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“Listening to New Voices”

Numbers 14:24-29

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So, Moses went out and told the people the words of the Lord, and he gathered seventy of the 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 didn't 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 hadn't gone out to the tent, 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 the spirit on them!"

Numbers 14:24-29

Some of what I used to pay attention to, does not hold up as well as I wish it would. Have you ever made your child listen to the music you grew up with, only to realize it was not as good as you used to think? I grew up in the 1970s when Hall and Oates sold 40 million records, but their music did not age well—Maneater, Private Eyes, and I Can't Go for That (No Can Do). It is not great music.

Some of the books that sold the most copies do not hold up. I am embarrassed to admit that I am one of the six million Americans who read Eric Segal's *Love Story*. That's the one with "Love means never having to say you're sorry." And I read it more than once. And I memorized the first page: "What can you say about a 25-year-old girl who died, that she loved Mozart, Bach, the Beatles, and me?" I did not have to look that up and I could go a lot longer, but I will spare you. I now know it is a bad book.

Some of the movies we loved are not movies we want to watch again. *Annie Hall* is hard to watch. Part of the problem is that Woody Allen made the movie when his present wife was seven years old and living with Woody Allen's girlfriend. It's complicated.

Some of what we used to pay attention to seems tired. We get bored with what used to be fascinating. Same old, same old—we stop paying attention. Experts say we retain 25 percent of what we hear. That seems high. We are like people who live near the train and do not hear it anymore. We get tired of good things, like good books, inspiring books, C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, G.K. Chesterton, and St. Augustine—still wonderful, but some days, old.

We get used to what happens in worship. Hymns written in the 1800s sound like they are 200 years old. We have been praying the Lord's Prayer every Sunday for a long time. Maybe we should have been delivered from evil by now. The Psalms run together—they all pray to "God who made heaven, earth and sea, and all that is in them." Every

Sunday, we confess our sins. Every Sunday, we pray for hurting people. We will sing “as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be” until the world without end finally ends.

We come to church on Pentecost and know we are going to read Acts 2. The table is going to be red. The minister will break out the red stole he only gets to wear one Sunday a year. We do not always bring a lot of life to worship. Some days it feels redundant. Something new would be nice.

The story in Numbers 11 is about people who are tired of the same things over and over. The Hebrews wander in the wilderness for 40 years. They have good reasons to complain about their hard lives.

On this occasion they complain about the manna. Anybody who has taken the same sack lunch to work every day knows how old it gets. Manna is a seed the people collected, ground, and boiled. It does not sound great.

The whiners moan: “Nothing tastes good out here. All we get is manna, manna, manna. The food was better when we were slaves in Egypt. We used to get fish, cucumbers, melons, onions, garlic. The salads were great. And why can’t we have a little bit of meat?”

God hears and gets so angry that—in verses you will not hear mentioned in many sermons—God sends fire to burn the outskirts of the camp. This is not the same fire as Pentecost. These are not Memorial Day fireworks.

Moses takes the fire personally: “God, why are you

treating me so bad? What did I ever do to you? Am I their mother? You're their mother. Why am I responsible? Why tell me to carry them around like a nursing mother, carry them all the way to this promised land that's not getting any closer? Where am I supposed to get meat for these people chanting, 'We want meat.' I can't do this by myself. It's too much. There are too many of them. If this is how you intend to treat me, do me a favor and kill me now. I've seen enough. I've had enough. Let me out of here."

God and Moses take a minute to calm down.

Moses says, "I know they're a bunch of whiners. I'm as tired of them as you are, but let's give them another chance."

God says: "Okay. Here's what we're going to do. You gather seventy of your best. Take them to the big tent. I'll meet you there. I'll put some of the Spirit that's in you in them. That'll take some of the load off you. You won't have to carry the whole thing alone. Tell the people, 'You want meat. You'll get meat. I'm sending quail, a whole month's worth, enough to make you sick of it.'"

That's what happens. The Spirit fills the seventy. Two stick out, because the Spirit stays with them. Eldad and Medad are leaders, but they did not go to the tent. The Spirit rests on them, and they start teaching.

One young guy is sure Moses is going to be jealous. He runs and tells on them, "Eldad and Medad are teaching like you do."

Joshua, who has been Moses' right-hand man since he

was a teenager, is horrified, “Moses! Tell them to stop!”

Moses says, “What’s wrong with you? Do you think I’m jealous? I wish all God’s people would listen for the Spirit. Listen wherever you can hear God. There’s enough truth, enough Spirit, and enough God to go around. Some new voices will do us good.”

We need to listen for God in places where we were not taught to listen for God, places we have never been before, and places we have never considered. We need to listen and learn that God is bigger than we thought.

