

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!"*

Asking for Help - September 26, 2021 *Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29*

2021 has been called the year of “The Great Resignation.” Across all industries and occupations people are retiring and quitting in unprecedented numbers. The Covid pandemic has stretched us all to our limits, mentally, physically, and spiritually. We are all frustrated. We are all feeling overwhelmed. We are definitely burnt out.

And no wonder. Many of us in the United States have enjoyed a relatively stable life. Most of us have been blessed with a good measure of stability and predictability in our daily living. And of course nearly all of us prefer stability to chaos. Now most of us don’t want and should not have too much sameness in our lives. We certainly don’t want every day to be a carbon copy of the day before. Nevertheless what we have all been through these past 18 months: the changes in work, the changes in school, the constant worries about family and friends. These are all dramatic transformations that most of us have never had to deal with in our lives.

Our natural reaction to all the changes swirling around us is to withdraw and retreat. I expect for those of us in the working world, we have been asked to perform tasks and quote unquote be flexible in ways that we have not imagined and were not well prepared for. Many of us have improvised and are improvising in all kinds of ways we never expected to be doing.

So suddenly we are faced with the paradoxical situation of simultaneously having a fairly high unemployment rate and an unprecedented number of available jobs. How can this be? There is plenty of work out there, there are people available to work. But somehow, they don’t want to do it.

The first reaction, of course, is to say there are a lot of lazy people out there. How dare people quit! How dare people not go back to work when there are plenty of jobs available! But is it that simple?

Let’s face it, friends. We are living in a time of great uncertainty. The pandemic has been incredibly disruptive both personally and professionally and it has made a lot of people rethink our priorities and evaluate our lives and careers. Suddenly, so much that was important is no longer important. Suddenly, the things we thought we wanted to dedicate our lives do just are not that relevant. Suddenly, priorities have shifted and we don’t know quite how to respond to any of this.

Is it any wonder that secondary activities have fallen by the wayside? I mean for many people, this church stuff is just a pleasant diversion, to be utilized on an as needed basis. After all, when people’s lives are in an uproar, who needs God? Right? So many believe that this place is all about pretending that things are OK, regardless of reality.

Sad, but true. Rather than being a safe harbor where people in all kinds of difficulties can come to and know that they will be accepted and understood, church for many is regarded as a place where we have to pretend that all is well.

Oh the painful irony! Here we proclaim that Jesus is here for everybody and accepts everybody no matter what is going on in their lives. This place is supposed to be haven, a refuge, for everyone who is experiencing stress and questioning the direction of their lives.

But instead, we find people fleeing the church in droves because deep down, they know they can't maintain the facade. They can't keep pretending that everything is OK. They feel that they can't lie about their situations with a straight face anymore so they run away from the church.

And I'm sorry to have to admit that some people are correct about how they perceive being part of a church. After all, when we can't pretend that we like our jobs, we can't pretend that all is well in our personal lives, we can't pretend that we are in control of what's going to happen, why should we want to be part of the church? For some, perhaps for many, the church after all is simply full of pretend people pretending to be something they most certainly are not.

The great resignation is driven by people who are tired of pretending that all is well. The problem is that we as the church are no longer seen as a place of authenticity. We are not viewed as a place where people can express their anger and frustration openly and honestly.

Where they go to do that, I don't quite know. I do know that alcohol consumption is way up. I do know that rehab centers are full. More and more people are simply withdrawing from the world as much as possible because it is too overwhelming and too complex. And I can't really blame them.

I am certain that Jesus envisioned His church as being a place of rest and renewal for those who have been beaten down by life. But where do we find ourselves today?

We find ourselves in the same position Moses found himself in the middle of the Sinai desert thousands of years ago. Moses was angry, he was overwhelmed, and he was burnt out and confused. In other words, Moses had come to the end of his rope, just like so many people have today.

Of course Moses was angry and confused. In his mind, he had overseen the liberation of his people from the slavery of Egypt to the freedom of moving forward in the desert toward the promised land. His people had crossed the sea, escaping the Egyptian army. They received the Ten Commandments, a new way of living and relating to each other. Their needs were provided for in the desert with manna every morning and all the water they could drink.

And yet the people, or "rabble" as the Bible calls them, were unhappy. Freedom and food were not enough to satisfy them. They said, "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 was burnt out. The people were burnt out. Everyone had been through more than enough disruptions and changes, just as we have been. And yes, we human beings get fed up, when we've had too much, when our stability is disrupted, what else do we do? We complain, we blame, we quit.

The Israelites freed under Moses' leadership felt lost and abandoned. All they could do was compare their current situation to the supposedly great life they had in Egypt. Sure, they may have been slaves. Sure, they had no freedom. Sure, they were abused by their masters. But at least they had cucumbers! At least they had garlic! They could eat well in Egypt while Moses could only offer them manna.

Now you may believe the Israelites had a legitimate complaint back then, just as so many people are legitimately complaining about how things are right now. The people back then wanted to quit, they wanted to go back to the familiar life they knew. You may believe that those caught up in the "Great Retirement" have much to be annoyed about as well.

I don't doubt that God was angry with the Israelites just as Moses was. How ungrateful they were! How amazing that they, instead of praising God, they could only talk about how bad things were. I mean who cares about freedom when you can have all the fish you want! Why not quit what you have today, even if you don't know what you really want?

