

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29 The foreign rabble who were among the Israelites were overcome by their craving. The Israelites also wept once again and said, “Who is going to give us meat to eat? ⁵We remember the fish we ate in Egypt free of charge, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. ⁶But now our lives are wasting away. We have nothing at all to look at except this manna.”... ¹⁰Moses heard people from all the clans weeping, each one at the entrance to his own tent. At the same time, the LORD’s anger burned fiercely, and Moses was displeased. ¹¹Moses said to the LORD, “...¹⁴I am not able to carry all these people by myself, because that is too much for me. ¹⁵If you are going to treat me this way, please kill me right now. If I have found favor in your eyes, do not let me see my own ruin.” ¹⁶So the LORD said to Moses, “Gather seventy men from the elders of Israel for me, men whom you know to be elders and officers for the people. Take them to the Tent of Meeting and make them stand there with you.”...²⁵The LORD came down in the cloud and spoke to him. He took from the Spirit that was on Moses and put it on the seventy elders. When the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied, but they did not do it again. ²⁶Two men, however, remained in the camp. The name of one was Eldad, and the name of the other was Medad. They were listed among the elders, but they had not gone out to the tent. The Spirit rested on them, and they prophesied back in the camp. ²⁷A young man ran and reported this to Moses. He said, “Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp!” ²⁸Joshua son of Nun, Moses’ aide from his youth, answered, “My lord Moses, stop them!” ²⁹Moses said to him, “Are you jealous for my sake? If only all of the LORD’s people were prophets so that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!”

The Gospel lesson for today is one of the most shocking sections of the Bible. People do not expect to hear words like this from Jesus. Too many people want to paint him as this peace-loving hippie sort of guy who just wants people to chill out. That’s not our Savior. He had some very serious work to do and in that lesson we get a glimpse of just how serious it is.

Jesus says that a person would be better off tied to a massive rock and drowned in the middle of the Pacific Ocean rather than cause anyone to sin. He says that we would be better off cutting off our hand or gouging out our eye rather than have them lead us into sin. So should we cut off our heads to keep ourselves from sinning? Remember the fifth commandment forbids us to harm ourselves too. His point is to show how serious sin is and how we should make every effort to avoid it.

The first lesson for today shows what happens when sin is allowed to run wild. The whole country was in an uproar. Their leader, Moses, was at the point of just giving up. Who could blame him? So God himself was going to intervene for the good of his people and the glory of his name. God Knows How to Handle Problems. We will see the issue, God’s solution, and Moses’ acceptance.

The book of Numbers is called that because the book begins with God telling Moses to take a census of the people. That way we get an idea of just how big the nation of Israel was when they left Egypt. God commanded another census later in chapter 26 not long before they finally entered the Promised Land. This book lists some of the laws that God had given to his people. It also gives their history from the time they left Mount Sinai until they were about to cross the Jordan River to go into the Promised Land.

This text occurred roughly two years after they had left Egypt. They were very close to the Promised Land. In chapter 13 we see how Moses sent 12 men, one from each tribe, to scout out this new land that God was giving them. You might say, “Wait a minute. I thought it took 40 years for them to get there.” You would be right. Sort of. Two scouts, Joshua and Caleb, encouraged them to enter that land because God was with them.

The other 10 got the people into a tizzy so that they refused to go in. As a result, they were forced to wander in the wilderness for another 38 years until all of those who were adults when they left Egypt would die off. Then their children would go in and take possession of it. God is very patient but his patience is not unlimited. If people keep questioning his promises, eventually he will take them away.

Apparently there were some non-Jewish people who were traveling with them. They started causing problems. They were sick to death of this manna, the miraculous bread that God had given them to eat every day. They thought back to when they were in Egypt, **“We remember the fish we ate in Egypt free of charge, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. ⁶But now our lives are wasting away.”**

They made it sound like being in Egypt was kind of like being at a luxury resort. They forgot how they had all been slaves. They were put to hard labor and beaten violently if they didn’t keep up. Pharaoh had commanded that all their male babies should be drowned in the Nile River. God had rescued them from all of that. To say that they were ungrateful would be an understatement.

Moses had been dealing with this nonsense for two long years. No matter how much God did for them, the people rebelled time and time again. Since they couldn’t take out their frustration on God directly, they took

it out on Moses and his brother, Aaron, the leaders that God had appointed. Moses is saying some dangerous things here, blaming God for the predicament they were in. He even asked God just to take his life if things were going to keep being this way.

Any of that sound familiar? It should. God has blessed us just as richly, actually even more richly than he blessed the Israelites. But then when God sees fit to allow some problem to come into our lives, what do we do? We act as if we never saw any of those blessings. We make it seem like suddenly all of God's promises are null and void. We sit in our homes surrounded by all of our possessions and gripe that God isn't good.

I think that every pastor can identify with Moses. Every pastor has had members of the congregation take out their frustrations on them. It seems like you serve and serve and people just take and take but never show any gratitude. The ministry goes from being one of the greatest blessings that God has given to people to the greatest burden in the world. The problem actually is the same. It's just in this case the pastor has forgotten God's promises too. Then you feel guilty about that as well.

God Knows How to Handle Problems. We've seen the issue. Now see God's solution.

How would you expect that God would deal with this situation? We might think that he would do exactly what he did in the verses before and after this text. He sent a plague to punish them. God does that because he is a holy God and he won't let people keep rejecting him. But he also knows that that is not a permanent solution to the problem. You can't punish the sin out of people. The only thing that would really make a change is the Word of God itself, so God made it more accessible.

