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### **Going with the Flow (Numbers 11:16—30)**

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Over the last few weeks I've been making a retreat in daily life with others from Benedictus. My desire as I began the retreat was to encounter the wildness of God, the sacred found beyond the confinement of our words and constructs especially, dare I say, religious ones. This desire reflects my recent transition away from fulltime ministry within a congregational setting in order to give more of myself to the contemplative life and the opportunities to serve Christ by it and within it.

The process of leaving behind the stability and identity of stipended ministry and learning to *sit well* with God in this less-defined, precarious and, as some might see it, irresponsible space is having its way in me. Tonight, I'd like to share a little of my experience with you in the hope that you may find something for your journey within it.

This weekend, we reach the final stage in the paschal mystery that framed our retreat—Pentecost. On Pentecost, we celebrate the Spirit's ongoing presence in the world and, together with Trinity Sunday which we observe next week, we mark the consummation of God's love with and for us. The Spirit of Pentecost manifests in our lives when the threads seem to come together, when we are in full flight with a sense of divine inspiration. It may last for only a moment or a short season, but these times are real and we do well to notice and celebrate them.

As we observe Pentecost, the story of Eldad and Medad may seem like an unusual scripture choice from the lectionary. Why not go with the more familiar reading from Acts with tongues of flame and a cacophony of languages? Now that's an exciting story with obvious and easier applications. Or, if not Acts, why not the gentler Pentecost story found in John's gospel which tells of the risen Christ breathing a spirit of peace onto the disciples? That story fits our contemplative setting. Well, in short, this reading resonates with my recent experience. It captures one of my life-long and oh-so gradual transformations.

In the story from Numbers, I hear that natural impulse to order (and maybe even control!) the Spirit of God with human initiatives and airless frameworks. Moses gathered seventy elders—a precise and meaningful number in scripture. They stood around the tent of meeting that contained the Ark of the Covenant where the presence of God was symbolically housed. Then, as the storyteller puts it, God placed some of the Spirit that was on Moses onto each of the elders and, for a moment, they prophesied. It was a ceremonial act done ‘decently and in order’—to quote from the polity book of my Reformed roots.

It would be true to say a kind of *decency and order* defined the cultures that have shaped much my life. In fact, I’d say organisation and neatness are natural inclinations for me. They are my go-to responses when life becomes stressful and uncertain. (Put things in writing... make lists... sweep the floor... wipe the benchtop...) It is a learned, and I hope sometimes useful, coping mechanism from my childhood which could be unpredictable, strained and violent.

As I mature, I am becoming aware of how religion can be a form of spiritual risk management. Rather than drawing us close to the living God we seek to love, it becomes like a firewall keeping us from a more primal, personal and life-shaping encounter with transcendence. As those who doxxed in Eldad and Medad suggest, our wish to *prioritise order* and *cling to* the illusion of control usually stifles the Spirit’s activity or, at the very least, causes it to go unrecognised.

Eldad, Medad, and Moses’ response to them, are for me the hoped for trajectory of my journey. They break open the possibility—no, the *reality*—that God’s Spirit is alive and active well-beyond good planning, beyond what I can *make* happen, and even my hopes and dreams. As I discover empowerment and security of a different kind, I desire freedom for myself and in my relationships with others and creation. I want *to be*—simple, transparent, real—and let others be... *and see what happens* in the glorious, creative mix. I have a long way to go in this regard, but it is my hope.

I was blessed to have something of this experience during the COVID pandemic. With my usual work responsibilities stripped away, I was able to be more responsive and spontaneous. The church I was serving at the time has a small UnitingCare agency that received essential service status when we went into lockdown. So, as the community around us became quiet and still, the church hall came to life with stranded international students, recent migrants and refugees, those experiencing homelessness and mental illness, and those looking for connection and support including the volunteers. Each day required me to be present to a Spirit who is well and truly

beyond what had been my experience up to that point. It was stretching, eye-opening and enlivening.

When Australian society began to rev up again as COVID restrictions eased I, like many, emerged from the experience with new insights and priorities. Without minimising the very real suffering caused by the pandemic, I believe we also discovered some gifts that were ready for us to integrate into our post-COVID existence—something I, for one, was eager to do. But to my naïve surprise, I found most people just wanted life to ‘go back to normal’. In my context, there was an expectation that churches would resume our program as-per-normal, completely untouched or uninformed by what we had just been through.

*But I was different.* And my vision of what church could be had grown with my fresh experience of the Spirit. I found it increasingly difficult and painful to squeeze myself back into the rubrics of a well-ordered, institutionally informed faith and community whose priorities remain unchanged. I wanted to join the likes of Eldad and Medad and go with the flow of a Spirit who comes upon us graciously, surprisingly, unbidden and sometimes even in rogue disguises.

