

September 30, 2018  
New Song Episcopal Church  
Matthew Helmke  
(All lectionary passages are included below the sermon text.)

## **Scattered Thoughts with a Theme**

Moses became discouraged. His people, the ones that God appointed him to lead, were unhappy. They were unhappy with their food, with the hardship of life in the wilderness, with Moses, and with God. They forgot about the life of slavery in Egypt and only remembered the food they ate while in slavery. God was angry with them and Moses was displeased.

Then Moses prayed a prayer that is similar to a prayer I would wager every person in this room has prayed at some point. In desperation, at the end of his rope, Moses cried out the equivalent of, “Enough, God! I can’t take any more of this. Why me? I can’t solve this problem; it is too big for me. I wish you would let me die.”

It is a human thing. We seem to be programmed to look for an escape route, for a solution to the problems around us. Sometimes, those problems are bigger than we are and we know that we alone cannot solve them.

As we look through the Bible, we see that Moses was not alone in his longing for death during adversity. Jonah, Elijah, Job, the Psalmist, and others each reached the end of their abilities and cried out, “Why me, O Lord?” Often they followed this with the very human sentiment that death would be preferable to continuing.

In each case, God chose not to give the death that was requested, but instead

brought about a solution, generally not the solution that was expected.

In today's case, God gave Moses the wisdom to appoint elders to help share the burden Moses was carrying alone. The text does not say that they suddenly provided the meat that the people were demanding, but instead it says that they prophesied.

Two other men who were among the seventy elders, but who did not make it to the meeting place also prophesied. Joshua became jealous on Moses' behalf, and Moses responded that he wished all of God's people would have the Spirit of the Lord upon them and prophesy.

What makes prophecy such a good thing? It is that through prophecy we hear the voice of God and this reduces the impact of other voices, including our own. It is a process of humbling ourselves and making our thoughts secondary to God's.

James tells us that prayer is powerful and effective, and that if anyone is in need, they should pray. They are invited, nay instructed, to find the elders of the church and ask them to lay their hands on them, anoint them with oil, and pray for them.

What is it about prayer that is so powerful? Why is it the default recommendation in times of trouble? I think a huge part of it is that prayer is an act of humility, recognizing and admitting that we do not have within ourselves adequate power to say, do, or even be all that we hope.

Humility is not self-effacing, it is not demeaning, it is not saying "for such a

worm as I” (as a line says in a rather perverse hymn I remember from my childhood).

No, humility is being honest. I have limits. There are things I can do and things I cannot do. Prayer is taking humility one step further and asking for help.

It is in this context that I think we should read today’s Gospel.

“Jesus, other people are doing good things in your name and we tried to stop them.”

“No, do not stop them. Rather, remove anything from the path that would cause a person to trip and fall on their way to follow me. This includes allowing them to speak and do good things on my behalf.” (Both paraphrases are mine.)

Stumbling blocks. These are the things that *people* do that give *God* a bad name. Stumbling blocks don’t come from God. They come from our pride.

Jesus gets right to the point with some powerful imagery. We should choose to humble ourselves and change or remove the things in our lives that cause us to follow poorly.

If seeing a beautiful woman causes you to feel lustful, don’t demand that she change how she dresses. Instead admit and get help for your lust problem, to the extreme point of plucking out your eye.

Our issues are never someone else’s to solve. But sometimes, they are too powerful for us to solve alone.

This is why we have prayer. We have a God who loves us, who accepts us, who forgives us, and who helps us.

This is why we have a community. We love each other. We accept each other. We forgive each other. We pray for each other. And we help each other.

Amen.

## **Numbers 11:4-6,10-16,24-29**

The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again, and said, “If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.”

Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, all at the entrances of their tents. Then the Lord became very angry, and Moses was displeased. So Moses said to the Lord, “Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child,’ to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors? Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say, ‘Give us meat to eat!’ I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once—if I have found favor in your sight—and do not let me see my misery.”

So the Lord said to 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 to the tent of meeting, and have them take their place there with you.

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!”

## **Psalm 19:7-14**

### ***Caeli enarrant***

7 The law of the Lord is perfect  
and revives the soul; \*  
the testimony of the Lord is sure  
and gives wisdom to the innocent.

8 The statutes of the Lord are just  
and rejoice the heart; \*  
the commandment of the Lord is clear  
and gives light to the eyes.

9 The fear of the Lord is clean  
and endures for ever; \*  
the judgments of the Lord are true  
and righteous altogether.

10 More to be desired are they than gold,  
more than much fine gold, \*  
sweeter far than honey,  
than honey in the comb.

11 By them also is your servant enlightened, \*  
and in keeping them there is great reward.

12 Who can tell how often he offends? \*  
cleans me from my secret faults.

13 Above all, keep your servant from presumptuous sins;  
let them not get dominion over me; \*  
then shall I be whole and sound,  
and innocent of a great offense.

14 Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my  
heart be acceptable in your sight, \*  
O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.

## **James 5:13-20**

Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

## **Mark 9:38-50**

John said to Jesus, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

"If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

"For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."