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

It is clear that the Bible is about real people. They aren't perfect saints. They are folks who have major faults. They get really grumpy and worried and confused, just as we do.

Our Old Testament lesson, from the book of Numbers, depict just such a moment. It occurs after the Israelites had been released from back-breaking labor in Egypt. God called Moses to go face-to-face with the Pharaoh. And to lead them to the promised land, a land of milk and honey. Along the way, God provided them with manna from heaven, so that they could eat. (*Exodus 16:1-34*) When they complained, God provided water from a stone. (*Exodus 17:1-7*)

In our lesson, the people are grumbling again about food. The manna is so boring! They fantasize about their days in Egypt. They forget all the horrible parts of slavery. All they can think of are the fish and vegetables and fruits that they ate.

What a selective memory! We can understand why Moses gets frustrated with the people. He turns to God, and really lets loose with complaint.

Why are you treating me so badly, God? "Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them?" (*Num 11:12*) The feminine imagery is really clear. He compares his

position as carrying them like a nursing child, until they reach the promised land.

He basically asks, “Am I their mother? Am I the one responsible for their welfare? I can’t handle the burden of them by myself.”

It’s the way that he whines that is telling. Of course he is not their mother. The answer to these rhetorical questions is no! Their God, Yahweh, is the one who is created them. God is responsible for making sure that they have enough to eat. That they are cared for and loved. God made promises that they would be saved from slavery for a better life. The people keep putting pressure on Moses. What will we eat? But that’s not where the responsibility lies. God is ultimately responsible for their lives.

God answers Moses’ complaints with a practical solution. Moses feels alone? God gives him a recruiting strategy, so that he is not the only one leading. Some of the Israelites can help to guide one another. God gives Moses strength – in the form of people.

Moses chooses seventy to join him as leaders. He gathers them and God blesses them. The Lord “took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders.” (*Num 11:25*) They prophesied, giving a clear sign of God’s presence with each of them. They were anointed to help bring the Israelites to the promised land.

The organizational restructuring is not only answer. God blessed even more people, beyond the seventy that were selected. The spirit also rested on Eldad and Medad. They prophesied to those who remained in the camp.

There is good news for the congregation of Emanuel's in this text. I have heard concern from people here about the future of the congregation. Money is tight and the long-term future seems uncertain. I have heard weariness in the voices of some of you who have been leaders for a long time. It seems like the burden of always serving as a leader is too heavy. I know that we are not alone in these struggles. Many of our neighboring churches here in the north boroughs are similar. They remember days when their large sanctuaries were full.

As far as I know, Emanuel's has not been promised a land of milk and honey. But God has seen you through over 100 years of ministry as a people. And we all hope that there are 100 more years to come.

Like the Israelites, we have moments of frustration and panic. What are we to do? Why have we been put in this position? How do we know what the future will hold?

The Word points us in the first direction we should turn. God created us. We were drawn into the body of Christ by God in the waters of baptism. The Spirit

blessed us each with a call to ministry in the world. And we have all come to Emanuel's that we may be fed and live our faith in God together.

God is the author of the story of our lives. And when we are unsure of our ground or future, we turn to God. Our first resource should be prayer – whether it is prayer filled with frustration and worry, or joy and delight.

What's hard is that the character of God's answer to our prayerful questions is not a guarantee. God might reorganize us – like gathering more leaders to help Moses. God might bless leaders or ministries who we don't view with authority – like Eldad and Medad prophesying in the camp. God might have an unexpected way that Emanuel's can share grace with the people around us. Christ's Spirit goes where she chooses. God blesses some ministries and ways of being at one time in life. At another time, the Spirit may move and God's blessing may change.

Change – the big “c” word. In the church, we live in the midst of a tension. Of course we hold onto the traditions that make us who we are as a people of faith. We never leave what makes us Christian. And we want to remember the history and heritage of our communities. But our God is one who surprises us with new prophets. Or who shows up at the door, clothed as a stranger. Somehow we need to remain open to the Spirit's new invitations in this new time. In our world of

economic downturns. In a society that does not assume people go to church on Sundays.

We are faithful in these times by simply continuing in our life of faith. We are called to center our lives on God, no matter what happens. We are called to continue to live as the people of God. Giving thanks, teaching, healing, serving, in the name of Jesus Christ. Drawing close to God in times of joy or sorrow, confidence or worry. In the uncertain times, we pray that the Spirit will strengthen us, bless us, and guide us out of any deserts that we find ourselves in.

I give thanks for our God who will answer our prayers. Amen.