



THE PRINCETON SEMINARY BULLETIN

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The Reverends Eldad and Medad (Numbers 11:26–30)

M. Craig Barnes

President M. Craig Barnes delivered this farewell to the graduates at the Seminary Commencement service in the Princeton University Chapel on May 23, 2015.

When the Hebrews left Egypt to begin their difficult journey through the desert to the Promised Land, they brought with them a group of people that the Bible calls “the rabble.” The rabble were not true believers in this journey, or in the God who called them to it. The rabble’s toleration for discomfort was low, and their capacity for complaint was high.

Every ministry has a member of the rabble in it. They don’t put them on the search committee, but they are there—waiting for you.

In Numbers 11:4 we are told, “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.’”

There are many ways in which manna was a metaphor for how God takes care of people. Everyone has to get their own portion because there is no group plan for the spiritual life. Everyone has to get it every day. You cannot store up faith. And the manna wasn’t much. It was just enough to help you take the next daily step of faith. But the best insights into manna come from its name which is translated, “What is it?”

Every morning the parents would go out and collect their bowl of “What Is It?” I am sure they prepared it as creatively as they could, but there was no “What Is It Helper” in those days. So the parents would place the manna on the table and their teenagers would say, “What is it?” And the parents would say “Yes.”

This means that everyday the people nurtured their faith by taking in the great question: “What is it, O God? What is it that is happening? What is it that you are asking of us? What is it that we are doing out here on the hard, desert journey?”

This question kept being asked for centuries, up to the sixth chapter of John when Jesus Christ revealed that he was the Bread of Heaven. This means that the answer to the old question, “What is it, God,” is actually another question. Only for Christians it is a more particular question—“What is it that Jesus is doing?”

Since the whole purpose of being on life’s journey is to learn faith, you don’t get a lot of answers. Mostly, you get better questions. And a choice still to believe in spite of those questions, which is how faith is formed.

But the rabble undermine our faith by getting us to stop asking “What is it that Jesus is doing?” and to focus on that terrible lament—“If only.” “If only we had meat. If only we were still back in Egypt. If only we didn’t have to keep settling for questions. If only we could have some certain answers...”

How many times are we also tempted to begin a sentence that begins with “If only?” Sometimes we use it because we are focused on the future. “If only I could get a job. If only I could find someone special in my life. If only, if only...then I would be okay.” Sometimes we use the phrase because we are focused on the past. “If only I had gone to veterinary school instead of seminary. Animals are so much easier to help. If only I had made better choices when I could. Now the good choices are all over, and all that is left are consequences.”

Speaking these “If only” words preoccupies you with the past or the future. Thus, the words “If only” are always a judgment upon the present day, which is the only day you have. And the only place manna is found. When the present tense disappears so does the manna. The mysterious, life-giving, blessed grace of God only comes a day at a time. Without the ability to ask what Jesus is doing today we are always anxious, and never joyful.

You see, the most dangerous rabble are not the complaining people around us, but the rabble that lives within each of our own hearts. You have to discipline your heart because there are too many voices coming from within it. This is why I have never understood that advice that says, “Just trust your heart.” If your heart is like mine, most days there’s a bad committee meeting going on in there. The meeting is filled with so many conflicting agendas. Everybody in the heart is trying to hijack the meeting. The whole thing goes into the ditch in a hurry. You have to make choices about what you are going to do with your heart today, or the rabble of anxiety will overwhelm you. There’s nothing that those whom you will be leading in ministry need more from you than your own spiritual health, your own ability to know how to find the manna everyday.

Up to this point in the journey out of slavery, Moses has been the model of patient leadership. When the people complained that Pharaoh was going to kill them, Moses stretched out his staff to open the waters of the Red Sea. When they complained about the lack of water, he found it in the desert. When they complained about the lack of food, he pointed to the manna. When they complained that he was gone too long on Sinai and turned to the idol of a golden calf, God told Moses he wanted to consume the people and then get Moses a new congregation. I would have been tempted to take this deal because these folks were complainers. But in perhaps his finest moment of leadership, Moses interceded on behalf of the people and talked God out of burning them away. In the first three verses of our text today the people complained again. This time God couldn’t resist sending down a little consuming fire and would have burned up all of them if Moses

hadn't interceded again.

But when the rabble got everyone to gripe about the manna thing, this time Moses snapped. In verse 11, Moses asks God, "Why have you treated your servant so badly, that you lay the burden of this people on me?" In verse 12, he asks, "Am I their mother?" In verse 13, he asks, "Where am I supposed to find meat for all these people?" In verse 14, he says, "I am not able to carry this people." In verse 15, he says, "If this is the way you are going to treat me, just kill me now." This is a leader who has gone over the edge and has finally flamed out trying to save the people.

God responds to his burned-out leader by saying, "I'll take care of the meat thing. But right now I'm more worried about you." Then God places some of the spirit on the elders to help Moses bear the burden of the people. Seventy of the elders came to the Tabernacle to receive the spirit. Then they started to prophesy.

For some reason two men, Eldad and Medad, missed the ordination service. They stayed behind in the camp. But the Spirit found them anyway, and so they started to prophesy as well. When Joshua heard of this, he was furious and demanded that Moses make them stop. "They did not follow the rules—they didn't even go to seminary! There they are out in the camp, not even in the place of worship. There's nothing in the Book of Order about this!" But Moses said, "No, would that all the Lord's people were prophets."

The goal of the church is not to organize all of the prophets of the Holy Spirit. The goal is to free everyone to speak God's word in their part of the camp.

When you're in leadership it is tempting to think your job is to get the people to the Promised Land, and you are on your own. But you are never on your own. There is always a Medad and Eldad. There is always prophecy coming up from another part of the camp. They are not the Rabble. They may not play by the rules, but they are on Team Holy Spirit. And your job is to say, "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets."

Thinking that leadership means it's your sole responsibility to get people to the Promised Land is just another "If only" phrase that places your calling in the future. It's God's job to get your people, your students, your family, to the Promised Land. Your job is to bear their burdens in your heart today. We prefer just the opposite: Let God love the people, and we'll just move them along. But your calling is to love even the rabble, today.

Here is the most frightening part of this text—God honors our choices. As Moses eventually discovered, if you keep asking God to get the people to the Promised Land without you, God will. Moses wasn't with them when they finally crossed the Jordan River. And it didn't make him as happy as he thought it would. Be careful with the rabble of your own heart.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.