

Moses had a problem. He, actually, had many problems. He resisted God at the burning bush (Ex. 3). He had to talk God out of destroying the Israelites after their jaunt with a golden calf (Ex. 32). He had trouble with public speaking, was a murderer, and had to betray his adoptive brother. Now, in Numbers 11, he has another problem. The people grumble against him, question his leadership, and are sick and tired of eating manna. God was providing for their sustenance, but they remembered eating meat when they were slaves in Egypt. God already provided manna in Exodus 16. Then, when they were thirsty, God provided water from a rock in Exodus 17. Why were they questioning God?

Moses felt the weight of leadership. There was no one else to blame when things went wrong and no one else to praise when they went right. It was too much. The Lord instructed Moses to gather seventy elders. When they stood around the tent, the Lord came in a cloud and put some of the spirit on them. This allowed them to prophesy and share the leadership responsibilities with Moses.

The choir invited us to listen to the rustle of the wind, drawing on the Acts 2 image of the Holy Spirit moving as the wind. Acts 2 uses the Greek word πνεμα for Spirit and wind. This is a shift from the Hebrew in Numbers, רוּחַ. Both mean breath or wind and can be translated accurately as Spirit, but the Hebrew sense is different from the Greek. In Greek culture, there was a body/soul duality.¹ In Hebrew culture, the spirit or breath was a life force.²

What about us? How do we experience the spirit of God? On a day like this, when a new person is standing before you, and we are all trying to decide whether or not we want to go on a journey together, we must ask, where is the spirit leading us to go? We might also ask about the future. Have you ever wondered about the future? Have you ever looked ahead to the future and realized that it was turning out differently than you anticipated? Sometimes, the future is full of changes and uncertainty. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus said, "You can never step into the same stream twice."³ If we acknowledge that change is constant, then how do we enter the future?

Numbers is vital for understanding God and humanity because it covers a formative period in the development of ancient Israel. Numbers 11-19 covers the tragic wilderness journey of the first generation. The people complained. God grew frustrated and responded. So, the people complain to Moses. He faced a crisis in his leadership. Moses goes to God, and God says, "Is my power limited?" Answer: No. Just as the wind shifts, the Spirit shifts and Moses has been applying human wisdom. God is not bound by our understanding.

In Numbers, as we see over and over again in the Bible, the story is not about a person; it is about God. It is not about Moses. Likewise, today, it is not about me. It is not about you. It is about something God is doing. We have the privilege to join in. As the passage unfolds, the details are fairly straight forward. They could wrap their minds around what was happening. They chose seventy elderly people (N.B. Hebrew זקן, *zawkane*, gender

neutral). This is a significant reminder for us about the value of people who have experience in life. The plan was simple: they put some of the Spirit on the elders.

Putting some of the Spirit on some of the people means that they are involved in leadership. This is like when we plan for our futures or find a solution to a problem. We find steps forward (a → b → c), but then God gets involved and reminds us that the Holy Spirit is not bound by our expectations. Eldad and Medad find themselves with the spirit. The Bible does not tell us anything about their story. Eldad's name means "God has loved," and Medad means "in the sense of loving." If a name tells us about the character and if God is love, then these are two people who are in tune with God. With the spirit on them, they prophesied in the camp.

They would have gotten away with it too, if it weren't for that meddling kid. Joshua-son-of-Nun and Moses' assistant ran to tattle. Joshua is a very important character, but he has a problem with the unpredictable nature of the Spirit. To be honest, I do too! The Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar points out the tension between viewing the world from God's viewpoint and viewing the world from a human viewpoint.⁴ When we emphasize how things make sense, when we revert to our Enlightenment mindset, we look at life from a human perspective. When we open ourselves to previously inconceivable possibilities, we see life from God's perspective. If we hear Eldad and Medad begin to prophesy and celebrate God's Spirit, we celebrate the movement of the spirit.

Joshua could have become excited, run around, and said, *God is using other people now! It's not just Moses! The Holy Spirit can touch all our lives!* He did not. Instead, he essentially said, *We've never done it this way before. Hold on, Moses. Tell those guys to stop it. We know the way God speaks and this isn't it.* Joshua was concerned because his understanding of God was confined to the tent. God spoke to Moses in the tent, and Moses shared God's vision with the people. That is how it worked. That's how it always worked and now Eldad and Medad are prophesying inside the camp.

Oh, for crying out loud! Moses says. Actually, he says, "I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his Spirit upon them all!" God is already doing something—in our lives, at UBC, in Charlottesville, and in the world. We can follow the spirit or not. It is our choice. The Holy Spirit can lead us to do strange things and take us out of our comfort zones. Moses had good excuses when God first called him in Exodus 3. He overcame his personal obstacles and followed God. Where is the Holy Spirit leading us?

In 1934, a young African-American Baptist pastor named Michael King attended the Baptist World Alliance meeting in Berlin, Germany. He was so inspired by the life of Martin Luther that he changed his name from Michael King to Martin Luther King, and he changed his young son's name as well, from Michael King, Jr. to Martin Luther King, Jr.⁵ For King, following the Holy Spirit meant taking up a cause.

King's son, the more famous Martin Luther King, Jr., followed in his father's footsteps and took up the cause of civil rights. How many people watched from the sidelines as King marched? How many people resisted the power of the Holy Spirit leading them into dangerous new territory? On this Pentecost Day, I think about King following the Holy Spirit. In his las speech, he talked about doing God's will:

Like anybody, I would like to live - a long life; longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. So I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. *Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.*⁶

No matter what happens, we have nothing to fear. God is still God. And, God is at work. Whether or not we join God's work and follow the Holy Spirit is up to us. Amen.

¹ Cf. e.g. Geoffrey Lloyd, "Pneuma between Body and Soul," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13 (2007), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4623125>.

² W. E. Staples, "The "Soul" in the Old Testament," *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 44, no. 3 (1928): 146-47, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/528460>.

³ Heraclitus, *Fragments*, trans. Brooks Haxton (London: Penguin, 2001), 27.

⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Spirit of Truth*, trans. Graham Harrison, vol. III, *Theo-Logic* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 46.

⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Called to Serve: January 1929-June 1951*, ed. Ralph E. Luker and Penny A. Russell, *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 30.

⁶ Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), 286.