

LEADERS AND PEOPLE IN A DEMOCRACY

Numbers 11:24-30

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on July 2, 2017, the Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia, as part of a preaching theme for multiple Sundays entitled “In the Beginning.”

So Moses went out and told the people the words of the Lord; and he gathered seventy elders of the people, and placed them all around the tent. Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders; and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do so again.

Two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the spirit rested on them; they were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. And a young man ran and told Moses, ‘Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.’

And Joshua son of Nun, the assistant of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, ‘My lord Moses, stop them!’

But Moses said to him, ‘Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!’

And Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.

I.

On Tuesday, June 13, after a two day drive, Maggie and I arrived in the motel in which we were staying in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, a few days in advance of the wedding of her son Daniel. When we awoke the next day, I received a text from Casey referring to reaching out to Amey, but didn’t see the originating text and therefore the context. Within seconds my son called from Florida to see if I was working out at the Y when the shooting occurred. We quickly turned on the TV and followed the events the remainder of the day and week.

Like most of you, we in this town feel a special connection when a national event is our local news. I work out at the Alexandria Y three mornings a week. Those of us in this church who do so form sort of a club, even as we seek to improve our bodies while hiding them from our fellow congregants at the same time. The Radford family is there nearly every day. I see Dan Tomlinson walking his dog when I take the spinning class at 6:00 a.m. I often see Ken Niemann across the hall pummeling his body to music louder than either of us should be listening to. If I go later in the morning, I may see Susan Griffith receiving instruction from a trainer named Larry whose physical fitness is a reminder of why this Larry needs to be there. I see Jack Turner regularly and Julie Kennedy on some early mornings. On one Saturday alone, I saw Mark Pollock walking one of his sons to their car after coaching his little league game, Caroline Jackson bring her daughters into the lobby, and John Frazier await his daughter finishing her swimming lessons. In a conversation with John Runyan after I was back in town, I decided – like many members of the Y – that I had *noticed but not noticed* the man who for several months made its lobby his last home.

This was indeed close to home for all of us, and like you, I am grateful for the heroism of Capitol Police who were already on-sight, those on the field who helped the victims to take cover, and the Alexandria Police and EMT who arrived within three minutes, all of whom helped contain what could have easily become a much more significant national and personal loss.

As a pastor it is trying to be away from your town and congregation when something like this happens, though I was proud to follow the response that Casey, the only one of us here that day, offered in opening the chapel for

prayer and then leading worship the following Sunday in a way that expressed the poignancy and sadness we were all feeling.

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The text I have chosen for this weekend is one of a few which will vary from the lectionary during this series on Genesis and Exodus. But as we share in our nation's 241st year of independence, the *dynamics* in this text concerning the relationship between the people of Israel and their leader Moses can, I believe, add a bit of wisdom to the dynamics of what it means in our time to be the people called "The United States of America." I offer these comments neither as law, prescription, nor even opinion, but as perhaps a bit of wisdom gleaned from a particular moment in the history of the people of God who were not quite as far along in their formation as a people as we are in our nation today, but a people with whom we may have more in common than at first we think.

Let us pray: *May God grant me to speak with judgment and to have thoughts of what I have received; For God is the guide even of wisdom and the corrector of the wise. For both we and our words are in God's hand, as are all understanding and skill...*¹ *In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.*

II.

The lead-up to our scripture is this:

- The people of Israel have been in existence about 500 years, since the time God called Abraham and Sarah and promised them land, descendants, and blessing that they would pass on to all the nations of the world.²
- In the years since that call, the descendants of Abraham and Sarah have become numerous; the land is still a generation away; and blessing has been more *wrestled with* than *appropriated* and *passed on*.
- They have instituted and celebrated Passover.³
- Moses has recently led the people out of four hundred years of slavery in Egypt across the Red Sea and into the land of Canaan.⁴
- They have received the Law – culminating in the Ten Commandments – which has formed a major part of their national and religious identity, which in their culture, less than ours, is fused.⁵
- Yet a few years removed from slavery, they still find themselves wandering and restless in desert wilderness.⁶
- Ironically, they begin to look backward to the security of slavery where they remember three meals a day rather than forward to the unknowns that come with freedom.

¹ Wisdom of Solomon 7:15.

² Genesis 12:1-4.

³ Exodus 12.

⁴ Exodus 14-15.

⁵ Exodus 20.

⁶ What follows is in the beginning of our chapter, Numbers 11:1-23.

- They complain to Moses and his brother Aaron about the quality and quantity (or lack therefore) of food and water in the wilderness, even though God has been providing both on a daily basis as “manna from heaven,” “daily bread.”

Hearing and sensing complaint from the grass roots, Moses and Aaron become exhausted, and Moses takes the matter to God in prayer. “I am not able to carry this people alone,” Moses says. “They are too heavy for me.”

As *our* text opens, God in turn tells Moses:

- Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them.
- Bring them *outside the camp* to the tent of meeting.
- I will come down and talk with you there.
- I will take some of the spirit that is on you and put it on them.
- They shall bear the burden of the people *along with you* so that you will not bear it all by yourself.

Moses does as God commands. God comes down and speaks to the seventy in the tent. God takes some of the spirit that is on Moses and places it on the seventy. When the spirit rests upon them they receive the gift of prophesy, a gift they exercise in their governance of the nation.

A movement toward shared leadership has occurred.

III.

Whenever we seek to draw parallels between the Old and New Testaments and our own time, we must recognize major differences.

