

Who Speaks For God?

Numbers 11:24-30

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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!" And Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp

(Numbers:24-30)

One Thursday, some years ago, I made my way out from Minneapolis to the campus of United Theological Seminary to work on a sermon. There was a particular nook among the stacks in the Seminary library where, over time, I had found that I was able to attend, undisturbed, to the ideas and questions and feelings toward which the busier parts of my life were inhospitable. On the particular Thursday of which I speak, before settling into my seat, I found myself wandering among the stacks, not looking for any particular volume, but simply threading my way around, since for me at least, movement of my body often helps prod my sluggish mind.

It was quiet at first. What sounds there were—the low rumble of a truck passing by outside, the gentle whisper and tick of the heating system, a few discretely passed words from the circulation desk—were benign and unobtrusive. As I meandered among the stacks, an occasional title caught my eye: "Christian Chaos: Revolutionizing the Congregation," "A History of the Church of England," "Voices of the Winds: Native American Legends," "The Works of Cardinal Newman," "Abortion and the Constitution." I also saw an eclectic assortment of authors: Emmanuel Kant, Rosemary Reuther, St. John of the Cross, Harvey Cox, and Julian of Norwich. At first blush, these were an orderly crowd of volumes: books that had the good manners not to speak until spoken to, docile enough to stand stock still, rounded up by subjects and obsequiously waiting in alphabetical order. Order in my outer environment, however elusive it is in my inner world, has long seemed to me a sanctuary, so things like books in their places have a calming influence on my soul and offer a welcome respite from a swirling reality that is not nearly so predictable.

But on this particular day, the silence and the order were not to last. I don't know who was first to do it (perhaps it was the irrepressible Julian, or maybe it was the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr or the iconoclastic bishop, John Shelby Spong), but as I walked among the stacks, some of the books began to speak. No ear could have picked them up, of course, but for me, in those moments, voices started to emerge from those books as though the authors were actually resident in the pages, imprisoned by the bindings, tired of their decorous silence, and wanting like anything to get out. The more I walked, the more I heard, and the more I listened, the bolder the books became until I could hear from every stack, every shelf, a rich chorus of infinite parts, each book with its point of view, its burning issue, its arcane facts, its compelling insights. And then the library was no longer silent at all, but teeming with sound, voices reaching out from the volumes, hungry for an audience, pregnant with things to say.

It was Pentecost in the stacks, a conflagration for which books were the tinder and the spark, and my mind and soul were the fuel, and it all brought to mind that day when the Spirit of God fell on the first disciples and prompted them to speak in myriad tongues which, foreign as they were, could still be understood by every hearer. So, right there in the library, John Calvin argued his case with Paul Tillich. James Weldon Johnson's soaring, cadenced oratory offered counterpoint to the meticulous systematics of Karl Barth. Thomas Aquinas conversed with Mary Daly, Gustavo Gutierrez's bold call to liberating action was balanced by Hildegard of Bingen's mystical reveries, and the playful, yet dolorous Søren Kierkegaard took his turns with the earthy and insightful Renita Weems. Their tongues were different, but it was all the language of God, and although it was not the quiet refuge that I had sought, it was glorious. Glorious, yes, but for my struggling mind and my fainter spirit, it was also intimidating. How does one find one's own voice in such a chorus? How does one claim one's own thoughts in such rarefied conversation? It was Pentecost for all but for me, it seemed, and as exhilarating as it was in one sense, in another sense it was frustrating to find my own words lodged immovable in my throat. Some inner censor was shushing me in the presence of these giants, forbidding me to speak because I was not of their spiritual or intellectual stature.

I wonder if you know that same censor. Perhaps in your case it isn't the words or the ideas that get silenced, but the feelings. The exuberance of Pentecost and other moments of ecstasy and passion, whatever prompts them, are unseemly, the inner voice tells you, and though at the deepest places in you something wants to leap, to dance, even to rage with echoes of Pentecostal fervor, a much more forceful voice tells you to keep your place, to mind your manners, to bridle your emotions . . . and sometimes that voice is so strong that you mistake it for your own. Or, then again, perhaps for you it is the moral grandeur of the storied saints together with a sense of your own shortcomings that stifle your unique moral voice, your particular ethical authority. If Mother Theresa is speaking and Martin Luther King is prophesying and

Dietrich Bonhoeffer is setting the tone, who are you to add a word or even make a sound? So it is Pentecost for some, but not for all. When the intellectual, spiritual, or moral authorities give utterance, more often than not we ordinary people defer and admire and bow and keep silent. And the paradox is that as frustrating as it seems on the one hand, on the other hand, it's a relief. If the idea of God, the truth of God, the ethical demands of God are to be carried into the world, better that someone else shoulder that burden. Not me. Not you.

But there is an odd and instructive story—another Pentecost-like story found in Hebrew Scripture—that challenges our reticence. The story takes place during the time of the Exodus, the great wandering in the wilderness of Yahweh's people between Egypt and the Promised Land. These nomadic tribes of Hebrews, joined together under Moses's leadership, have known epic tribulation, have vacillated between fearful faithlessness and courageous conviction. One minute they are treading with “unmoistened foot” through the Red Sea waters, and the next minute, they are fashioning a Golden Calf. One day their minds are fixed on the Land of Milk and Honey that is ahead of them, and the next day they are pining for the security of Egypt and their predictable slavery. In other words, these are people tossed about by life much as we are, caught in the glory and the brokenness of their humanity. It is not a company divided between saints and sinners, but a congregation of women and men whose feet are of clay and whose aspirations are of spirit and whose hearts are caught in between.

