

“Spirit of God”

I had a choice about which scripture readings we would hear today. Of course, one of those choices was the reading from the Book of Acts in which a wind rushes into the room where the disciples had been hiding out since Jesus’ crucifixion. According to St. Luke, who authored the Book of Acts they this was the fiftieth day after the Crucifixion of Jesus. It was the Jewish feast of the Pentecost when that happened. That is the usual reading we hear on the Day of Pentecost. Why not hear the reading about the Pentecost?

It is simple because I wanted us to focus on another pouring out of God’s Spirit, without it being overshadowed by the Pentecost story. That other pouring out of the Spirit of God happened in the Book of Numbers. It is a short reading, just a few verses. It is also much less dramatic. There are no multinational crowds in the streets. There are no hecklers calling the disciples drunkards. There is no proselytizing. No one is trying to convert people. The scene we heard from Numbers is rather calm given what happens to the elders.

In Numbers, the pouring out of the Spirit is very practical. The Israelites have been harassing and haranguing Moses with everything that annoys them. This includes the quality and amount of water, the variety of food, and the hardships they have had to endure on the exodus out of Egypt. As if that was not enough, they brought to him all their personal arguments, interpersonal issues, petty crimes, gripes, arguments, encroachments, and anything and everything that caused discord among the people.

Moses has had it up to here with the Israelites. He goes to God asking for help. These are the verses just before the passage we heard today. It gives us the context we need to understand the urgency that Moses feels.

“Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, all at the entrances of their tents. Then the Lord became very angry, and Moses was displeased. So, Moses said to the Lord, “Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom as a wet nurse carries a nursing child, to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors’? Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me, saying, ‘Give us meat to eat!’ I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once—if I have found favor in your sight—and do not let me see my misery.”¹

Man, oh man, you can tell that Moses is burned out. He is ranting to God about what it feels like for him to lead this motley crew of people wandering in the wilderness to who knows where, except that it is a land promised to their ancestors. He whines and complains, fairly in my eyes, about why he is stuck with them. What did he do wrong to deserve this? Did he conceive and birth all of these people, and that is why they are his responsibility? Is it his responsibility to get them meat to eat, too? Which, by the way, they had manna to eat, and it was fresh every day, wasn’t that good

¹ Numbers 11:10-15

enough? He finishes by crying out that if God has any love for him, then kill him now, so he does not have to deal with it.

He sounds to me like an overburdened mother who just cannot take it anymore. I do not mean that at all derogatorily. The burden a mother carries, especially with little ones, can be more than any one person should bear. The number of people does not matter, nor does it matter whether they are children or adults. In the novel *Slow Poison*, someone tells a recent widower, “God never gives us a heavier burden than we can bear.” He responds, “Maybe, but he sure doesn’t hit us over the head with more happiness than we can stand either.”²

God, rather than striking Moses dead, comes up with another solution. He has Moses call together seventy elders of the people at the Tent of Meeting, also known as the Tabernacle. This was the home of God while the Israelites were on the exodus before the first Temple was built by Solomon.

In this gathering place, the Spirit of God is poured out upon the elders and officers. While we do not hear of anything extraordinary happening immediately after that pouring out, what we can hear across the centuries is the sigh of relief that Moses let out. Suddenly, the weight of the people was taken off his shoulders. There would still be the issue of the meat they wanted to eat, but not so many of the small and medium-sized issues that had been vexing him and wearing him out.

God’s Spirit appears many times in Holy Scripture. In Genesis, Numbers, and in the Book of Acts. In creation, it was hovering and waiting to act, as God pondered the beginning of the world. In Numbers, the Spirit acted to anoint the elders to assist Moses in his leadership of the people. In Acts, the Spirit moves the disciples from fear into active ministry. In each place we see the Spirit moving. The Spirit of God has many ways of working in the world.

The Spirit is also at work today if we are open to it. It can motivate us to ministry. I do not just mean ordained ministry, but the ministries of caring for people, feeding them, or healing them. It moves us to advocate for the poor and marginalized. It moves us to be kind to those we meet each day in our personal and impersonal lives. The Spirit can move us to reassess our lives so that we might find a way to give up addictions and obsessions that are ripping us and our relationships apart. The Spirit can move us to take the difficult path. One that might lead to hardship and sacrifice for reasons we do not yet fathom. But it leads us to a life of meaning.

I do not know how the Spirit of God will touch you. I do not know how the Spirit of God will change you. I do not know when and how the Spirit of God will touch and change me. All I know is that we are to keep our hearts open, our minds aware, because the Spirit of God has more in store for us than we can ask or imagine. This promise is not only for the young. Age, abilities, opportunities, and station in life do not matter for God’s calling. There is nothing that can impede the Spirit of God.

Life is more than plodding along to the grave. God is calling each and every one of us. Hear God and follow. Only God knows what will happen if you do.

² Sheila Bosworth, *Slow Poison*, [New York: Knopf, 1992].