- In the formation of the people of Israel, there was nothing like what we would call separation of “church and state.”
- The faith of Israel and the shape of their governance were linked.
- Thus, for civic leaders to be given the gift of religious prophesy would *not* be the source of discomfort it might be for us.

What I think is parallel *is* that the gift of prophecy to these chosen leaders is the gift they *need to lead*, the skill they *need* to exercise their responsibility as leaders of their nation. So in that sense, the relationship between these leaders and the people they lead may teach *us* several things as we *continue to define* the relationship between leader and people within our democracy. I will briefly mention four.

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- First, we learn from this text that leadership is best when it is *shared*. For the voice of the people to be heard, and for the leaders to carry out their responsibilities, leadership had to be shared. From Moses to Aaron to Miriam to the seventy, leadership is shared, and the nation moves forward.

- Second, we learn from this text that leadership is best when it is *trusted*. God says to Moses, “Gather for me seventy... whom you *know* to be... *elders...and officers...*” The leaders God instructs Moses to choose are to come from among people who are *already exercising leadership* within the tribe, people recognized and experienced as leaders. The seeds of trust are sown.
- Third, God instructs Moses to provide these leaders and the people they lead with *structure*. The number of elders is initially set at 70. They are taken *outside the camp* into the *tent of meeting* where they have a *place* and a *space* to deliberate and make their decisions about governing. When two additional elders not in the original seventy – Eldad and Medad – are found to display similar gifts of prophecy, Moses invites these two in, against the nervousness of two of his advisors. But invited into the tent, Eldad and Medad become part of the *structure* God ordains.
- Fourth, God equips *all* these elders with the *gifts* they need to govern, namely, the spirit of prophesy Moses has already displayed. It is only because Eldad and Medad have been equipped with the same spirit that they are in fact invited to share in leadership.

Thus, from this text we derive that leadership that is *shared, trusted, structured, and gifted* goes a long way toward making the relationship between leaders and people constructive. This was true for the people of Israel. I believe it is true for us as well, as we continue to shape the democratic society in which we live.

IV.

I want to share with you some conclusions I drew from this text in writing a paper on it for the Moveable Feast Preaching Group I attend each January, and then I want to close with a pastoral note about our congregation.

In January I wrote:

- Democracy is rarely pretty. What ends in this text as an orderly sharing of power, responsibility, and gift beyond the one leader Moses *begins* as an uprising of “complaint” from what the text calls “the rabble.” The eruption of complaint is real. It is rarely articulated with the smoothness of language ordinarily found in leaders such as Aaron, or even the less articulate Moses. Complaint is often more about *perception* than *facts*, as the people of Israel were in fact receiving bread and water from the hand of God each day. But ultimately, because under the leadership of Moses the complaint is taken seriously, both the leaders and the people of Israel *mature*, and several generations later, they enter the Promised Land.

In January, I also wrote:

- As responsive as Moses (and ultimately God) are to the uprising of complaint, the solution does not ultimately involve turning all power, authority and decision making over to those who first raise their voice in complaint. Rather, in response to Moses’ prayer and the people’s complaint, God institutes an *orderly system of governance* by which Moses is to lead the people of Israel. While the changes involve great strides in *sharing* power, all power is *not* shared with all people all the time. Power is diffused within the people of Israel. It is given structure. It is exercised by appropriately gifted people, whose number is first set at seventy and then expanded to seventy two. Power is not given free rein to find its own bearers and expressions. Israel will be governed in an orderly capacity. It is not a town hall.

Finally, I also said in January:

- Moses remains a constant in Israel from the time God calls him – through a burning bush⁷ – to lead the people of Israel out of slavery until the time he turns over the reins to Joshua that the people might enter the Promised Land.⁸ But there are other leaders who come and go, make their contribution, and then meld back into the general population. Many have their “fifteen minutes of prophesy.” A few lead for longer periods. The initial seventy are given the spirit in an ecstatic moment. They prophesy. “But [the text says] they do not do so again.” Throughout Israel’s history, leaders play their part and then they exit – presumably with some sense of humility and pride – and pass the responsibility of leadership on to others. Even Moses, who leads the people for many years, does not himself enter the Promised Land, but passes leadership on to Joshua. Yet of Moses the text says: “Now the man Moses was very *humble*, *more humble* than anyone else on the face of the earth.”⁹

V.

This leads me to close on a complimentary note. In the thirteen years I have been your pastor, I have come to know and observe many of you who work directly or indirectly in service to our nation. Some are military or retired officers or spouses, some of whom I have had the privilege of burying at Arlington National Cemetery. Some are elected officials local or national; appointed officials; civil servants; diplomats; intelligence officers; congressional staff. Some of you are lobbyists, lawyers, campaign consultants, pollsters, journalists, analysts in think tanks or universities. Some work for defense contractors, trade associations, non-governmental agencies seeking to bring relief and development to this country and around the world. And some of you are family to these.

Now granted I may be a poor judge of character, but what I have experienced among nearly all of you is a *sense of humility* about what you do. Nearly to a person I experience you as humble. I have told several people that members of Westminster “work for household names and don’t want to be one.” It may be that it is your *humility* even more than your brains or talent through which you make the greatest contribution to our nation’s welfare.

As you are involved in shared leadership, trust, structure, and appropriate gifts in serving our nation, what I most appreciate about you is your humility.

Amen.

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⁷ Exodus 3.1-12ff.

⁸ Numbers 27:12-23.

⁹ Numbers 12:3.