

When Ruach Blows  
Numbers 11:24-30  
A sermon by Benjamin Broadbent  
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I.

What to preach on the week after Walter Brueggemann? If I learned anything, it was don't shy away from the Old Testament. Shiny nuggets roll around with the smooth grey stones. You may not recall ever hearing a sermon on the Book of Numbers. I don't recall ever preaching on it. Shall we begin?

Surely you've noticed that the Israelites, having escaped from Egypt and while wandering in the desert, started complaining. It's hard to find fault with people wanting food and water. But the Book of Numbers, chapter 11, verse 4 reads, "The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again, and said, "If only we had meat to eat!" The bread from heaven called manna wasn't enough. Verses 5 and 6: "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." The text itself makes the case that manna, while a gift from Yahweh, suggests that Yahweh isn't the most creative chef. Verse 7: "Its color was like the color of gum resin." Verse 8: "the taste of it was like the taste of cakes baked with oil."

Reading through a Brueggemann lens, we might interpret the story this way: "The wandering people began to pine for the variety of Egyptian foods they had enjoyed. Apparently, the constant demand to make more bricks was a reasonable price to pay. This peripatetic desert freedom was not worth the bland stuff that was the only item on the menu. But we can hear the undercurrent of doom in the people's resistance. It's like a person with critically high cholesterol reasoning that the half-pound grease burger is probably worth a heartattack. Or consider the highly sensible contemporary movement toward supporting local farmers. Like the Egyptians, we might reason, "Why eat local manna when Egyptian avocados are always in season?"

The people complain even to the point of weeping, maybe even whining. "We want meat. Is that too much to ask?" Verse 10 reads, "Then Yahweh became very angry, and Moses was displeased." Hearing the words of Moses that follow, I think it's a bit of an understatement to say that Moses was "displeased." Moses rails against Yahweh, modeling a prayer of complaint to which most of us can only aspire.

What do you have against me? I think you hate me. What have I done to deserve this? To deal with your people is like trying to carry a dumptruck around in my backpack.

And by the way, am I their mother? Did I conceive them, carry them around for nine months, give birth to them? No, that would be you YHWH, Mr. Tetragrammaton. Where am I going to get meat for all these whiners? “We want meat, we want meat” is all I hear. The backpack is too heavy. If you’re going to treat me like this, why don’t you just go ahead and kill me. If you really love me, you’ll put me out of my misery. That’s really what he says. Read the text. It’s pathos filled and it’s hilarious.

## II.

And so we arrive at God’s response: More work for Moses. Verse 16: Go and get 70 elders, bring them to the tent of meeting, that is, the portable temple. Verse 17: “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.” I can’t help but hear Moses grumble to himself, “I actually meant it when I said ‘kill me.’”

But God isn’t done yet. Now it’s Yahweh’s turn to engage in hyperbolic standup comedy. Hey, once they get there, we’ll do a little blessing ceremony and you’ll give them this nice little message: You want meat? Okay. I mean, I just happened to overhear you mentioning ever so subtly that the manna you’re eating doesn’t have the variety that you’re used to. You say it’s a little bland, and although it’s what’s been keeping you alive all this time, you’re hoping for something more tasty, like we had when we were slaves and got beaten every day. Then say this to them, Moses: Sure, sure, don’t worry, Yahweh will give you some meat, and not only once. And not only two days or five or ten or twenty, but for a whole month you’ll eat meat. In fact, you’ll eat so much of it, you’ll be snarfing it out your noses.

At this point I can hear Moses laughing. He’s laughing the laugh of someone at his wits end who can only be entertained by the absurdity of it all. “I told them just to eat the manna,” he’s thinking, “but no, they wanted meat. Well, surprise!” Simultaneously, he’s laughing at God. “Um, Yahweh, there are 600,000 of us. Where are you going to conjure up all that meat? In case you haven’t noticed, there aren’t very many sheep wandering around in the desert. The fish in the sea aren’t going to jump up on shore and swim across the sand to us.”

