

“Prophet Sharing”

Numbers 11:10-17, 24-30, Acts 2:1-21
Hope Church, Pentecost, May 11, 2008, Lynn Japinga

Before OT text: The Israelites were wandering in the wilderness. Tempers were frayed. They were hot, tired, and bored. They were especially bored with the menu, which was always the same. The manna appeared on the ground every day, and they baked it into cakes. But they craved meat. They remembered the fish and the cucumbers and melons and onions and garlic they used to eat in Egypt. So they complained. Bitterly. And their leader Moses complained just as bitterly about them.

Moses had reached the end of his pastoral rope. He was tired and frustrated and angry with the people. He was even angrier with God for giving him this assignment. The people were too heavy to carry. Moses was ready to resign.

Part of the problem was that Moses was not good at delegating leadership. The people took all their complaints and disputes directly to him. One commentator said that if there had been an organizational flow chart with little boxes for each leadership role, the name Moses would be in every box! He had taken on too much, and it was no surprise he was burned out.

So God suggested a new leadership plan. Instead of Moses being president, secretary, cook and janitor, the community should find some people who could share the load. Moses gathered 70 elders around their worship space and God took some of the spirit or power that was on Moses and put it on them. As a sign of their authority they prophesied, which probably meant some kind of ecstatic experience.

But two of the elders, Eldad and Medad, didn't show up for the ceremony. The text doesn't say if they had something better to do or refused the invitation or simply forgot. Or maybe they were outcasts or misfits who did not get an invitation. But back in the camp, they received the spirit as well, and they also prophesied. Somebody got

nervous about this power that seemed to be on the loose. You can't have people exercising leadership indiscriminately, after all! But Moses reacted very calmly. Don't be jealous, he advised. It would be good if all of God's people were prophets!

Lots of people with power and authority are afraid that if they share it, they will lose it. But Moses knew that God's power could be distributed without being diminished. When power was divided, it actually multiplied.

Still ... this was kind of a disorderly event. Moses and the Israelites had set up a nice process. The elders should come to this place and stand in this way and they will receive the spirit. And here Eldad and Medad didn't show up, didn't follow the rules, and they also received the spirit!

God's spirit can be such a messy and uncooperative presence. It was true in Acts too. The Spirit blows into town with a loud noise, and strange visuals, and multiple languages. The people who receive the Spirit act like they are drunk. For all that we celebrate the day of Pentecost now, the event was pretty strange at the time. Surprising. Awkward. Disruptive.

And the Spirit often seems to fall on the most unlikely people. "Your sons AND your daughters will prophesy. Your old men will dream dreams. Even slaves will receive the spirit!" Well that was a bit much. The Israelites had generally done things decently and in order. One group served as the priests. They offered the sacrifices and made the contacts with God. But now God might speak through anybody? A slave? A woman? Impossible.

But someone forgot to tell the Spirit.

God did a very new thing at Pentecost. When Jesus had been on earth, God encountered the world through one person. Now God's Spirit would meet the world through many people. God's spirit would be shared. God's voice would be heard through many human voices. And this would prove to be messy and disruptive and hard to control. And yet it would also be remarkably effective.

One message of Pentecost, then, is that God's Spirit will appear in surprising places and surprising people. God's power is not limited to church leaders, to those ordained, to those with seminary education. God's power is not limited to those who pray a lot, or speak a spiritual language. So be open to the way God's spirit might speak through a teenager, or a person with a disability or a person with Alzheimers.

But Pentecost also encourages us to be open to the spirit of God in ourselves.

I suspect there is a little anxiety in Hope Church right now about who the search committee will recommend to be the new pastor. And that's important. But the most important thing for the health and future of a congregation may not be the quality of its preachers but the quality of parishioners in the pews. Would that all the Lord's people were prophets!

That's not an invitation for all of you to elbow your way up to the pulpit!

But it's a reminder that you, the people of Hope Church, are remarkably gifted, intelligent, committed and open-minded. I have seen the Spirit of God present in your over and over in the last year.

in your deep commitment to the needs of the poor, and the care of the earth.

in the questions you ask in adult education

in the care you offer to one another, and to children

in your openness to new ideas

in your commitment to the tradition of Reformed liturgy and theology.

The Spirit of God is speaking to you and through you. You may not speak in another language. You may not be called to preach from a pulpit. You may not have an ecstatic experience. But the power of God's Spirit is evident in the grace and love and compassion which you demonstrate to one another and the community and the world.

The Spirit of God broke into the world at Pentecost and gave birth to the church.

The church needs you: old or young, male or female, rich or poor.

Would that all the Lord's people were prophets!