

May 31, 2020
Would That All Were Prophets
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Numbers 11:24-30

²⁴ 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.

²⁶ 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. ²⁷ 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!" ²⁹ 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!" ³⁰ And Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.

It's good to be with you this Pentecost morning, friends, as we look at Numbers chapter 11 and Acts chapter 2. In Numbers, chapter 11, Moses and the people of Israel have been in the desert, in the wilderness just over two years. Two years out of Egypt. They are not much past Sinai which is really not very far past the Red Sea, so – good thing they didn't know they still had 38 years to go or they would have been really discouraged. At that moment, Moses himself is very discouraged – he is more than discouraged; he is fed up. He's fed up with the people, because they can't stop complaining about their free food – manna! – that falls from the sky every morning. And he's fed up with God who has set the camp on fire because of the food riots. And he is ready to quit.

Being ready to quit, Moses has a speech for God once the fire's out, and the speech for God goes something like this: *Listen, God, you conceived of these people and you birthed them. And honestly, I don't think I should have to be the one who carries and nurses them from here to Kingdom come. So either you can treat me better, or you can just kill me now, because I am done being a nanny to these rotten kids of yours.* There was some more stuff in that speech – stuff about dead bird meat coming out of people's noses. But for our purposes here, it was Moses' promise to quit that is important.

God, like any mother about to lose her childcare, hurries around saying "Okay, okay, okay, okay! I'll get you some help!" and so God proposes what I would call a men's retreat. He says, *Moses, go find seventy men, take them on retreat, and when you all get out to your retreat, I will come out there as well, and the spirit that I placed on you, I will spread out over those seventy people.* So Moses agrees to this plan and it goes according

to plan – except that the Spirit (as the Spirit is prone to do) doesn't stay where she is expected to stay, and she ends up blowing back over to the camp and landing on these two guys named Eldad and Medad – and they just start prophesying there in the middle of the camp.

Somebody sees that happening and runs to tell Joshua, who is Moses' assistant, and Joshua tells Moses, thinking that Moses should make them stop it – because that's a theme of the scriptures, you know, that only certain people should preach and everybody else should just be quiet and listen. But Moses says, "*Would that all God's people were prophets.*" And I love this for Pentecost Sunday; I love that the Lectionary puts this Numbers passage here.

I love it for the way it stitches so much of Scripture together. It stitches Moses to Joel, who talks about who the prophets shall be – the young men and the old men, the working women and the working men, and the sons and the daughters, which is stitched to the New Testament – because the apostle Peter quotes that in his first sermon that Pentecost Day, a sermon in which the Apostle Peter was so nervous he stood up to preach and his first line was "I am definitely not drunk!" – already seeming to recognize that what he was about to say was so crazy, was so outrageous, that it could be mistaken for something a drunk man would say when he thought he had a really good idea.

Historically, people have treated preachers and drunks with about an equal measure of seriousness. And Peter, like other Spirit-filled preachers, doesn't care. And what the Scriptures tell us is that at the end of his sermon, 3,000 hearts were cut by the sermon that he preached. A sermon in which the Spirit of God blew the church wide open. And it might have been something new in the life of God but it was the same old spirit, the same old spirit that met Moses in the wilderness.

His sermon, Peter's sermon, preached in the echo of Moses' longing that all of us would be prophets, is my interest for this morning, especially on a morning after a week in which I think American history shows the lack of prophecy in the history of God's people.

Would you pray with me? *Humanity is both saved and still so very broken, O God. Redeemed by your divine and endless grace, yet clinging to this world's treasures – nothing so much as our privilege – while those with so much less go about their lives in fear of real and present dangers that we cannot begin to imagine. Having you, we need nothing else. Would that the courage to believe it come to life in us, among us, O God, we pray. Amen.*

In his book *The Half Has Never Been Told*, Edward Baptist goes through reams and reams of economic research and historical research to explain how human torture was a critical factor in the explosive progress of the cotton industry in the first half of the nineteenth century. Black people, enslaved human beings, who did not meet daily cotton picking quotas were methodically whipped and beaten, i.e. tortured, until the cerebral function that controlled right- and left-handed dominance was essentially severed from

their bodily function, so that they could pick faster. They essentially became like machines. They had no dominance, they had no left- and right-handed dominance. Their mind was detached from their bodily function, allowing them to pick more and more and more.

Of course, enslavers at the time did not know any of that neurological information. They just knew that the more they tortured their workers, the faster they picked. They knew it and they knew they knew it. And the way Dr. Baptist knows they knew it is based on the records they kept and shared, plantation to plantation, in order to share methods that worked. The faster the pickers picked, the earlier the cotton got to market. And the earlier the cotton got to market, the better the price.

Over the years between 1829 and 1840 – that’s only eleven years – the increase in the average amount of cotton picked has never been replicated in any industrial process improvement. What that means is that in the last 200 years, no mechanized factory process has improved with the same degree of efficiency that human cotton-picking improved between 1829 and 1840. You cannot torture a machine to work better. Now it doesn’t sound believable, does it? And the first two times I read it, I still struggled to believe that that’s what Dr. Baptist really meant. But it is what Dr. Baptist really meant. And I encourage you to read Dr. Baptist’s book, so we can talk about it.

Dr. Baptist uses this information to suggest that one mistake of American history is its failure to apply certain vocabulary words to the management of enslaved people, and *torture* is one of those words. *Theft* is another. People may believe slavery is wrong or slavery is okay, but nobody believes that theft is okay – theft, as in the *theft of a mother from her children*. His thesis is that in its time, slavery might have been less tolerable to more people had words like *torture* and *theft* been the common descriptors for the business of slavery.

