



First United Church of Oak Park

Feed me Till I Want No More

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-17, 24-29

The Rev. Dr. Deborah Kapp

September 30, 2018

There are so many dimensions of this text to talk about this morning, that it is hard to know where to begin.

The text begins and ends with the people's hunger, their craving, their dissatisfaction and impatience with the blessings God has given them.

The text is laden with rich feminine imagery for God. Moses reminds God that God is the mother of this people. God conceived them and gave them birth. The language Moses uses evokes mercy and compassion, traits often associated with motherhood.

There is a whole narrative here about leadership development among the people, the establishment of elders.

And then, of course, there is this little story about two relatively unknown guys named Eldad and Medad.

The backdrop to the larger story is the narrative about the people's cravings and God's motherhood. I want to be on record as saying that it's singularly unfair that one of the few times we get motherhood imagery in the Bible, it is in a story that gives motherhood a bad name. This is a story like ones that some of you might tell about your worst experiences at the family dinner table.

The Israelites are bored with what mom has been serving. Sound familiar? "Oh, this again," the Israelites say. "Manna. When are we going to have something good? What about the cucumbers and leeks and melons that we used to have? What about meat? Meat!"

Mom's not having a good day. "Meat?" she says. "You want meat? I'll give you meat. You are going to eat meat for breakfast. You are going to eat meat for lunch. You are going to eat meat for dinner. And you're not just going to do it one day; you're going to do it for a month. You will eat so much meat it makes you sick. You will eat so much meat it will come out of your nostrils." Really. That's what God says; it's in the verses I left out of the reading. I also left out the part where the Israelites named the place "graves of craving," because they remembered it with such distaste and some people actually died there.

Who wants to be at that dinner table? Who wants to cuddle up with that mother? Remember when you wanted to put a little distance between you and your mother, until she calmed down? This is one of those days. Moses is caught right in the middle. He's the proverbial middle child, or the dad, or whoever is designated the family peace-keeper. One commentator suggests that Moses starts the whole leadership discussion just to distract God's attention from the people and the meat.¹

¹Pamela Tamarkin Reis, "Numbers XI: Seeing Moses Plain," *Vestus Testamentum* LV,2, 207-231.

Our lectionary text today focuses our attention where Moses wants to focus God: on leadership development. To talk about this, I'm going to put aside the family table analogy, because it doesn't work very well when we move to this part of the story. But, even though we move away from the analogy, we need the meat story as background, because that is part of the context in which this leadership development occurs.

The people's hunger, their craving, frames these events. Human beings are made for variety; we thrive on it. We feel burdened when our lives are weighed down with humdrum monotony. Maybe that monotony is a job that's not really our vocation, but it's how we make the money we need. Maybe it's relentless unemployment or underemployment; that seems to be the burden carried by some of the Trump voters. Maybe it's a struggle with chronic illness that just never lets up. Or, life being what it is, maybe your monotony is just a relentless grind. That's not thriving. It's existing, and that's what the Israelites are doing out in the wilderness. They don't like it. They crave a better life.

And, to make matters worse, they are in the wilderness. We talked about this a couple of weeks ago when we looked at a text about Ezekiel. The wilderness is dislocation. The wilderness is transition. The wilderness is being wherever it is you are, without a road map.²

So here they are in the graves of craving, where the people hunger for a better life, and they don't know how in the world to get there. In this context, they face a challenge: how are they all going to be able to live together. That is a timely question, for our world, for our nation, for our church. How do we live together? We, with our cravings and anxieties, how do we make life together work?

Moses is weighed down with this question, because he's taken the whole thing on himself. He's discovered that Abraham Lincoln was right about not being able to please all of the people all of the time. The text emphasizes the weight of the burden that Moses carries.³ So, to relieve the burden, Moses does what God suggests. He selects 70 men - I suspect that the gender exclusivity is probably accurate - and once they are gathered, God takes some of the spirit that he had given to Moses and distributes it among the men. They prophesy, once.

There is no scholarly agreement about what it means that they prophesied. Some people think that the 70 men have an ecstatic experience; they speak in tongues, fall down, dance, are "slain in the Spirit," as some Pentecostals might say. Other people think this was a much more Presbyterian sort of thing, with the men sharing wisdom and exercising discernment, an ancient version of strategic planning without the markers and newsprint.⁴ Take your pick; you have a wide range of ways to interpret this text.