But of course, letting go of something so fundamental to my history and, let’s face it, so essential to my practical needs (housing, stipend, long service leave, superannuation) was not easy. It was a long season of wrestling, grief, waiting, surrender and needed trust—familiar movements within the transformation journey we’ve been exploring on the retreat. After making the decision not to renew my contract at the end of ten-years, a parable came my way that gave me courage.

I was sitting at the dining room table drinking my morning tea when I noticed a bird flying back and forth into the potted tree under the eaves of the house. What is she up to? I wondered. In time it became apparent she was building a nest in our pot plant—a blessing, I thought, and an acceptance of our hospitality. After my husband and I returned from a trip to Western Australia a few weeks later, we began sitting in the Adirondack chairs outside since the weather had grown warmer. But each time we went outside, the bird would become unsettled and fly away from her nest. One day she flew off and didn’t return.

After a few weeks when it was obvious the nest was abandoned, I took the opportunity to peek inside the nest. There were three unhatched, pink speckled eggs. I felt sad and hoped our activity around the pot plant was not the reason for this outcome. Nevertheless, the experience became a

parable for me over the weeks. I brought the nest with its eggs into the house and it remains in a prominent place even now and I wrote this poem about my reflections:

### The Empty Nest

A nest in  
the potted tree  
next to the house.  
A blessing  
now empty,  
no chicks  
not even broken shells  
of possibility.  
Just empty.  
It tells a story  
I do not want to hear.  
She moves on  
so easily  
it seems  
and we  
continue to collect  
our twigs and feathers,  
bits of grass and hair,  
padding a nest  
that will never hold  
a future once imagined.

This is not as sad  
as it may seem.  
For it speaks  
of *Kairos* time,  
of being attuned,  
knowing when  
and what  
and freedom  
to take flight.

Life is so often  
about padding our nests,  
sitting  
with stubborn determination,  
clinging,  
staring blankly,  
when really,  
it's time  
to move  
on.

They say we should be careful what we wish for. Indeed, as I'm finding, encountering the wildness of God and approaching the freedom I seek require more courage and strength than I can muster on my own. At times I am tempted to return to the security and tamedness I once knew.

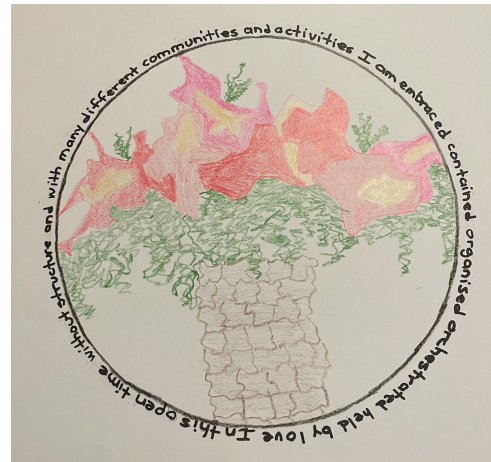
Though it is increasingly easy to turn down offers to take up supply ministry, I can feel anxious sometimes without a role to define my identity or, let's face it, to pad my nest now and for the future. So, the question of what it means to *sit well* with God in this new place—this Pentecost place where the threads have come together—is a live one for me.

As I reflected on this question during the retreat, I found not so much answers, but affirmations. One strong and abiding affirmation is reflected in a mandala I created at the beginning of the retreat. One day, I was moved to colour the vase of snap dragons I brought in from our garden. Sitting before the blank paper with a box of crayons, I noticed I felt overwhelmed by the

squareness and sharp edges and vastness of the sheet of paper before me. So I took a plate from the drawer in the kitchen and drew a circle to begin a mandala.

Over the days, as I returned to gaze at the mandala, I wondered if drawing the circle represented my need to control and contain. Was this more of the same for me as I encounter such an undefined and open space? Or is this something else? something new for me? One day in prayer before the mandala, these words came to me:

In this open time without structure  
with many different communities and activities  
I am embraced  
contained  
organised  
orchestrated  
held  
by love.



Perhaps it matters less what I do, what I call myself professionally, whether I belong to this group or that group, but that there is love.

When the bank balance seems to be making a slow descent, when I struggle to see value in how I spend my days, when I feel anxious about my future, I ask myself, 'Is it enough? *Is love really enough?*' This question is usually met with another equally unanswerable one: *What else is worth living for?*

So, for now, here is where I sit with God and I am happy and I am grateful.