
Moses Asks For Help and Loses Control

A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
Proper 21 – Year B

“The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again, and said, ‘If only we had meat to eat! 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 our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.’”

“Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, all at the entrances of their tents. Then the Lord became very angry, and Moses was displeased. So Moses said to the Lord, ‘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 on 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 all this 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 favour in your sight—and do not let me see my misery.’ So the Lord said to Moses, ‘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.’”

“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!’” (Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29).

Today’s Bible story is about leadership.

It is about your leadership. Every one of you in this room is a leader, of some sort. I know that we are not all presidents of things. We are not president of the United States, or president of the Coca-Cola Company. We are not the head coach of the Georgia football team. We are not even the managers of our office division.

But we are the heads of something. We are the leaders of something. And the most important something that we are head of, is ourselves. We are meant to be leaders, first of all, of ourselves. The way we nurture ourselves, the way we inform and sustain and grow ourselves is the most important leadership we will ever have responsibility for.

So, today’s Bible story provides us with two critical lessons for leadership. And the star of today’s story is one of the elite leaders of the Bible, our man Moses. His life story offers us dozens of leadership lessons, from gathering his people out of oppression and bondage to trying to prepare them for a new civilization.

Listen to this story about Moses, and learn, learn for ourselves, no matter what kind of leader we are.

We pick up – a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away—in the eleventh chapter of the Book of Numbers (Numbers 11:4-5, 10-16, 24-29), as Moses is enduring the complaining of his people. Yes, they are his people, and they are complaining. After all the amazing things God – and Moses—have done for them, things like parting seas and bringing plagues upon the enemy and feeding them in the wilderness—after such miracles, all the people do is complain.

We know those people, don't we? No matter what has gone right, they want to complain about what is wrong. Sometimes, of course, those people are the voices inside us, the voices inside us who want to complain.

Here is what they say to Moses. "Hey! We don't like the food out here. Back in Egypt, in the good old days, we had fish to eat, and meat, and cucumbers and melons and leeks and garlicks and onions. All we have out here to look at is manna. What in the world is manna, anyway? Is it some sort of mystery meat?"

So, what does good old Moses do? He decides to complain, too! He succumbs to their complaining and begins to complain, too. Moses takes his complaining straight to the Lord, "Hey, God, why have you treated me, your great servant, so badly? I didn't give birth to them! I can't carry them; they are too heavy for me. If this is the way you, O Lord, are going to treat me, put me to death at once."

Okay, this is not the lesson about leadership that I was referring to. At this point, both the people and Moses are behaving badly. But they are acting remarkably like much of humanity does. Whine, whine, whine.

But there is a leadership lesson here: "Ask for help." Moses asks for help. And here is how our God responds. He makes Moses delegate. That's the first lesson: Delegate. Part of this delegation means that Moses will give up some of his direct power, his ability to prophecy, some measure of his spirit. Moses has to ask for help from his own people, people he thought he had control over.

"The Lord said to Moses, '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. ... So Moses went out... 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 Moses and put it on the seventy elders; and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied' (Numbers 11; 16, 24-25).

That's the first lesson. Moses has to ask for help, and the help God provides is from Moses' own people. In a way, Moses asks for help, and gets it, from other people. He appoints seventy other people, seventy other leaders, to help him guide and teach and lead the people. He does not have to carry the burden alone.

Ah, but there is a second lesson. This story is not over yet! There are seventy appointed elders now, prophesying in the tent, properly ordained and properly located.

But suddenly, there are two other guys! They have two of the most fascinating names in the Bible; they are Eldad and Medad. And, lo and behold, they too are filled with the Spirit and are prophesying! But they were not among those properly appointed! They are way back in the camp and not in the tent of meeting at all. They are outside the proper boundaries and structures. So Moses' chief of staff, Joshua, comes running up and says, "Moses, stop them!" Joshua cannot handle this aberration.

And here, good old Moses delivers the right answer, and our second lesson of leadership. "Do not stop Eldad and Medad," says Moses, "I wish that all God's people were prophets, wherever and whoever they are."

The second leadership lesson for today is a follow-up to "Delegate." After delegating, the second lesson is "Give up your need to control." Lose your need to control.

We have heard that advice before, to "Delegate!" But we rarely understand that it also means giving up some of our personal oversight and control. Yes, control. Delegation means giving up some control. Moses asks for help, and the help he gets is from the people he thought he had control over. He seems to understand this, even when his assistant, Joshua, does not.

It looks like the same scenario played out a thousand or so years later, when Jesus – the new Moses—was ministering with his disciples. After taking Peter and James and John with him, to the mountaintop, Jesus was beginning to trust his closest disciples. According to today's gospel lesson, a few days later, John comes running up to him and says, "'Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.' But Jesus said, 'Do not stop him; ... Whoever is not against us is

for us.” (Mark 9:38-40).

Two thousand years after that incident, we struggle with the same leadership challenges today. In order to lead effectively, we have to ask for help and delegate, and we have to be willing to lose our control and sense of organization. Most of us have a hard time doing that. We would rather cling to our control.

Many a strong organization, many a strong church, many a strong country, fails at this leadership challenge. It's usually during a crisis time. Maybe like a wilderness time. I have seen our own church, The Episcopal Church, struggle with this. First, real crises threaten us – maybe like individual parishes or dioceses threatening to sue the wider church and threatening to leave. Maybe of necessity, The Episcopal Church years ago began to clamp down, began to tighten lines of authority, began to centralize critical decision making.

Many thought these actions would strengthen the Church, but I don't think they did. Instead, these clinching actions, tightening down actions, only furthered the shrinking of the church. The more any leader tries to clinch control, to tighten control, to seize control, the more that organization shrinks. The way to grow a body is to release the individual members to their own authority and agency. Do not be threatened by Eldad and Medad outside the tent, filled with the Spirit!

Do not be threatened by people doing good, who do not seem to be inside our fold. Our God is bigger than our fold!

In our own country, for instance, we seem to have two political parties divided by two different leadership emphases. One party rightly sees the need to set out boundaries and rules for health, to be clear about what leads to salvation. The other party rightly wants to acknowledge individual authority, and individual agency, maybe even the agency of those outside the tent who don't seem to fit with the program.

The good leader, the leader needed in our own time, will be like Moses. Whether we are interested in the leadership of our country, or our church, or our family, or our mere individual selves, we need the leadership of Moses. Moses asks for help and delegates authority, so that others can be filled with the Spirit. But Moses also lets the Spirit move outside his individual and properly appointed structures; Moses releases the Spirit even to the unauthorized.

In all this, God is honored. In all this, in all healthy leadership, it is God who is honored. We will get there. We will get to the promised land. We will get to salvation and health, if we let the Spirit of God fill up all of God's people, wherever and whoever they are.

AMEN.

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