

I Wish that All the Lord's People were Prophets

Brothers and sisters,

Starting a new church is a lot of work. Our District Mission Board has received funding for a new mission in Mansfield, and the families of that Core Group are busy with a constitution and incorporation and bank accounts and even starting to hold services; not to mention planning for outreach events once they receive a new pastor. Lots of work. It kind of reminded me of being a first-time parent: it's almost better beforehand if you don't know how much work it's going to be.

In our First Lesson, Moses is pretty distressed. He's leading the people of Israel, two million of them, to the Promised Land, and they are complaining endlessly. Moses is depressed. There's too much work. But the Lord provided Moses the help that was needed: he sent a special gift of the Holy Spirit on 70 men, so they could assist in leading the people. Moses saw that God was in charge, that God provided the resources that were needed.

So Moses could change his tune. From despair to confidence, from moaning about his life to shouting, **"I Wish that All the Lord's People were Prophets."** The Lord provides us with the Holy Spirit, and the people to proclaim his Word, so that we can move from distress to joyful service.

Moses was overwhelmed. This was only a year after the Israelites had left Egypt—a year after God's powerful plagues, a year after the Red Sea parted for them. And the people complain. **"The Israelites started wailing... 'If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic.'"** Their memories seem to have been clouded. They had been slaves in Egypt! If they ate without paying for their food it was because they didn't have any money! And they had to do back-breaking work, trying to make bricks without straw—practically impossible. All this they forgot. And they also forgot God's love in delivering them from that slavery.

For Moses, it was too much. He didn't just feel down. He joined the people in complaining against God. **"Why have you brought this trouble on your servant? What have I done...that you put the burden of these people on me?...They keep wailing to me."** Moses forgets the Lord's grace. He even said that if this is how it's going to be, God should kill him.

The Lord responded with love. God promised help. **"Bring me seventy of Israel's elders....Have them come to the tent of meeting.'...Then the Lord came down...and he took some of the power of the Spirit that was on [Moses] and put it on the seventy elders."**

The Lord put his Spirit on them. Not "in them": they already had the Holy Spirit in them, the Spirit who had led them to faith. No, this was a special pouring of the Holy Spirit "on them," so that they now had more spiritual gifts to serve God's people.

By the way, when it says the Lord "took some of the power that was on Moses," that doesn't mean that Moses had less of the Holy Spirit. No, when God gives his gifts, he creates more and more—just like when you share your faith with someone, you don't end up with less faith. A writer compared this with lighting the candles on a birthday cake. Once you have more than a few years on you, the safest way is to light one candle, blow out the match, then use that

one candle to light the others. The first candle doesn't lose its flame. In the same way, we don't lose the gifts of the Spirit when we share them with others.

Look at the spiritual gift God poured out. **“When the Spirit rested on them, [the elders] prophesied—but did not do so again.”** They prophesied for a time. What does that mean? We can't be completely sure what they said. It does not mean that they went around simply predicting the future—that's not what prophets did. Some have suggested this was some kind of ecstatic speech—but the word is “prophesy,” used for speaking God's Word. “Prophesy” means to speak for someone else. Prophets speak for God.

Apparently these 70 men were able to speak God's Word in their Hebrew language directly, without having studied it. When I preach a sermon, I am not simply standing up here and God's speaking in my ear feeding me what to say; I spent hours digging into the Bible in preparing this sermon, on top of the years of studying I've done. But these elders were able immediately to speak the direct Word of God, the very Word God wanted his people to hear. This is why God sent the prophets of the Old Testament—to bring his direct message to his people.

So what message would God have delivered to his people at that time? Well, the people were complaining. They were whining that God was not taking care of them. They needed to hear that this was wrong. It was sinful to despise God's gracious deliverance. It was wrong to drag down their leader Moses because they didn't have everything they wanted. They needed the Law of God, applied to their own hearts.

And when the Law had done its work, they needed to hear the Gospel. The elders could prophesy that the Lord was still their God, that he was protecting Israel and guiding them on their trip. The elders could remind the people that they were traveling to that Promised Land because that was where their Savior would be born, the Lamb who would pay for their sins. And the elders could tell the people that, not only did they have a physical Promised Land ahead of them, they also had a home in heaven.

