

Numbers 11:24-30

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!” And Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.

Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ‘In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’ (590)

Turns out, disruption might be evidence of the Holy Spirit. Things getting out of line.

If you’re like me, you appreciate good order. Things settled. Everything in its place.

Everything *having* a place. Your garden bed weeded. Your *actual* bed tidy with pillow, sheet,

blanket. Your dogs sleeping while you write in the early morning, sleeping close enough to you that you can hear their gentle snores.

The candlesticks are symmetrical on the altar table. The sanctuary itself has just enough asymmetry to keep things interesting. The musician is at the keyboard and the preacher is in the pulpit and if it were the other way around things just wouldn't sound right.

Good order. I love that line from the hymn, "Dear Lord and Father of Mankind, Forgive our Foolish Ways." "Take from our souls the strain and stress, and let our ordered lives confess the beauty of Thy peace."

Somehow, throughout its long history, it became a common confession that church is boring. How has it come to this?

And maybe it's not church everywhere, of every sort. Maybe it's just my church, the Mainline Protestant American church. Somehow, it's come to be a common understanding about us that we're boring.

I don't think we're boring. But maybe that's because quite often I'm the one who gets to talk—and the one who's talking rarely thinks she's boring.

Our first reading this morning is an obscure passage, a small incident in the larger swath of a much larger story. Moses is exhausted. The people are anxious, hungry, more than a little angry that they so willingly went off with Moses as he led them out of Egypt. Egypt, where they at least had enough to eat.

Empires are like that, and the Egyptian one was no different. Oppressive, exploitative, demanding of utter adherence to the established way of life, at least you know you'll eat again later today, at least you know there's water and milk enough for you and your children.

Moses got them dreaming of bigger things. Life beyond slavery, life beyond their own servitude to earthly lords who gave not one single care for them: Moses got them dreaming, thinking, scheming. They would leave, whether or not Pharaoh allowed them.

But now they were out—out from the sheltering oppression of empire, out from the safeguarding of a terrible economic tradeoff. Is it better to know just exactly how you'll suffer than not to know how you'll suffer?

They seemed to think so. The people grumbled, were nearing rebellion, which Moses took up the mountain to the Lord. "Why have you treated your servant so badly?" he demanded of God while the sound of weeping and wailing rang through the camp. "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 suckling child,’ to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors?’ I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me.”

At this, God said, “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. I will come down and talk with you there; and I will take some of the spirit that is on you and put it on them; and they shall bear the burden of the people along with you so that you will not bear it all by yourself.”

Moses gathered the seventy elders. He brought them to the tent of meeting, away from the camp. And God gave each of them a portion of his spirit that had once rested on Moses alone. *Ru-ah*, it’s called, which means breath, and which would come to be understood as Spirit, which seems right as a sign of the presence of the Lord, whose name is Yahweh, I AM. Breath seems like the right manifestation of the God who is being, wouldn’t you say?

But then this unexpected thing happened. Two others had stayed in the camp instead of going to the tent of meeting, Eldad and Medad. But they also prophesied. Even though they weren’t there in the place where portions of the Spirit were being handed out, even they weren’t in the tent of meeting, that sanctuary that could be packed up and moved from place to place through the wilderness years. Even though they were out in a common place, out in the world among regular old people, they still got some spirit anyway.

Apparently not even God could contain Godself. He was all over the place.

Get it together, man!

Remember when Covid was found to be, not only airborne, but incredibly transmissible? It disrupted everything.

Not everyone’s up for that level of disruption. “Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp! My lord, Moses,” Joshua said running to Moses, “stop them!”

“Are you jealous for my sake?” Moses asked. I hear him as exhausted. I hear his as incredulous. “Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them.”

Be careful what you wish for.

I’m reading a book called *Tradition and Apocalypse*. David Bentley Hart wrote it, someone whose precision with language has it so what he’s actually saying with such utter precision sneaks up on you, lashes you with its disruptive implications long after you’ve been charmed into thinking

you're safe. He's the most correct writer ever to say things that will otherwise blow the doors off. e.e. cummings had to break all the rules of conventional language to indicate what he was intending to indicate, the utter wildness of life and everything about it, the astonishing reality that courses wildly through reality. David Bentley Hart doubles down on those rules, uses rectitude to lead you out unto a wildness of untold beauty and frightening power.

You think all those words used precisely, correctly will have formed a shelter of meaning for you.

Nope.

In the penultimate chapter of the book, which shares the same name of the book, *Tradition and Apocalypse*, he writes of the tradition that he so loves, Christianity in some of its more ornate if also orderly forms, Anglicanism and then Eastern Orthodoxy: "Once upon a time [he writes], Christianity grew and endured and even flourished over the course of many generations in total and blissful ignorance of any officially defined dogma, any single universally recognized canon of scripture, anything remotely like the systematic or dogmatic theologies of the coming ages of Christendom and after."

Once upon a time.

Lately, though. The high church has its doctrines and liturgies. The low church has its BibleBibleBible. The Mainline church? Our church? "We've always done it this way." That's orthodoxy for the likes of us.

I guess we all have it: our orthodoxies. It's as if everyone everywhere is afraid of the future. The world of entertainment doubles down with sequels. The world of art and architecture returns to classical forms. Even the world of the church, the *church*, which should be propulsively future-looking: "We've always done it this way."

