

Sermon ✝ September 26, 2021

Mark 9:38-50

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Once upon a time there were two ordinary — well, maybe even a little less than ordinary — prophets. They had never been written up in history; they were not even well known among their own people. Certainly, they had never been listed in anybody's *Who's Who*. In fact, when Moses selected seventy elders to go with him outside the camp, he overlooked these two completely. He left them back in the camp. Oh, they were registered prophets, all right, but just ordinary, run-of-the-mill prophets. Their names were Eldad and Medad.

And they stayed in camp while Moses took the seventy specially chosen ones to the tent outside the camp. There a wonderful, marvelous thing took place. You see, a powerful lot of God's Spirit rested on Moses, and sometimes it was almost too much for him. So God came down in a cloud and took some of the Spirit that was on Moses and put it upon the seventy elders. Something like taking a loaf of bread — a whole loaf of bread — and breaking it and putting some of it in the hands of each one of us, as we do at communion.

And when God had taken some of the Spirit and put it on all seventy, they began to prophesy. They began to speak in ecstatic utterances. These prophets were forerunners of the great prophets like Elijah and Isaiah, and Jeremiah, and Deborah and Hosea, the ones who were to come. In fact, they may have been symbolic for the way in which God was going to pour out the Spirit on many different ones.

What or who is a prophet, anyway? A prophet is one who speaks the word that God gives. A prophet is one who speaks *for* God and speaks out against injustice, tyranny, oppression of any kind. A prophet is one who speaks on behalf of those who experience injustice and oppression.

Prophets in Hebrew Scriptures — and today — are those who have a vision of what people and the world could be *if* all of us were to commit ourselves to bringing about the rule of God on earth. Prophets are persons who are willing, if need be, to die for their commitment to God and to justice.

What was happening with Moses in this story in Numbers? He was being shown by God that the prophetic spirit, the spirit of justice, the spirit that denounced tyranny and oppression, was to be poured out of many different people. It was not to belong exclusively to the great and well known.

So the seventy *only* received portions of the Spirit. But, meanwhile, back in the camp, away from the center of activity, way back on the fringes, two ordinary, run-of-the-mill prophets named Eldad and Medad also began to prophesy. They were not even with the others. They were not in the mainstream. They were not among the seventy . . . How dare they?!

A young man came running, bringing the message to the tent where Moses was: *“Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp!”* And Joshua, an assistant to Moses, said, *“My Lord Moses, forbid them. Make them stop. They are not one of the ones you chose.”*

But Moses looked at Joshua and said, *“Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, every man, woman, and child, that the Lord would put the Lord's Spirit upon them all!”*

There is a clear word here: God's Spirit is not confined to certain officials or people. God's Spirit is not only confined to those upon whom we think it should fall.

We also have a similar message in today's lesson from Mark. Jesus and the disciples were in Capernaum, and the disciple John came to Jesus complaining about a man he and some of the other disciples had seen casting out demons in the name of Jesus.

John told Jesus with great excitement, *“And we told him to stop doing it because he was not one of us. He was not following after us.”*

So . . . what did Jesus say? *“Good boy, John. You did great. That's exactly what I would have.”* Of course not, Jesus said, *“Do not forbid him; for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon after to speak evil of me. For he [or she] that is not against us is for us.”*

It is interesting what one commentary says about these words:

*“‘Do not forbid him’ must be taken as a warning against exclusiveness and overemphasis upon apostolic authority.”* And in another section: *“So Jesus' saying means, in part: do not look for labels; look for actions, attitudes, spirit. When that in which Jesus rejoiced — mercy, justice, integrity, reverence, faith — appears, welcome it. Do not meet it with sour, skeptical antagonism. Meet it as he did.”* (*The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 7, p. 789).

Sometimes we act, as Christians, as if these stories had never appeared in the Bible? Is it possible that one of the greatest sins we commit is that of exclusiveness?

These people, this person, is not following after us, is not doing things exactly as we do them . . . is not one of us. Jesus, do something. Tell them to stop it. Send them away, Jesus! Don't you hear us?

We are threatened because someone is doing something we don't like is being received and is getting results. Jesus, they can't be acting out of the Spirit because they aren't acting the way we think they should act. Jesus, stop them.

Could it be . . . that we want to say that unless others express their faith in our way, when and where and how we think they should, then they are outsiders? Do we think we have to protect our view of Jesus as Joshua tried to protect Moses? Do we think the ways of God are our particular domain, that only we know how things should be done, what language should be spoken, what expressions used?

Both Moses and Jesus made it clear that we cannot dictate where or through whom the Spirit will be manifested. No protection is needed.

And our pitiful attempts are surely born of jealousy and exclusiveness. And there is no room in the realm of God for either.

It seems to me that there are two primary messages in these two scripture passages. One is that the Spirit of God will be poured out on whom God pleases, and our permission and our approval are not required. The second is that, at times, the Spirit of God is surprisingly poured out on persons who least expect it — on ordinary, run-of-the-mill human beings.

There are times in the church that you and I are asked to put ourselves in the way of the Spirit. However ordinary we feel ourselves or our pocket-books or our talents to be, we are asked to give what God wants us to give, to speak the words God wants us to speak, to receive the measure of the Spirit that God would pour out on us.

God takes the loaf of the Spirit and breaks it open. The bread of the Spirit is in God's hands, and it could be that, suddenly, in the next few days or the next few weeks when you least expect it you will be thrown a portion.

I look around at the church people I know and I think: Eldad? Medad? Where are you? Are you here among us or have we somehow written you off? Are you left back in the camp? Not in the inner circle, not among the specially chosen so that we do not want to hear you speak? So that we are afraid of what you will say or what you will do?

Whoever you are, the Church needs you to come forth. The *world* needs you to come forth, to receive the portion of the Spirit God has for you. Amen.