The bottom line is that this ancient story uses the language of "spirit" to talk about the way in which Moses and God begin to build a network of trust and authority among the people. In my mind, those two words mean pretty much the same thing, trust and authority. People have authority because we trust them to do whatever it is we want them to do. What we see here is Moses and God beginning to build that trust into a network among

² Tim Gorringer, "Numbers: Chapter 11," Expository Times 2005, 12-14.

³ Reis.

⁴ John R. Levinson, "Prophecy in Ancient Israel: The Case of the Ecstatic Elders," Catholic Biblical Quarterly 65 (2003), 503-521.

the people. It's a first step in figuring out how they are going to make things work. These hungry, anxious people need to learn to trust each other.

But trust is a funny thing, because it works paradoxically. Are you familiar with the team building exercise called "trust fall?" It's a group exercise in which people take turns being vulnerable with each other. One person at a time stands up, puts her arms over her chest, and then falls backward, and the idea is that the group will catch her, before she falls flat on the floor or the sidewalk and cracks her head open. This is a process through which the falling person learns that she can trust her friends, because they do indeed catch her, they have her back. But she cannot learn that without making herself vulnerable first. That's the way trust works. You have to take a chance with people before you can know how trustworthy they really are.

Here we see Moses and God taking a big chance. They take a bit of the spirit, the charisma, that God had given Moses, and they spread it out. And, one of the first things they discover is that they can't control it. Not even God can hem in her own spirit.

Eldad and Medad are not part of the 70, but somehow they get a little bit of the spirit anyway and they start prophesying, too. It's kind of like that I Love Lucy episode when Lucy and Ethel put too much yeast in the dough and they end up with much more than they can handle. The Kingdom of Heaven is like that; it's like leaven hidden in a loaf; it grows in ways we do not understand and cannot contain. And Moses gets a glimpse of that truth.

Eldad and Medad. The "Eld" part of their names is a Hebrew word for love. "God's love" and "who is loved" is how we might translate their names.⁵ The spirit overflows with God's love, and it spills out into the Israelite community.

Martin Buber makes a great observation in his book *The Prophetic Faith*, when he writes about Israel and God in the wilderness. He says that God isn't interested in Israel being a crowd of people, a random conglomeration of folks moving through the wilderness. God, says Buber, is interested in Israel being a community.⁶ They can't be a community if they don't trust each other. Neither can we. We cannot be the community God calls us to be if we do not trust each other.

The important thing that this text tells me, is that when we talk about trust in a religious community, we are not just talking about our capacity as human beings to act with integrity, compassion, and transparency - or whatever the values are that we want to affirm. We are also talking about God's capacity to act with integrity and compassion. Because we are not just in a community with each other; we are in community with God, too. Like leaven hidden in a loaf, God has shared with us some measure of her spirit. And God's love overflows from that spirit; it cannot be contained.

⁵ Reis.

⁶ Martin Buber, *The Prophetic Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1949), 55.

There are Eldads and Medads all over this sanctuary, people of every age whose words and deeds are so often a witness to God's love. That's what we are invited to trust. Not that we are perfect, but that God is here, working mysteriously among us like leaven hidden in a loaf. And God loves us.

As I write this, I realize that I have painted myself into a theological corner because I began this sermon with an illustration about the ugly side of God: the anger and frustration God feels when the Israelites are ungrateful. In the end I assert that we should all trust God, because God is loving and shares her spirit with us. Can we really go from here to there? I think if we look at Israel's larger experience of God in the Old Testament we have to say "yes."

The God of these texts is not warm and fuzzy, she is not a presence with whom we want to cuddle up. At the same time, this God is dependable. This God is resilient and relentless. This God is inventive. This God is committed. Committed to the people of Israel. Committed to all who read this text in faith. Committed to you and me.

And it is this divine commitment, this steadfast love that endures forever and will not let us go that is the bedrock of any trust we might have as a church. God is one on whom we can rely. We can trust her. And, with her at our sides, we can also trust each other. Amen.