With this, Yahweh starts talking smack. “You don’t think I can do it? Well start taking notes, Junior. Yahweh doesn’t make false promises.” We learn in verses 31 and following that Yahweh does indeed get his game on: “A wind went out from Yahweh, and it brought quails from the sea and let them fall beside the camp, about a day’s journey on this side and a day’s journey on the other side, all around the camp, about two cubits deep on the ground. So the people worked all that day and night and all the next day, gathering the quails...” Can you say stomach ache?

### III.

All of this is to set the scene for the verses that make up the lectionary reading for today, verses 24 thru 30. After Yahweh threatens to fulfill the people's gastronomical desire with an obscene amount of meat and before Yahweh fulfills the promise with a downpour of Cornish hens, Moses does the work of gathering the 70 elders and bringing them to the tent of meeting. And then, as promised, God takes some of the spirit that was on Moses and puts it on the elders. And they prophesy. But only once. We don't know exactly what it means to say they prophesied, but we can imagine a fleeting moment of ecstatic spiritual experience and truth telling.

In Hebrew, the spirit that God spreads around is called *ruach*. It is the same word used in describing the wind that brings the quails in from the sea. *Ruach*. In Genesis 1:1, *ruach* is what blows over the face of the deep. In Genesis 2:7, *ruach* is what God breathes into the nostrils of the first human, giving life. This relationship between wind and spirit is maintained in the Greek - *pneuma* means spirit and wind and breath. We can also hear it in English - spirit and respiration. In the Bible, *ruach* is the means by which Yahweh carries out promises. It's important to note on this Mothers' Day that *ruach* is a feminine word, as is the Greek *pneuma*. Against the pretensions of our patriarchy soaked western culture, the activity of the God of the Bible, Yahweh, is figured as a female counterpart to the male Godhead. And not just a counterpart, but the very action of God, the action of God inseparable from God.

Returning to the narrative, Yahweh takes some *ruach* from Moses and distributes it to the seventy elders who have gathered at the tent. Every one of these newly commissioned and authorized men prophecy once. With two exceptions. Verse 26: "Two of the elders remained in the camp. Their names were Eldad and Medad." The grammar in these verses is somewhat confusing. Apparently, 70 were invited to the tent of meeting and only 68 showed up. Now these two - were they slackers or rebels? - received a dose of *ruach* and not only prophesied more than once. They couldn't be stopped from prophesying. Of course, those authorized at the tent of meeting were livid. Even Joshua said, "Moses, stop them!"

But weary Moses just smiled his mosaic smile. He smiled at the absurdity. He smiled at yet another complaint. He smiled who had been whining for meat and who would likely get what were asking for. He smiled at the thought of Eldad and Medad, doing some of the work while the august elders were gathered around the austere tent of meeting. He smiled at the matchless Yahweh, as frustrating and majestic a God as could be imagined. He smiled while thinking of wily and unruly *ruach* and her unpredictable ways. Maybe he could already catch a glimpse of the cloud of quails in the distance. The people were getting what they asked for: meat. All too much of it. Moses got what he asked for: help with the load. 70 able men to help him and all but two ran out of steam after their first effort. And smiling Moses,

throwing his hands up in the air, tells Joshua: “Would that all Yahweh’s people were prophets, and that Yahweh would put his spirit on them!”

#### IV.

The ones who ask for meat get more than they bargained for. The one who asked for help got lots of help that petered out quickly. The one who gives keeps on giving, and never runs out on these bumbling wanderers.

And the heroes of the story are none of the above. Two nobodies who are in the wrong place, unauthorized to do the work of bearing the burden of the people. Prophesying, truth-telling, encouraging in the camp while the authorized leaders complain and insist that Moses put a stop to it. More meat! Less reckless truth-telling in the camp! Fix this! Do that!

Sound at all familiar? Sound at all like the anxious wrestling for control with which so many of us are currently consumed? And in the meantime, an unruly and free *ruach* blows in from the distant sea, defying the control and enabling the next chapter of God’s newness to unfold. Amen.