

In our Old Testament lesson from the book of Numbers, the children of Israel are whining to Moses. This story takes place about a year after the Exodus, a year after they were freed from slavery in Egypt. They had had numerous trials in that first year.

When they were leaving Egypt, they were afraid that they were going to be killed by the Egyptian army, but God opened the sea for them. Then they complained about thirst, but God brought forth water from the rock. Then they complained about hunger, but God sent Manna, the bread from heaven for them to eat.

Those complaints are pretty serious. Being slaughtered by an army is a pretty pressing threat. Dying of thirst in the desert is something that would worry anyone. Not having any food to eat is also a serious problem. But at every turn, God took care of the Israelites. Now they've been in the desert a little over a year.

So we come to ch11 of Numbers and see that the Israelites are griping again. But today, what are the Israelites complaining about? Are they worried about the basic needs of life: safety, water, food? No.

Now they're complaining about variety. They salivate over the foods of Egypt: fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic.

They're whining because they're tired of eating the same old Manna day after day after day. They've forgotten the threat of starvation which God's Manna has saved them from.

Now, notice what they don't say. They don't think to say, "God, thank you for keeping our stomachs full, thank you for keeping us from starving to death." Instead they say, "Why can't you set a more interesting table? Why can't we get a decent assortment of meats and vegetables? Why don't you send us a United Supermarket truck full of produce? I'd like some spice in my diet. Where's the onion and garlic? Manna is too bland and boring."

The Israelites have forgotten that God has kept them alive miraculously. They've gotten rather spoiled. Miraculous daily bread from heaven apparently isn't good enough anymore.

Their response to God is not "Thank you for all you have done for me." Instead it's "What have you done for me lately?" They've forgotten the very core and center of what's going on: God has saved them. And God sustains them.

That's lesson #1 for us. We've got to keep things in perspective. God has given us many good things. God has brought us through some rough patches in the past, and God continues to bless us. Hang on to that. Don't lose that perspective. Don't waste time whining about what we don't have. Instead, be thankful for all the amazing things God has done for us. That's lesson #1.

Back to Numbers. The people have been complaining to Moses. So Moses complains to God. Moses is really on the edge of burnout. He asks God, "Why are you treating

me so badly? Why are you laying this burden on me?" He asks, "Did I conceive these people, did I give birth to them?" In other words, 'I am their mother?' The underlying accusation is, No, they're not my children. They're your children. You deal with them.

The bottom line is Moses saying, "I can't carry these people alone--the burden is too heavy for me." And then, Moses says, 'If this is the way it's going to be you might as well kill me now and put me out of my misery.'

And that's lesson #2 for us. It's something we really already know. But it doesn't hurt to remind ourselves of it. If everything that happens at St. Paul's depends solely upon the Rector, we'll be dead in the water. One person cannot carry the burden of St. Paul's alone. If I ever think that I'm the only minister here, or if you ever think that I'm the only minister here, we're in deep trouble.

We do have strong lay leadership here at St. Paul's. That leadership has gotten us through some tough patches in the past. And that's something Moses was missing. That's why, God tells him to recruit 70 other leaders to help him. Leadership is meant to be shared. We mustn't ever forget that.

So Moses gathers the 70 leaders together just as God told him. And he brings them to the tent of meeting, the place where he and God talk.

And there, God come and gives his Spirit to the 70 elders. Numbers says, "The spirit rested upon them, and they prophesied."

The Spirit comes upon the 70 who are gathered in front of the tabernacle. But meanwhile, back in the camp, the Spirit also comes upon Eldad and Medad, two guys who didn't make it to the meeting. And this makes Joshua freak out.

Now, 40 years from now, Joshua will be the great mature general and leader who will succeed Moses and lead the people into the promised land. But right now he's still a pup.

Young Joshua says, "Moses, stop them!" 'Things have gotten out of control. This is unauthorized. This is a threat to your authority and status. We've got to get a handle on it.'

But Moses' reply is so wonderful. Moses isn't worried about his status. He's not worried about whether he can keep God boxed up and under control. Instead he says, "I wish all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put his Spirit upon them all." In other words, if God is doing it, don't try to stop it.

And that's lesson #3 for us. God's love is sure. But God's behavior is unpredictable. If something is from God, we have to be careful not to try to stop it. God's gives gifts to all his people. My gifts may be different from your gifts, but that doesn't mean yours aren't valid. The Holy Spirit gives gifts to people in different ways. Our job is to use the gifts we're given to further God's work in the world, not to not hinder it.

Now I want to jump ahead a couple of chapters. In chapter 13 of Numbers, Moses and the people make it to the border of the promised land. God tells Moses to send some spies out to reconnoiter. Moses sends 12 guys out, and they spend 40 days spying on the promised land. Then they come back to give their report. Now, 10 of the spies say, "Well the land looks good, but the people there are tough. If we try to fight them we're going to lose. There's no way we can win. "

But 2 of the spies, Joshua and Caleb file a minority report. "Hey we can do it." Why are they so confident?

Joshua and Caleb say, "If the Lord is pleased with us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us." Then they add: "The Lord is with us, we do not need to fear." Joshua and Caleb remember the bottom line. God is on their side and God wants to bring them into the promised land.

The other 10 spies are thinking in terms of their own strength, which is inadequate. Those 10 have forgotten about God. And the tragic thing is, the people also forget about God. They let their fear get the better of them. They accept the negative report of the 10 spies. This is one of the most tragic statements in the entire OT.

"Would that we had died in the land of Egypt!"

Do you hear what they're saying? Do you really hear what they're saying? I wish that we had died in Egypt. Or I wish that we had died in this wilderness!

They're saying, "God, the place where you're calling us to go is too scary. God, the things you're calling us to do are too scary. After all the wonderful things you've done for us in the past, we would rather go back to the nasty situation of being slaves in Egypt than to face the future you're calling us to. We'd rather die out here in the middle of nowhere than to follow you into the unknown." This is really a vote of no confidence in God.

And this is lesson #4 for us. It's really a powerful warning. Fear is an extremely powerful emotion. And we have to constantly ask ourselves, "Who is ruling in my heart? My fears? Or God?"

It's a terrible thing to say to God: "God, I'm so afraid. I'd rather go back to the way things were than to trust you. I'd rather stay frozen and paralyzed right where I am than to trust you."

The Israelites said "no" to God. They said, "We would rather die in the wilderness." And God granted their request.

They wandered 40 years until everyone of that generation died and was buried in the wilderness. Only Joshua and Caleb would enter the promised land.

We have the same question before us at St. Paul's.

This is an important time for us. We're down to one clergy person for the foreseeable future. We are called to function in the 21st century, not the 20th. This is a time when we need all hands on deck. We need every member of St. Paul's to give of their treasure, their talent, and their time.

Will we simply wander around doing the same things we've been doing? Or will we step out in faith into the promised land God is calling us to? Will we step out beyond our comfort zones? Will we live into our mission in a rapidly changing world?

Our mission is clear:

Worshipping God in the beauty of holiness.
Welcoming and growing in faith and fellowship.
Serving our neighbors in Jesus' name.

We need to focus on that mission together. And we need all of us, ALL of us to work toward that mission, together.

It can be a scary proposition. But God promises to be with us when we try to carry out his will. God promises to be with us as we journey toward the land he has prepared for us.

Remember the faith of Joshua:

"The Lord is with us, he will bring us into his good land."
"The Lord is with us, we do not need to fear."