

May 11, 2008
Numbers 11:24-30, Acts 2:1-21
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“The Spirit Within You”

Boiled manna, baked manna, fried manna and roasted manna. No matter how many ways they try to prepare manna, it is still manna. The only thing that appears each day on the pantry shelf is manna. Reach down to the bottom of the bag of groceries and it is still manna. In the wilderness, the children of Israel, set free from slavery for a great experiment of faith, are complaining, grumbling and grouching. What they want is to sink their teeth into some meat. More than that, the neighbors' children are making too much noise and running through the campsite; husbands and wives are getting short with each other; sisters and brothers are starting to quarrel; one tribe can't get along with another; people are arguing over who carries the water, who takes care of the children, who deserves the biggest tent and who prepares the fires.

Moses is tired of listening to the complaints. His ears cannot bear the sound of any more voices arguing. Instead of being grateful for the daily supply of miraculous manna, they are tired of its taste. He is tired of listening to them talk about the way things used to be in Egypt. Here they are on the edge of freedom and all they can think about are cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. They are on a journey to the Promised Land and they can't see beyond the next rock in their path or stone in their shoe. Moses is worn out settling their disputes. His bag of tricks is almost empty. He has read every How to Lead book from cover to cover and has not found out what he needs to know. Even his prayers to God are becoming a lament, a complaint and a pity party. He cannot bear the burden of leadership alone.

Just when he is ready to give up, God tells Moses what to do. God tells Moses to gather seventy elders from among the people to share the mantle of leadership. God takes the same Spirit that rests on Moses and places it upon these elders. They begin to prophesy. Two of the elders named Eldad and Medad are not with the others. When they begin to prophesy on their own outside the tent of meeting, Joshua wants Moses to stop them. Moses says, “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 (Num. 11:29).”

Would that all the Lord's people were prophets! Now there is a holy wish. There is a holy dream that moves us from seeing ourselves simply as wanderers or followers, as tent dwellers or pew sitters, as receivers of daily manna or daily bread, to seeing ourselves as prophets. Yes, there is a dream that calls us to move beyond the temptation to get stuck in our complaints, expecting somebody else to change things, make them better, do the work or supply the need. There is a wake up call to seeing and discerning what God would have us do. That is what a prophet does. A prophet discerns the word and will of God for a particular time and place. Being a prophet isn't about telling the future; it is about telling the present as God's time. This is God's time! It is about perceiving the word of God for today and getting our lives aligned with what God wants done.

Would that all the Lord's people were prophets! After the resurrection of Jesus, the disciples are gathered in a room in Jerusalem on the Jewish festival of Pentecost. There is a sound like the rush of a mighty wind. Suddenly, the Holy Spirit falls upon them like tongues of fire. The Spirit comes upon all of them, not just a select few. They begin to speak the word of God so that everyone in the city of Jerusalem is able to hear the word in his or her native language. All of the commotion leads some to scoff and say that they are drunk. They are not drunk, but filled with the Spirit of God. The word of God in the prophet Joel has come to pass, “I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, and the young shall see visions and the old dream dreams (Acts 2:17).” The dream of Moses has come to pass. Not only are the elders and deacons filled with the Spirit and empowered to lead, but everyone who calls on the name of Jesus is to be a prophet! We call Pentecost the “Birthday of the Church” because this is the day the entire people of God are filled with the Spirit, bound together as one body and empowered to lead. As Christians, we cannot sit around the campfires and lament the past, complain about the present and dread the future. We cannot sit around on our hands and wish somebody else would hurry up and do something.

When a young pastor I know was just beginning in ministry, an elder in the church complained that many of the people didn't know the Bible. Every time he brought it up, he asked this pastor when he was going to do something about it. The pastor wasn't reaching the people this elder thought he should. Even though the pastor was doing what he thought he could, he added the elder's concern to his own. The pastor began to sink lower and lower under the weight of this constant grumbling. After several months of listening to his complaints, the pastor said, "Well, I hear your concern. Now what are you going to do about it?" The elder looked surprised, said nothing and walked away. Later that month, the elder started a Bible study in his home.

Would that all the Lord's people were prophets! When all of the elders gathered in the tabernacle, two of seventy elders stayed behind. Eldad and Medad began to prophecy in the camp. Some wanted to stop them, but Moses did not. Some were afraid of losing control, of things getting out of hand or of somebody coming up with a new word. Moses wasn't afraid because he knew the same Spirit was upon them all. We need people who not only discern God's will in the sanctuary, but also in the town hall; we need people who are speaking God's word not only in a Bible Study but also in a Kenyan hospital. We need people who see themselves as God's servants not only on a mission trip but in a classroom, not only in a home but in a prison, not only on a spiritual retreat but in a troubled neighborhood. What God is giving is a new model for leadership in which all the people are prophets.

Two stayed behind. I am always thankful for those prophets of God who ask me what I think about a need and then tell me what they are going to do about it. In the past year, God's prophets have asked me what we are doing as a church to nurture the children in our congregation with special needs; then they have told me what they are going to do about it. God's prophets have asked me what we are doing to care for creation to insure that we as a church are being good stewards of God's earth; then they have told me what they are going to do about it. God's prophets have asked what we are doing to support people who have Parkinson's disease, who have survived cancer or who are going through grief; in all these situations, they have told me what they are doing about it. All these Spirit-filled "somebodies" are led to discern God's will and are responding to the needs of God's people wherever they may be.

Would that all the Lord's people were prophets! On Wednesday evening, the Niners met in this sanctuary for a service of worship. Brian Shivers presented each one with a Bible inscribed with a verse of scripture especially chosen for that particular person. Then they knelt and received a blessing that they would grow more and more each day in the Holy Spirit. We sealed the blessing upon their lives with the sign of the cross. Today, they profess their faith in Jesus Christ. Today, the elders lay their hands upon them as a sign of the Spirit of God passing from one generation to the next. Today, these young women and men are empowered by God's Spirit to be prophets. A prophet is simply a Spirit-filled person who hears the word of God, sees the world from God's perspective and lives in the world as God's servants.

To the confirmation class I say: Be filled with the Spirit of God. God is empowering you to get up, get out and get going. Be a prophet. Live your faith with boldness wherever you are.

Would that all the Lord's people were prophets!