

Sermon: The Wrong Prophets

May 28, 2023

Numbers 11:24-30

Acts 2:1-21

Despite the fact that the first rule is nearly always, “You must be present to win,” I have lost count of the number of times I’ve heard someone call a raffle number and the person with the matching number isn’t in the room. Raffle prizes, after all, aren’t just about luck. It’s also about staying to the end. Hanging in there. Enduring.

It doesn’t speak all that well of fund-raising dinners that we feel that people who stay until the end are “enduring,” does it? They’re usually more fun than that. Right? I mean, usually?

More important than staying to the end, though, is showing up at all. That’s what happened with Eldad and Medad, or more accurately, that’s what didn’t happen. They were among the various elders of the tribes and families of Israel there in the Sinai who were invited to become a special Council of Elders who would share responsibilities for leadership with Moses. It was an elite invitation: just seventy had been selected. Sixty-eight showed up at the Tent of Meeting, the place of worship. The two who didn’t were Eldad and Medad.

God proceeded to demonstrate that these elders at the tent were blessed as leaders much as Moses was blessed. They would speak with the authority of Moses, and to show that, for a few minutes they spoke with the authority of God. Sixty-eight voices sharing God’s will and word.

Oh, but wait. It wasn’t sixty-eight. It was seventy.

It was supposed to be sixty-eight, because Eldad and Medad hadn’t done what they were supposed to do. Not only did they not stay, they didn’t show up. No raffle prizes for you! I don’t care what your luck is like.

But the spirit of God isn’t about luck. It’s about God’s choices. God chose seventy – not sixty-eight, seventy – and God was going to have all seventy no matter what anyone might say. You didn’t show up? Well, said God, I’m showing up. Joshua’s jealous? Well, said Moses, wouldn’t it be wonderful if everybody spoke out of the spirit of God? Imagine how jealous you’d be then, Joshua.

It's such a muddle when God chooses the Wrong Prophets.

God has a talent for choosing the Wrong Prophets, people who say awkward things that the hearers frequently don’t like. There’s Samuel, whose prophetic career began when God

directed him to speak judgement to the priest Eli, Samuel's mentor and caretaker. There's Isaiah, who comforted kings and then criticized them for perhaps six decades. There's Amos, who was literally told not to speak in the shrine at Bethel. There's Jeremiah, who was arrested by the king and imprisoned for a time in a water tank. There's John the Baptist, who irritated King Herod by criticizing his marriage and was executed for it. We know what happened to Jesus, of course.

On that Pentecost, God selected a brand new batch of the Wrong Prophets.

A really *big* batch.

There weren't that many of Jesus' followers in Jerusalem at the time. Chapter 1 of Acts says there were about 120. It's likely that a good many of those people had come to Jerusalem along with thousands of others for the festival of Shavuot, also known by the Greek name of Pentecost, which celebrated the first harvest of the year and the Law of Moses.

Then came the rush of a violent wind.

Immediately things started going wrong, at least from certain points of view. The day wasn't orderly; it was chaotic. While some were mystified by what the Jesus-followers were saying, others found it easy to diagnose them as drunk. You can almost hear Joshua's voice echoing across the centuries: "They're not supposed to be doing that. Make them stop!"

Peter quoted the prophet Joel to explain it, which really wasn't any better. As Jeremy L. Williams writes at Working Preacher, "Joel writes that God's spirit would be poured upon all flesh (sarka). The pouring does not discriminate by gender; the passage deliberately names daughters, when often sons (uioi) could be used to refer to children regardless of sex or gender. Furthermore, we can take this to mean that all (with an emphasis on all) genders have access to the pouring out of God's spirit. The pouring does not discriminate by age either. Young people will see visions and the elderly will dream dreams (Acts 2:17). The pouring does not exclude those on the lowest rungs of the social ladder—enslaved men (doulous) and enslaved women (doulas)."

The crowd noted that those speaking appeared to be Galileans, and that pretty much made them the Wrong Prophets. Galileans weren't the objects of a generations-long feud like the Samaritans. They were just... well, you know. They're not sophisticated. They're not educated. They're not... smart. You know the kinds of words people would have used about people of that kind. Go ahead and think of those words. Now: Don't say them. Ever.

There they were, the Wrong Prophets, and one of them, a fisherman for heaven's sake, stood up and started by quoting the prophet Joel. I mean, Joel? Really? How well do you have to know the Bible to quote the prophet Joel?

Come to think of it, you've got to know the Bible pretty well to quote the prophet Joel, don't you?

Simon Peter apparently learned a few things spending three years with Jesus. It may well be that the Holy Spirit gave him a few words to say, too.

Kristopher Phan Coffman writes at Working Preacher, "I think it's important not to take the miracle of Pentecost for granted. The miracle could have worked the other way around: God could have caused the tongues of fire to allow each of one the visitors to Jerusalem to understand the language of the Galilean disciples. Pentecost could have been a return to the time before Babel, a return to a single language, but instead it turns into a riotous celebration of the diversity of human speech (complete with the accusation that the disciples are having too much fun!)."

Not only do we have the Wrong Prophets, they appear to be directing God's words to the Wrong People. They're all Jews, which is a fine thing, but couldn't we stick to Hebrew? Wouldn't that be a nice way to winnow out those who deserve to hear the message from those who don't? I'm sure they're all good folks in, um, where was that? Pamphylia? But seriously. Just use Hebrew. That's all you need.

Except that it wasn't. Amy G. Oden writes at Working Preacher, "God's gift reaches outward to those outside of this immediate circle of Jesus followers. It seems that one mark of the Holy Spirit's gifting is that it empowers us to connect to others."

Us?

Yes, us.

We are also the Wrong Prophets, friends. One of the foundational convictions of early Christianity, illustrated countless times in the New Testament, is that the Holy Spirit is a gift not just to a few followers of Jesus, but to all followers of Jesus. The Spirit's gifts might manifest in different ways in different people, but each person would be given those gifts. What did Joel say? Sons *and* daughters. Young *and* old. The poorest of the poor.

Maren Tirabassi shared a poem about a Wrong Prophet this week at GiftsInOpenHands:

There is a woman who forgets –

the deacons' meeting,
her keys,
picking up the church poinsettia order.

Last Sunday she forgot she was not
doing coffee hour —

some mistakes are delicious.

Someone called to remind her
this week
and she comes with carrot cake,
gluten-free brownies
(she never forgets Amy)
grapes, cheese and crackers,
and a big smile,

that fades suddenly, suddenly
as she takes a good look around.

But then everyone begins
to give her red things,
that's the way it is in church –

first the red necklace,
then the red earrings, a carnation,
a red sweater, a scarf.

Someone takes her to the pew,
with the most kids and balloons.
She remembers
something eloquent, not just in Cyrene,
but in the tongue she has been given –

she says,
skipping the part we all know
(about how the sky opens)

“This morning I saw a cardinal.”

The Apostle Paul said a number of true words, but no word truer than this: “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”

We are – I am – you are – the Wrong Prophets for this place and this time. We are the ones given the Holy Spirit today to proclaim the Crucified One – not the Belligerent One – as the Savior. We are the ones given the Holy Spirit today to proclaim God's judgement upon the powerful and unmerciful and God's favor to the merciful and the meek. We are the ones given the Holy Spirit today to bear witness through our own lives to the power of love and the blessings of forgiveness.

We are the ones who can hear and understand the Holy Spirit in those words of wonder:

“This morning I saw a cardinal.”

by Eric Anderson

Amen.