Hart writes, "We should never forget that official doctrine (or long-standing convention) is, above all else, a language of disillusion...a language of disenchantment, a probationary discourse that tries at once both to recuperate the force of a cosmic disruption in the form of institutional formulae and to create a stable center within history from which it might be tolerable to await a Kingdom that has been indefinitely differed."

Because, as you might know, we're *waiting*. We've been waiting, really, all this time.

Because, remember, the earliest apostles expected that Jesus would return any day now.

He'd been born, he'd lived among us, he wandered and taught and healed and raised up disciples, but then he was killed. But then he was raised, and he seemed to wander once again,

seen here, seen there, though dead now also alive and for evermore. But then he was taken up on a cloud out of the sight of the disciples, which we remembered last week, on the Sunday after Ascension Day, at which time two men in white robes appeared among the disciples who were still gazing up at the sky, and they asked them, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

Which would have them waiting.

Any day now.

But *a lot* of days have passed in the interim.

Thus, this language of disillusionment. Thus, this practice of disenchantment. Hammering out doctrines. Establishing scripture: what books belong and what books should be excised out. Deciding on where is the center of things: Jerusalem, Rome, Constantinople, Canterbury. Then reforming, getting back to basics.

“Even so,” here Hart is writing again, “it should never be forgotten that Christianity entered human history not as a new creed or sapiential [wisdom-seeking] path or system of religious observances, but as apocalypse: the sudden unveiling of a mystery hidden in God before the foundation of the world in a historical event without any possible precedent or conceivable sequel; an overturning of all the orders and hierarchies of the age...the overthrow of all the angelic and daemonic powers and principalities by a slave legally crucified by all the religious and political authorities of his time, but raised up by God as the one sole Lord over all the cosmos; the abolition of the Law between peoples; the proclamation of the imminent arrival of the Kingdom and of a new age of creation; an urgent call to all persons to come out from the shelters of social, religious, and political association into a condition of perilous and unprotected exposure, dwelling nowhere but in the singularity of this event—for the days are short.”

But the days have become long.

We were promised the reign of God in our midst; what we got was the institutional church. We were promised freedom for the oppressed, liberation for the indebted and the enslaved, a whole and healed creation where none shall hurt or destroy, where death itself, this pall cast over all creation, shall be swallowed up; what we got was an orderly recitation of three hymns, two scripture readings, and one sermon than always goes on just a little too long.

How has it come to this?

On the other hand, how could we have managed otherwise? History has proven *long*. These last days have been way more many than we originally thought.

But here we are, reminded once again to trust what disrupts us at least as much as we trust what is regular as clockwork, regular as the sun and the hours of daylight and dark as the seasons turn once again this year.

I love the regular—which is a good thing because we’re about to get a lot of the regular. With this Sunday, we turn from high liturgical time to ordinary liturgical time. We’ve had six months of eventful story: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, the Transfiguration, Lent, Holy Week, Crucifixion, Resurrection, and more Resurrection, and more Resurrection, and most recently Ascension, and now Pentecost, the Holy Spirit coming down, down to earth, down to where people live, where people live most often unremarkable lives, just day after day, sunup, sundown, breakfast, dinner, wake the kids, get the kids to bed.

As you likely know, I row. And I’m back on the water now after a winter on my erg, that rowing machine that’s only sort of like actual rowing. And it’s a funny thing about rowing: it gets rewarding only once you’ve become stable on the water. Once you know you’re not going to flip every time you move, once you know where to apply your power and where to go light with finesse, that’s when the real work begins, that’s when you can really start to move, once you’re on the regular.

I have a now-retired colleague who was looking back on her longest pastorate, her most successful pastorate. She’d had occasion to hear from members of her past church, about how they missed her. “What did they miss?” she managed to ask without sounding like she was fishing for compliments. “You were a stabilizing presence,” they said. This deflated her, which I could tell in her telling me. We’re not *wrong* for wanting to be exciting.

I told her about rowing. I told her about how once things are stable, and you’re strong enough to hold a steady state, that’s when you can really begin—ready for movement, ready even for the unexpected.

Which is the trick: to have the regular practice be all about staying open to something taking you all by storm.

With Pentecost we turn from high liturgical time to ordinary liturgical time, and it’s even called that: “Ordinary time.” For the next twenty-seven weeks there won’t be any moments of theophanic highs. For the next half year or so, we’re on but a pilgrimage through time, walking with Jesus as if he were back among us.

But maybe you know this. Maybe you've traveled the church year before. Maybe you've heard this whole story before—this last chapter of the whole event, the surprising arrival of the Holy Spirit, who's as ever out of line but even more so now, making a noisy mess of every otherwise well-ordered thing.

Maybe you've heard it all before.

If so, that's too bad because the trick might be even harder for you to manage—the trick of treading what's becoming the same old path, but one whose whole point is that something apocalyptic has happened and we're to live ever amidst that moment of apocalypse, when the mystery at the heart of all things manifested, and we could see God's enduring truth, but then was recovered by regular time.

Can we do that?

Can we sit here in these well-worn pews though poised and clenched, ready, waiting, bated breath, to be taken by storm, at any moment?

At any moment?

Thanks be to God.