

## P18B 2021 Numbers 11 & Mark 9 38-50

There is a joke among clergy that every ministry has a “Back to Egypt” committee, an allusion to today’s reading from Numbers and the many other passages in the Exodus story where the people of Israel whine unto the Lord because their restoration to the Promised Land is not instantaneous. God sent Moses and the plagues to deliver Israel from slavery; God opened the Red Sea so they could escape on dry land and then closed the waters behind them over Pharaoh’s chariots; God led them by a pillar of cloud and fire; God woke them up each morning with manna, the bread of heaven. And the people said, “Yeah, and? What have you done for us lately?” In fit after fit of nostalgia, they look backwards and yearn for their life in captivity. “Remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing...” Except of course it wasn’t for nothing; it was for making bricks without straw; it was for being beaten by taskmasters; it was for all the baby boys but Moses being thrown into the Nile. Their memory is ridiculously short, and they were not yet trained for freedom; so God makes them walk in circles for a few decades until the generation that longed to return to slavery had died out.

But in the meantime, Moses can’t take the complaining anymore. “Did I conceive all this people? How did they become my problem? They are too much for me. If I have to put up with this griping all the way to the Promised Land, just kill me now.” So God sends Moses help—seventy elders to share the burden of leadership and to prophesy—that is, to speak on behalf of God—to the people. We don’t know what the elders said, but whatever it was, the people of Israel get moving, continuing to trek through the wilderness until at long last they re-occupy the land of Canaan. They don’t go back to the cucumbers and garlic and slavery, they go forward, where God always intended for them to go, even if it takes them 40 extra years and 70 extra prophets to get them there.

Two of the appointed elders, Eldad and Medad, receive the spirit and prophesy, but they don’t go to the tent with everyone else to do it. Someone tattles on them, so Joshua, the assistant to the regional manager, tries to get Moses to stop them. But Moses knows a good thing when he sees it—two more elders helping the people to get with the program. Moses isn’t going to turn down help dragging the people into the future God has promised. “Would that all the Lord’s people would get on board.” Moses knows he’s only a servant; it’s not all about him; it’s about the liberating work that God is accomplishing through and for the people.

It is because of this last little piece about Eldad and Medad that the lectionary pairs this story with today’s gospel. The disciples—who 10 verses earlier were themselves unable to cast out a demon—come running to Jesus to complain that someone else is casting out demons in his

name. John tells him, “We tried to stop him, because he was not following *us*.” Did you catch that? John didn’t say that this other person wasn’t following *Jesus*, but that he wasn’t following *us*. John is maybe not so concerned about this person’s connection to *Jesus*; his problem is that this person is working outside of the Official Disciple’s Club—so exclusive only 12 members are allowed. How dare this person who is not even part of their group cast out demons in Jesus’ name; and how much more infuriating that they were able to do it when the 12 just tried and failed.

Of course, Jesus doesn’t stop the person from casting out demons. In Mark’s gospel, the very first miraculous thing that Jesus does is cast out a demon. If freedom for the demon-possessed is a sign of the coming of the kingdom of God, why would Jesus, or the disciples, or anyone want to stop someone who is helping people by getting rid of their demons? Whoever this mystery exorcist is, he’s doing the work that Jesus himself prioritized. Not only that, he’s even doing it in Jesus’ name. John may think he’s safeguarding Jesus and Jesus’ reputation and mission, but really he’s just being territorial and elitist. Jesus does not mince words in teaching the disciples not to get in the way of anyone who is trying to be a disciple: don’t put stumbling blocks in front of others, and get rid of whatever it is *in yourself* that causes you to stumble.

Historically, Christians have done the exact opposite of what Jesus, or Moses for that matter, taught us to do. We love to define who is acting in the name of God and who is not, to confuse following Jesus with following us. Sometimes it seems like we create institutions for the express purpose of setting up the stumbling blocks Jesus warns against. And we’re usually more than happy to point out when someone else’s hand or foot or eye should be cut off, forgetting that Jesus never tells us to do that to others, only to ourselves. Like the disciples, we may know that by the Great Commission and the Spirit of Pentecost we are sent out to the whole world, but so far as who we think *really* counts as a disciple, we like to keep that group pretty small and homogenous, not open to collaboration but accessible only through assimilation. The problem is that scripture—here and everywhere else—draws a completely different trajectory. Looking at the whole biblical narrative, we see a series of boundaries which humans build and God breaks through.

It’s just human nature that leads us all to volunteer for the Back to Egypt committee sometimes: longing for what is familiar, even if it’s not as good as what God has promised; suspicious of anyone going too far or too fast or without *our* permission, forgetting that God didn’t call us to keep gates but to be sheep. Would that we recognize the Spirit that rests on all the Lord’s people, and would that we remember that all people are the Lord’s.