This was God's plan. He said, **"Gather seventy men from the elders of Israel for me, men whom you know to be elders and officers for the people. Take them to the Tent of Meeting and make them stand there with you."** Then he did something amazing, **"²⁵The LORD came down in the cloud and spoke to him. He took from the Spirit that was on Moses and put it on the seventy elders. When the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied, but they did not do it again."**

This way Moses wouldn't feel like he had to take care of the people himself. The 70 elders would assist him. It's sort of like if I tried to do all of the work in this congregation. There's not enough hours in the day and, quite frankly, I don't have the gifts to do everything that this congregation needs. So God blessed us with teachers for our school and leaders in the congregation.

Speaking of which, in about a month we are going to have a Voters' Meeting with election of officers. We will be tapping some of you on the shoulder to help. Consider that as a request from God himself. I know you're busy. Everybody is busy. But God has also given every believer gifts to use. This is an opportunity to make use of your gifts for the good of this congregation and the glory of our God. The same God who was with them will be with you as you serve.

This also reminds me that I got some good news when I was in Wisconsin. There are 49 first-year students at the Seminary. That's a really big class. Projections indicate that within about a decade or so, the vacancy rate in the Synod for pastors will be below 5%. You know what that means? God is answering the prayers of his people. Keep praying for more workers and encourage the young people in your family to consider being in the full-time ministry as a pastor or teacher.

When we talk about God taking from the Holy Spirit who was on Moses and giving it to the 70 elders, we might think that Moses would be weaker as a result of that. We think of it being like a cake. There's a big difference if you have a cake to yourself as opposed to sharing it with 70 of your closest friends. It is more like using one candle to light 70 other candles. The first candle doesn't get diminished at all, but there's a lot more light now.

I think of how I was taught at St. John's school in Bay City. My grandfather taught me the catechism. At MLS, Northwestern College, and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary my professors taught me more and more about God's Word. Now it is my privilege to bring that same message to you. Through the Word and Sacraments the same Holy Spirit strengthens and encourages us to proclaim Jesus to the world.

Also remember why God is going to all of this trouble in this text. It is because he is looking ahead to you. If this nation, Israel, falls apart, then his promise of a Savior cannot be fulfilled. So he dealt with them in love and patience so that he could send the Savior that both they and we so desperately need. It's just another example of how God has been working out all of history with you in mind.

God Knows How to Handle Problems. We've seen God's solution. Finally see Moses' acceptance.

Two of the elders didn't go to the Tent of Meeting. They were named Eldad and Medad. Why didn't they go? We don't really know. I hope it wasn't because they were ignoring Moses' command because then

they will also have been ignoring God. Maybe we can put the best construction on it and say that there was some emergency that they had to deal with. I guess we can ask God when we get to heaven.

Why they were there is not clear. What they did is. They also began prophesying like the other 68 elders had. We don't know what this involved. It seems like it was some kind of miraculous prophesying. The people who had been whining and complaining against Moses probably wouldn't have been willing to accept those elders either. This miraculous sign would have shown that they had been chosen by God himself and so the people should respect them as God's representatives.

You may have noticed that when we installed our new principal, Michael Chappell, last month, that he didn't start prophesying or speaking in tongues or anything like that. God the Holy Spirit is still with him but those signs are no longer necessary. We have the completed Bible. We know he is speaking for God because he is bringing God's Word. The Holy Spirit guided our decision to call him so we can regard him as a special blessing from our God to us.

When Joshua heard that these two men were prophesying in the camp he said, "**My lord Moses, stop them!**" He was a good man. He had been serving as Moses' assistant for years. As I mentioned before, he would be one of the two faithful scouts who encouraged the people to take God at his Word and enter the Promised Land. Almost four decades later he would replace Moses as leader and guide the nation in the conquest of that land.

His concern wasn't just for Moses personally. He had already seen how quick the people were to turn on him and Aaron. He worried that these two men prophesying would lead more of the people away from him and, by extension, lead them away from God. So Moses set him straight, "**Are you jealous for my sake? If only all of the LORD's people were prophets so that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!**"

This situation was not a problem for Moses. This would only help him. The burden of leading the people wouldn't just be on his shoulders anymore. The reason the people were rebelling is because they weren't particularly spiritual. Having more, strong, faithful spiritual leaders would only be a good thing. This wouldn't stop the people from being ornery and rebellious, but now there were more and better ways to deal with that.

In the same way, I wasn't worried when Michael Chappell accepted the call. Otherwise I very likely was going to be principal. I wasn't concerned that people might feel that they don't need me as much because he is here. I don't get frustrated when a new pastor graduates from the Seminary and is assigned near me. I know I'm not going to be able to serve forever. I can be encouraged by their youthful enthusiasm and I can share what I've learned over three decades in the ministry.

Later God inspired the Apostle Paul to write, "**God is faithful. He will not allow you to be tested beyond your ability, but when he tests you, he will also bring about the outcome that you are able to bear it.**" This text is a classic example of that. God didn't suddenly make all of Moses' problems go away, but he strengthened him to deal with them. This same God will equip us to deal with whatever the future holds until the day comes when all of our problems are left behind here and we join him in heaven.

God Knows How to Handle Problems. We've seen the issue, God's solution, and Moses' acceptance. Sin never builds anyone up. It places ourselves over other people and causes jealousy and in-fighting. God has given us the perfect solution in his Word. Our Savior took our sin and guilt on himself so now we are free to live in humble service for each other.