

It was a miracle beyond what they could have imagined, for the slaves to be given their freedom and to be fed with manna in the wilderness. But then they start complaining that they don't want to eat the manna anymore. They start complaining that they want meat. They say, "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 there is nothing but this manna to look at." (*Numbers 11:4-5*) They seem to have forgotten that when they were in Egypt, they worked like slaves, and ate like slaves, because they were, in fact, slaves. Hearing all this, Moses complains to God himself:

"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 an 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 these 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." (*Numbers 11:11-15*) So at this point, after Moses has said he is not able to carry these people alone, God presents a solution. God tells Moses to gather seventy of the elders of the people, and bring them to the tent of meeting and have them take their place there with Moses. God tells Moses, "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." (*Numbers 11:17*) God also promises to give them meat to eat for days and days, for a whole month, "until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you." (*Numbers 11:20*) All righty, then.

So that's where we are when our Old Testament passage for today picks up the story at Numbers 11:24. Moses gathers the 70 elders, and places them around the tent.

God comes down in the cloud, speaks to Moses, takes some of the spirit that was on Moses and puts it on the 70 elders, and when the spirit rested on them, they prophesied.

This is all a very fine passage. In fact, when Herbert and his friends are ordained to the priesthood this winter, this passage about the spirit resting on the seventy elders is one of the two options the Prayer Book gives for the Old Testament passage that will be read at their ordination service. Then immediately following this grand and inspiring event, we get to the part I am particularly fond of: Eldad and Medad. If the Old Testament had saints, I would nominate Eldad and Medad as patron saints of people who march to the beat of a different drum. Eldad and Medad were among those registered, but they don't show up at the tent. "So," the Bible tells us, "they prophesied in the camp." And then we get Joshua, the devout assistant of Moses, who says, "My lord Moses, stop them!" Joshua may be very well-intentioned here, people like him often are. They work hard to make sure they are doing the right thing and obeying each instruction exactly, and they want to make sure other people always do the right thing and obey each instruction exactly. Joshua probably thinks he's doing God a favor. The trouble is, Joshua wants to stop them from responding to the Spirit of God. Joshua explains, "My lord Moses, stop them!" But Moses sees no reason to limit the Spirit, so Moses replies, "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!"

Joshua wants to draw lines for who's in and who's out, who's right and who's wrong, who does things in a righteous way and who doesn't. But the Spirit of God colors outside the lines.

People see the spirit of God in someone they hope could be ordained to the ministry. Various denominations discuss which groups of people they will ordain and which they will not. Most recently, denominations have been talking about gay people, before that it was women and divorced people, before that it was African-Americans. In each case, there are people who see the Spirit of God in these folks. There are others who say, "Stop them!" There are others who say, "I wish all the Lord's people had as much of God's spirit as these folks do."

Nora Gallagher's autobiography Practicing Resurrection describes her own struggle to discern whether her calling is to be an Episcopal priest or a writer. In addition,

it describes the struggles of the Episcopal congregation she's a member of, as they wrestle with different views of the homeless people who come to their soup kitchen, different views of new liturgies, and different views of how to handle the two men who ask for a marriage ceremony. This is very controversial, with some members of the congregation who want to say yes, some who want to say no, and some who want to say wait. They plan to have the wedding, and one parishioner, Martha, says she will attend but will not receive communion because she doesn't believe in gay marriage.

At the wedding, the preacher talks some about the lives of the two men, and then she tells about her visit to England:

“On our visit to England five summers ago, my husband Randy and our son Ben and I...went to Durham...to see the shrine of St. Cuthbert, the seventh-century monk famous for his healing powers. We entered the cathedral, pulling open a huge heavy door with a huge brass lion's-head door knocker. I was not ready for what was inside....Massive columns of stone carved eight hundred years ago rose up around me. A mighty fortress indeed. The whole place spoke of power, frankly, the power and might of the Norman kings more than the holiness of God.

And then I looked down at the floor....I looked down and saw a long, wide black marble line inlaid in the stone floor. It stretched across the entire width of the nave, across the back end, the west end. I had never seen anything like it. And then I looked up and saw a framed sign posted on the column, explaining the line. The sign said the marble was laid there in the 1100s, when the cathedral was built, to keep the women back, to keep the women away from the main part of the church. It was a protective barrier, to keep the altar and St. Cuthbert's holy shrine pure and free from the corrupting power of women...

It hurt to see that line. It hurts to remember it even now—that barrier established in the name of purity. That day, as I stood there, surrounded by the power and might of the church, I thought of the men who had laid that marble and all the women who had stayed behind the line....We all know about lines....

That line on the floor of Durham Cathedral serves no purpose anymore. It is a relic from the past. I believe that the day that marble was laid, God wept. And I believe that every time we cross a line like that, God dances.

Today, we cross the line. Today, old barriers lose their power, old wounds can lose their sting. Today, as we gather our collective courage and our good will, healing is possible because we gather to celebrate something larger than ourselves.

Today we celebrate not only the love of these two men but the love of a God that invites all of us to cross the line, to stay back no longer, to step into healing, and into hope and into joy.

Today, we cross that line. And so today, God is dancing. Amen.” (122-123)
When it is time for communion, Martha comes forward, “solemn, quiet, measured. She crossed herself and reached her hands up and opened her palms like a crane coming to rest in water.” (123). Later, as she is performing her altar guild tasks, the priest asks her gently why she came to communion. She replied, “Because I’ve drawn too many lines in my life.” (124).

Miracles still happen, sometimes even in church, and the Spirit works in people’s lives and changes them. The Spirit crosses lines as it blows into the lives of Eldad and Medad, and the women at Durham Cathedral, and the wedding couple, and an altar guild lady named Martha. And God dances.