And isn't that the heart of all the complaining? Back then and right now?

What are the answers for our lives? We are experts in what we don't want from life, but somehow can't explain what we do want from life. Where friends, where are we going?

Back then, the people's frustrations showed up loud and clear at Moses' feet. He felt totally overwhelmed and utterly powerless to lead his people. Moses was so upset that he literally asked God to kill him so he could be freed from the burden of leadership. Moses faced the impossible task of leading people who didn't know what they wanted — and therefore he could not lead them forward on his own. So he complained to God.

Likewise it's plain that while people are quitting their current jobs, they aren't rushing to fill the existing vacancies, are they? It's hard to lead people who can't express their needs and wants. When leaders can't discern what their followers want, they often quit.

Does it surprise you that Moses wanted to quit? I mean Moses didn't just want to quit, he wanted to die! Listen to what he said, " 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."

Moses wanted out. He was tired of proving over and over again that God was on the side of the people or "the rabble" as the scripture calls them. He was tired of listening to all the whining and complaining. He didn't understand how the people did not understand and appreciate everything that God had done for them and was planning to do for them. Moses saw himself presiding of a bunch of spoiled 2-year-olds and at this point in the journey thought things ought to be going better.

Now I know that few of us have been tasked to do something as difficult as what Moses did. We have not had to liberate thousands of people from a cruel pharaoh in Egypt. We have not had to lead people through the desert without a clear source of food and water. We have not had to listen and deal with the

complaints of dozens, hundreds, even thousands of people all at once. Frankly, I'm amazed Moses lasted as long as he did before pouring out his anger and frustration to God.

Nevertheless, every one of us has faced, is facing, and certainly will face massive challenges in our lives. We will all have important decisions to make and have to deal with people, friends, and family, who disagree and will argue with us. That, my friends, is what life is all about.

However, when the battles of life come our way — and make no mistake they will — we do have a choice on how to respond. For a long time, Moses kept making the wrong choice. You see, Moses kept believing that he had to do everything by himself. During the time in Egypt, during the crossing of sea, during his receiving the Ten Commandments, during the wandering in the desert, Moses made himself the chief problem solver. He just kept assuming that he had to find the answers himself. He had to convince the people himself. He had to have an answer to every question and problem, all by himself.

Does that sound familiar? I'm sure for most of us it does. Let's face it, in our society asking for help is frowned upon, To ask for help is often seen as a sign of weakness. When we ask for help, we fear that others will make fun of us or someone will easily produce a better solution and make us look foolish.

It took the extreme pressure of all the people simultaneously complaining against Moses for Moses to reach his breaking point. Finally, finally, finally, Moses cried out to God and confessed that he could not do it alone. Look at the story: Moses wanted to die. Then and only then did he break down and yell at God.

Friends, I pray that you and I never reach the point in our lives and situations when we see yelling at God as the only solution short of death. The fact is that as far as Moses is concerned, as far as we are concerned in our lives, there is no reason, absolutely no reason why things should ever get that bad. At no point in our lives do we need to feel that the burden of fixing everything and solving every problem should fall on our shoulders alone. Moses should have called out to God long before he did. God was always there, waiting to hear Moses' cry for help. But the only one who could ask for help was Moses. He had to realize his need. He had to do the asking. He had to ask, because he would only be able to listen to God after he asked. Only then would he be open to God.

And God did listen to Moses when he asked for help. The good news, friends, the best news is that God will listen to us, too, when we ask for help. God is always present. God is always available. God is here right now and God wants all of us to live the lives we were intended to live. All we have to do is ask.

So how did God respond to Moses? Two ways. First God sent Moses help in the form of people. In other words, Moses finally came around to the idea that maybe, just maybe, he could share the burden of leadership with others. How often do we refuse to let others help us? How often do we keep saying no, even when others tell us they want to help. Sure, they might not do things exactly the way we want. Sure, they might have different ideas from ours. But, even if they don't do things perfectly, isn't that better than no help at all? Who knows, perhaps, just maybe, they might have ideas that our better than ours! Oh my!

The other thing that God did for Moses was to share is spirit with his leaders. What does that mean?

Friends, in life, if we don't include God in our planning and leadership process, we will fail. It's easy to look

at so many brilliant and wonderful ideas to improve and change society that ignore God. As we debate equality in our nation, why is nobody proclaiming that equality was God's plan from the first chapter of Genesis? As we focus on climate change, why is nobody insisting God created the world as a harmonious place and that the role of human beings is to care for creation, not abuse it? I fear that because we are not bluntly stating that equality and climate change are not just human preferences but God's commands, these well-meaning initiatives will fail.

If God's spirit is not at the center of our thoughts and ideas, everything we try will never be as good as it could be and in fact, will likely fail.

Only when the nation of Israel put God and God's spirit first could they successfully unite and move forward to enter the promised land. The Scripture tells us that after this incident when Moses asked for help, things went much better for the people. The controversies died down. The people complained much less.

Until we as a nation today put God in the center of our needs and our problems, we will continued to be mired in the arguments and hatred which are driving us apart and things will just get worse.

Is it any wonder that after Moses finally accepted God's help he exclaimed, "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!" Let us ask for help from God without shame and without fear. Let us all be God's prophets.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.