Wherever they set up camp, they erect the Tent of Meeting nearby, the place where Moses goes in and converses with God. On the day in question, Moses chooses seventy elders of the people and takes them out and places them around the tent. And God takes some of the spirit, or the charisma that has been given to Moses, and places it on each of the seventy so that before you know it, they are all prophesying; that is, they are all imbued and speaking ecstatically. Like Moses, they speak for God, have become vessels of God's spirit. They are the chosen ones, the appointed ones, the authoritative ones, the honored ones.

But there are two other men, Eldad and Medad, who have not been chosen, who have remained in the camp with the ordinary people. Nevertheless and unaccountably, some of God's spirit has come into them as well, and they are prophesying too, just like the seventy. They speak out just as boldly as the chosen ones and act with the same kind of authority. Someone, of course—undoubtedly a well-meaning person who wants things to happen “decently and in order”—is horrified at the impropriety, and so he runs to Moses and tells on the two men. “Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp!” he cries. And Joshua, Moses's protégé, here playing the part of the censor, picks up the theme and begs Moses to shut them up. “They can't prophesy,” Joshua complains. The censor's voice is shrill and frightened and threatened and clear: “Eldad and Medad weren't chosen. They weren't out at the tent. They didn't go to seminary. They aren't intelligent enough. They aren't as spiritually deep as Ki-

erkegaard or as morally authenticated as Bonhoeffer. If they can prophesy...then... then..., then anyone can prophesy. If they can speak for God, then anyone can speak for God. That will never do!" Moses's response is swift and sure: "Would that all the people were prophets," he said, "and that God's spirit would be on them all."

Centuries later, when people came to Jesus and asked him to bear God for them, he turned them back. When they addressed him as "Good teacher," he said, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." Jesus wanted people to know that if God was to be in the world, it would happen through them, and not through him alone. "You are the light of the world," he said to them, and again, "You are the salt of the earth." He did not claim to be the unique and sole Son of God. "When you pray," he said, "pray like this, 'Our Father....,'" and what implication can you draw from that pronoun but that he understood each of us to be the Daughter of God or the Son of God? All of the most authentic religious leaders refuse to carry our religion—and our moral burden—for us.

It's true, of course, that we need moral heroes, so we look to people like Dorothy Day and Dr. King and the Righteous Gentiles who protected the Jews during World War II. We need spiritual guides, so we look to Thomas Merton and May Sarton and the medieval mystics. We need intellectual teachers, rabbis, so we look to Luther and Niebuhr and Heschel and Barth and Reuther. And many look to Jesus who had the intellectual rigor of a rabbi, the spiritual depth of the mystics, the moral authority of a prophet, and the authenticity of one who lived what he taught. There is nothing wrong with heroes and guides and teachers. Thank God for them. But on this Pentecost, consider that Moses's wish—that God's spirit might be poured out on all the people—has been fulfilled. This is one of the great teachings of the Protestant Reformation and of our liberal religious heritage. We cannot ask others to carry God for us, to be spiritual for us, to make moral choices for us, to think for us. The supreme glory and the staggering burden of being human is that we each bear in our mortal bodies the spirit of the eternal. We each bear in our limited minds the spirit of wisdom. We each bear in our flawed souls the spirit of the goodness. Who speaks for God? Yes, the giants do, without a doubt, but not only them. Who speaks for God? You do, and if you take that as both encouraging and terrifying news, then you have heard it correctly. So on Pentecost, you are meant to be no bystander, hearing the tongues of the wise and the good and the soulful, admiring them from afar, or sitting at their feet. On Pentecost, you and I are meant to join the wise and the good and the soulful, to stand on our own feet as children of God, to make hard moral choices with the saints, and to loosen our tongues, and with courageous abandon speak whatever truth has been imparted to us. So let me ask you: on this Pentecost, what is the truth that has been given to you to speak, with your words or with your deeds? What truth is burning in you? The truth of forgiveness? The truth of peacemaking? The truth of good news for the poor? The truth of the ineffable holiness of beauty? If the voice of the Eternal is to be uttered through the community of the faithful, then your part of

that utterance, even if it is incomplete, is holy, and urgently necessary. Dear friends, it's Pentecost. Will you let others speak for you? Can you be silent on such a day?

At the end of Lanford Wilson's play *The Fifth of July*, we hear the conclusion of a science fiction story written by one of the characters, a young boy whom we never see:

After they had explored all the suns in the universe, and all the planets of all the suns, they realized that there was no other life in the universe, and that they were alone. And they were very happy, because then they knew it was up to them to become all the things they had imagined they would find.¹

We may not be alone in the universe, and we are certainly not alone here on Earth, but there is wisdom in what the boy wrote, for on the journey of the soul, it is, indeed, up to us to become all the things we imagine we might find. And if, on that journey, we have sought to discover the Eternal, the Transcendent, the one known as God, then we will not find it at all unless we find it in ourselves.

Note

¹Wilson, Lanford, *The Fifth of July*, (Act II) (New York: Hill and Wang Publishers, 1979), pg. 127.