Listen to the people around us as a way of hearing God’s voice. Listen to the woman on the train who invites an elderly man to take her seat. He is more tired than anyone knows. The person who, in the middle of an argument, offers a word of kindness that moves the conversation from bitterness to reconciliation. The question from a child that sounds like a question God may be asking. Strangers you meet, people who are not your ethnicity, your economic class, your age, and people who do not vote like you do may speak with God’s voice.

We listen for God when there are no voices. We listen in the silence. Even our emptiest silence may whisper love and strength.

Elaine Foster writes, “God speaks in a soft voice I can hear better when I resolve to listen and stop putting words in God’s mouth.”

We stop offering monologues for prayers. We sit quietly long enough to hear the quiet. In quiet moments

we hear the muffled sound of the sacred that helps us listen to the silence that becomes prayer.

Virginia Mollencott says: “Prayer is not a matter of my calling (out) in an attempt to get God’s attention, but of my finally listening to the call of God, which has been constant, patient, and insistent. God is speaking to me, and it’s up to me to learn to be polite enough to pay attention.”

We listen in worship. Worship is centered in the belief that we hear the Spirit in one another. We sing hymns to hear the witness of Christians we have never met. We hear the sacred story of those who knew the Spirit before us. We listen to scripture and hear God speak.

Listen to the litanies, the prayers, the sermon, everything you can hear. Listen as though it is holy. Listen as though you are in the presence of the Spirit. Listen as though it’s about you, because it is. Listen for the Spirit in the music you listen to, the books you read, and the movies you watch.

Listen to Ted Lasso. The television series Ted Lasso centers on an American football coach hired to coach an English soccer team. Although he knows nothing about what the rest of the world calls football, he is an inspiring coach and student of the human condition.

He struggles with his own difficulties, but he lives with relentless optimism. The show’s tagline is “Kindness makes a comeback.” His joy for living infects those around him. He encourages everyone to believe. Ted speaks the truth with love and humor. He has discovered that one of God’s gifts to heal anxiety is a holy playfulness.

Do any of these quotes sound like the Spirit to you?

“Taking on a challenge is a lot like riding a horse. If you’re comfortable while you’re doing it, you’re probably doing it wrong.”

“As the man once said, the harder you work, the luckier you get.”

“You know what the happiest animal on earth is? It’s a goldfish. You know why? It’s got a ten-second memory.”

“I feel like we fell out of the lucky tree and hit every branch on the way down, ended up in a pool of cash and Sour Patch Kids.”

“A palace made out of crystal seems mighty fragile to me.”

“I promise you there is something worse out there than being sad,

and that’s being alone and being sad.”

Leslie Higgins, who works for the team, says this about his troubled relationship with his father, “I love my father for who he is and forgive him for who he isn’t.”

That sounds like the Spirit.

Ted says, “If you care about someone, and you got a little love in your heart, there ain’t nothing you can’t get through together.”

I have a feeling Ted Lasso does me more good these days than re-reading C.S. Lewis would do. At this point, the Spirit may be speaking to more people through Jason Sudeikis than through the author of *Mere Christianity*.

One episode back, Rebecca, the owner of the team, is in a meeting of super rich owners talking about forming an exclusive league for the richer teams, to make more money and cut out the poor teams and poor fans. Rebecca's the only woman in the room.

She listens to the spiel and asks, "Is this a joke?" (I'm cutting the expletives.) "What do you think you're doing? Just stop it! I mean, how much more money do any of you really need? Why would you ever consider taking something away from people that means so much to them?"

She tells a story about how one of the owners used to sneak into games when he was a little boy, because his parents could not afford tickets. She makes them realize that they don't need more money. She reminds them of why they fell in love with the game in the first place:

"This isn't a game. Football isn't just a game. It's one of those amazing things in life that can make you feel (horrible) one moment and then like it's Christmas morning the next. It has the ability to make heroes and villains out of ordinary men. Just because we own these teams doesn't mean they belong to us."

And the wind of the Spirit blows through the room. The old men smile and laugh and do what's right. An unlikely voice reminds them to be generous and kind.

Malcolm Muggeridge said, "Every happening, great and small, is a parable whereby God speaks to us. The art of life is to get the message."

If we have taken a course in music appreciation, we have been handed a list of classical pieces that we were to listen to and learn to identify the composer. We may have surprised ourselves when we realized that we could figure out who wrote pieces we had never heard before. The artist's tone, rhythms, preferred keys, and favorite themes help us recognize the composer's voice in unfamiliar music.

God is a composer whose tone, rhythms, keys, and themes echo in unfamiliar places. We can identify God's tone and rhythms in music, literature, and theater. We hear God's preferred keys in art, architecture, and poetry. We recognize God's favorite themes of hope, joy, and love wherever we hear them. Whenever any voice calls us to care for one another, the Spirit is speaking, so we listen for God everywhere we go.

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