacts and how God conveys the divine promise on the next generation as the new bearers of hope in the world.

The story begins to pivot in the chapters that proceed the reading Mark gave us from chapter 11. Moses has organized the tribes of Israel for the journey and they have set out for the promised land. But how quickly they forget! How quickly we – uh, *they* - forget

Throughout the first books of the Old Testament, we see a clear cycle. God saves God's chosen people. At first, the people respond with celebration and worship. But then they start grumbling. God puts up with their grumbling and disobedience for a time,

making new promises. The people celebrate and worship ... and then forget and start grumbling again. In the middle of all of this are the leaders that God has chosen, God's mediators. In this story, that's Moses.

That cycle of divine promise and provision giving way only to more grumbling plays out in today's passage in Numbers. Moses is leading the people across the desert. To sustain them, God delivers manna every morning, fresh bread to the doorstep of their tents. It couldn't be more convenient.

What's to complain about? But the people want more. They want meat, like they used to have in Egypt. Never mind the fact that they were slaves back in Egypt, being forced to make bricks without straw and getting whipped when they didn't produce the bricks fast enough.

They come moaning to Moses and long-suffering Moses takes the matter to the Lord.

"What am I to do with these people," Moses asks God. "I can't carry this bunch of moaners any more. If this is what you called me to do, than I've had it. Find another leader. I'm tired anyway. Go ahead and put me out of my misery."

But the Lord has another idea about what to do with the people. If it's meat they want, meat they will get. God sends quail by the ton. As chapter 19 reads:

You shall eat not only one day, or two days or five days or ten days or twenty says, but for a whole month – until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you – because you have rejected the Lord, who is among you, and have wailed before the Lord, saying 'Why did we ever leave Egypt?'

Then we find one of those points in the Old Testament where the writing really shines. It is a masterful demonstration of under-statement. In chapter 23, the chapter that immediately precedes today's reading, the Lord says to Moses: "Is the Lord's power limited?"

In his commentary on this passage, Richard Boyce, a good friend of Caldwell's, offers this piece of wisdom:

"Here is a general biblical rule: watch out when the Lord poses rhetorical questions!"¹

Richard is right. In the verses that follow the Lord's rhetorical question – Is the Lord's power limited?" - we see how God works in mysterious and utterly unpredictable ways through the Holy Spirit.

But, first, Moses' own spirit needed some renewal. Remember, he was on the verge of quitting. And God's sending the quail by the ton – so much that the people ate it until it

¹ Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 5.

came out of their nostrils – had to put a smile back on Moses' face, to say nothing about putting the moaning Israelites back in their place. This act of divine discipline reminds me of those stories about a youth that sneaks a cigarette just to see what it's like. When the tough-loving father finds out, he makes the kid smoke a whole pack in one-sitting, so that he never smokes again. Not healthy discipline, granted, but effective.

With his morale restored, Moses gathers the leaders to convey God's displeasure. That's when God in the Spirit shows up. The leaders are filled with the Spirit and, for a time at least, they prophesy the word and will of God.

But a funny thing happens. Some of the Spirit seems to sort of spill over on a couple of bystanders. Eldad and Medad were their names. Scripture says nothing about them before or after this story. This is their 15 minutes of fame and they make good use of it. They prophesy around the camp, in a way that is pleasing to both God and to Moses.

Even then, though, there were some of God's people who thought their job was to portion out God's wisdom and spirit, as if God needed their help. So Joshua, who at this point is a young lieutenant of Moses', goes tattling to Moses. He tells the great leader how these two yahoos are out prophesying the will and word of God.

"These two weren't among the 70 you hand selected to spread the word of God," Joshua says in effect. "They weren't picked for the team."

"You've got to do something," Joshua tells Moses.

Moses tells Joshua he is completely missing the point.

"God needs more faithful messengers, not fewer. They are serving through the Spirit of God," Moses says. "Let them be."

And, while it doesn't exactly appear in the text, we can easily imagine Moses saying to himself. "Besides. I need all the help I can get."

* * *

This story conveys important truths about the Spirit, truths that we find here in the Old Testament that also appear in the New.

God's activity through the Spirit is just that – GOD's activity. It always confounds us but it does so in what turn out to be wonderful ways. This story reminds us that the Spirit is not to be contained, quantified, assigned or directed. God seems to chuckle when we try that, as Joshua did.

In Eldad and Medad, God picks a couple of unknowns. For reasons we are not told, these guys don't make the cut when Moses picks the 70 elders. Moses, in all of his

wisdom, may not have seen leadership potential in these two. But God did and gave them what they needed in and through the Holy Spirit.

This story also has something to say about leadership in God's realm. Joshua will go on to inherit the task of leading the people of Israel. But in this story he is something of a student leader. And Joshua learns an important lesson about leadership according to the Spirit. Moses isn't the least bit concerned about Eldad's and Medad's seemingly free-lance prophecy. To the contrary, Moses welcomes it. That is the way it is with God's work.

One of the blessings of my job as your pastor is that I travel in circles around the city, church, ecumenical and interfaith circles, non-profit circles, circles of others who share your concern about justice and equity.

Frequently, people will say something like. "I hear good things about Caldwell church." To which my usual reply is, "We're just trying to stay out of God's way."

Not that long ago, Caldwell was the Eldad and Medad of churches. Overlooked, forgotten, dismissed. But God had a different idea. And, unlike that old generation of Israelites who never saw the promised land, the faithful few here, those who had not walked out on Caldwell, still trusted that God would do something. God did.

And, lest we get the "big head," we better remember that we are about as "qualified" to do God's work here as Eldad and Medad seemed to be as prophets. God's doing fine here, if we just stay out of God's way and seek to be God's agents as the body of Christ.

This story can even speak that same word of hope and possibility to our denomination, our often-quarreling, long-shrinking, ever-faithful bunch of about 2 million that some days seems to include far more Eldads and Medads than Moseses.

In his commentary on this passage, our friend Richard Boyce speaks to that as well. Richard offers this:

"One of the annoying things about God's spirit in the Old and New Testament is that while we may attempt to choreograph and control it (with liturgies and licenses and limits on office), it is ultimately more like the wind than our books of order.

"The wind," Richard adds, quoting the Gospel of John, "blows where it chooses and ... you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."²

Thanks be to God. Amen.

² Ibid, p. 7