Two of the elders had remained out among the people instead of going to the Tabernacle. Those two elders began prophesying, and Joshua, Moses' aide, thought they should stop.

And then Moses shows how completely his attitude had been changed. **“Moses replied, ‘Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!’”** Moses shows his humility here—he didn't have to be the only prophet in town. But there's also joy in his words. Other believers could speak God's Word too! It's kind of like when the Apostle Paul was in prison—he rejoiced that other Christians had been moved to take his place, to preach the Gospel where he could not.

And that's the point we should take to our lives. God does not want only pastors speaking his Word. All of us Christians are called to be priests of God, declaring his praises. And good thing, because there's a lot of work to do! In our congregation, we choose teachers and leaders to do the work of the public ministry alongside the pastor. And all of us Christians are called by God to love and serve others, and to share his Word with them.

And the Lord gives his Spirit to those who are doing his work—he gives us the spiritual gifts we need for our situation in life, whether the gift of encouraging or administration or giving or teaching, the Lord gives his gifts where and when they are needed.

So let's ask, is there a need for God to send out his Word, his Law and Gospel, today?

Did you turn on the TV Thursday, or listen to the radio? Or maybe you shut them off, not wanting to hear the testimony. Many people were left confused, many were angry, some were in tears. Some commentators and some politicians got very angry, even self-righteous about it.

It reminded me of the Epistle Lesson we read last week, from the first part of James chapter 4: **“What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill.”** Some people want to turn conflict into a battle to demonize and even destroy “the other side.”

But this does not lead to real peace. Even if people get everything they want, even if they squash their competition, they will not be content. They’ll look for more battles. And they would not have the peace of God.

In our Second Lesson today James tells us God’s solution: **“Submit yourselves to God....Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.”** The Lord tells us to repent. That means, focus on your own sins. And do something about them—in today’s Gospel Jesus said, **“If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off!”** Off course your hand isn’t the problem, the problem is in the heart. Repent—that hurts.

We may have our opinions about Thursday’s hearing. But I hope one response is that we Christians, when we hear a woman talk about how she had been attacked at a drunken party, would look at our own lives. Have I misused alcohol? I need to repent. Have I viewed other people as objects, as things to use so I get ahead, instead of viewing them as souls created by God, souls redeemed by the blood of Christ, souls whom I am to serve? Where I have viewed people as mere objects, I need to repent!

“Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.” Yes, the Lord lifts us up from our despair. Jesus came to earth and substituted for us. Where we sinned, Jesus did not. For example, Jesus never fell into sinful anger. He respected the humanity of everyone he talked to—he even prayed for the soldiers who nailed him to the cross. And Jesus’ perfect life replaces our sinful lives.

Moses was overwhelmed by the burden of his work, to the point of doubting God and saying he was ready to die. Jesus took the burden of our sin, the burden of all sin, and he was willing to die—not in despair, but in strength. Jesus died to pay the price for our sins. And now the Lord lifts us up with his amazing forgiveness. Your sin is washed away. That’s God’s gift in Baptism, in Communion, in all his Gospel.

And the Lord will lift us further. Jesus rose from the dead. He came out of his grave, with no more pain. And God will raise us also, raise us to our home in heaven.

When this world seems upside-down, out of control, when we can’t make sense of it, remember: God lifts us up today with his love, and God will lift us up eternally. He lifts us up through his Word. And this is the wonderful message we get to share with the world around us.

I mentioned that starting a church could be like a parent, in that it may be better not to know how hard it is. But actually I do know; years ago I was called to a new church start. But as I look back to that time, I see how hard it was, but I also see how God provided the people to do the ministry. And the Lord poured out his Spirit on those people, he gave them the gifts they

needed to do their work. The Lord poured out his Spirit on the 70 elders in Moses' day; and the Lord pours out his Spirit on us today, equipping us for the work we get to do.

Moses could say with joy, **"I Wish that All the Lord's People Were Prophets."** May we rejoice in the message of salvation, and may we boldly proclaim that message each and every day. Amen.