Today I wonder if the word *torture* had been applied then, would we apply it now to the treatment of black people that persists in our country? Did the lack of the right language plant in us a tolerance for the mistreatment of our black brothers and sisters that has lasted for 400 years? Because, while the word *mistreatment* is sour – I mean, it tastes bad – the word *torture* is a word we don’t want in our mouths. I want you to imagine that Peter stands to preach, already having claimed to be fully sober and he says the most outrageous thing he could possibly say: he says *as white people, you have tortured and murdered the Christ himself*.

Now, he didn’t say “*white people*.” What did he say? I’m reading verse 36 from chapter 2, which is still Peter’s sermon, but well beyond the text as read earlier – he says this: ³⁶ “*Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.*” Now Rome ran the world then and there, and Rome carried out the crucifixion of Jesus. But if Jews could have, they would have killed Jesus. More than once they attempted to kill him by stoning or throwing him off a

cliff. And they tried not because they were Jews, friends – please don't quote me as having said that exactly – they tried and they wanted him dead because they were human beings, and human beings time and again are perfectly willing to momentarily forfeit their humanity to retain their worldview. It is a common human phenomenon, especially when people get into groups, and especially when those groups feel like their identity or their privilege is being threatened.

Which brings us to this week. Another black man tortured, his windpipe slowly crushed beneath the knee of white supremacy. At least one white man forfeiting his humanity and another generation of white people just staring and wondering why it is that change takes so long. James Cone's book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* is four hundred pages thinner than Dr. Baptist's. Read *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* and you will see the neck of Jesus below that policeman's knee.



And you will see the face of Christ against that pavement. You will hear the voice of Christ begging, begging for what has been freely given by the Creator to all creatures: air; breath. Friends, trees and ants are given air for free, and we have a human being *begging*.

You will also see the Christ taking upon himself the sin of all people. We say it every Sunday. But if that's true, friends, that means that we can see the Christ in the one whose knee is on the neck of his brother. We can see the Christ in the one momentarily forfeit- ing humanity, the one willing to torture a brother rather than give up a worldview that keeps us safe in our thinking.

Peter's sermon sets the footers for the book of Acts and the entire New Testament. It is the story in which Jews who follow Christ must come to terms with the reality that in order to follow Christ they must abandon the privilege of their Jewishness. Friends, when we read that, we must read *whiteness*. In order to follow Christ, we must abandon the privilege of our whiteness.

Now, in the New Testament, eventually we know that Jew and Gentile were not able to keep it together as they started out. The church became Gentile, as it moved into the world. It moved into Europe, and the Western church – the white church, our church –

became ally to the system of theft and torture that we are still dealing with now. And friends, not just ally, but the theological framer, the theological defender of the system itself. Our church explained why slavery was God's will for the world, why black people were meant to be slaves and why white people were meant to be enslavers. None of us believe that now. But some thread of that has woven its way into our thinking and our talking and our tolerance of the world as we know it.

It has embedded in us the idea that this is just the way the world is – that racial disparity is just the way the world is, that a certain degree of prejudice is just the way the world is, that a certain level of violence is just the way the world is, that “a few bad apples” is just the way the world is. And I would offer, friends: no, absolutely not.

We are amazed. We are outraged. We are appalled that one man could keep his knee on another man's neck as that man begged for life. And yet what finger have we lifted to ease the burden on that man while he lived? I have no idea why that policeman did not take his knee off that man. But I know why I don't move, I know why I don't change: because change is hard and change is expensive. And the truth of what white supremacy has allowed me while at the same time stealing from others is so shameful to me, I no more want to dig into that than I want to put my hand in a fire.

When I begin to think about the deep, systemic change that is required to bring about even a measure of justice, I know that I do want others to have what they deserve; I just don't want it to cost me what I value most. And I'm not proud of that. But I have to tell you, even that is easier to say than the truth of what is inside, which is the actual content of the cost of that change. I almost think that I'd gladly just sort of skip over to the reparations part of the process, if we could sort of not do the truth-telling part. But there can be no repairing, without the truth-telling. And see, there it is. Because, the truth-telling: that is prophecy. Prophecy is not telling the future. Prophecy is telling the truth.

No wonder Moses said, *“Would that all God's people were prophets.”* Think of a world in which all God's people tell the truth. Think of Moses' world, if all those people had told the truth. *Yeah, we don't love manna, but it beats being a slave!*

If God's people had told the truth 400, 300, 200 years ago, there might still have been theft and torture of African people. But it would not have been countenanced and justified by the people of God. Because the people of God know – what? They know the truth of God never enslaves people. We're the people of Jesus. We know the truth does – what? The truth sets us free. If we want to be free of the burden of white privilege, maybe the first step is telling the truth about it. White privilege, white supremacy – it has never set a single person free. Never. Not even white people. As long as one person has a knee on the neck of another person, neither of them can go anywhere. Not until the one lets the other go. Only then is either of them truly free, this side of heaven at least.

It's Pentecost, friends. The Spirit of God has blown our lives and our life together wide open. And everything is possible in a world so free of fear, so full of truth – and that truth is on the very tip of our tongues. We know it, because we know that the spirit has already done her work. What happens next is up to us.

Would that all God's people were prophets, including us. Amen? Amen! Let's pray.