

Intersections



SESSION 16: Passages from Numbers 11, John 4, 1 Corinthians 3, and Luke 9

A banquet hall on holy ground where love and justice meet...

Comment 1

Last week, we explored an “intersection” of biblical texts related to the Jewish “feast of weeks.” In Hebrew, that’s the feast known as *Shavuot*. Greek-speaking Jews sometimes called it “Pentecost,” because it always fell fifty days (seven weeks and a day) after the beginning of Passover.

Shavuot or “Pentecost” was a time to celebrate the beginning of a new harvest, a time to honor the “first fruits” from farm fields.

Comment 2

For Christians, “Pentecost” also became a time to celebrate the empowering Presence of the Holy One in the midst of Jesus’ terrified followers. With dramatic signs and manifestations, the Spirit from Above came upon them, enabling them to serve as the “first fruits” of God’s grace in a world dominated by forces seeking to devour and destroy.

This week, we will explore a different group of texts, this time drawn from the writings known as Numbers, Luke, John, and 1 Corinthians. Last time, we began with a long chapter from the book of Joel. This time we begin with a long chapter from the book of Numbers. Although this week’s texts are *different*, some of their themes are *similar* to what we saw last week.

As we read, we will once again listen for God’s Voice, seeking divine Wisdom for us today.

Numbers 11:1–15 (slightly abbreviated)

From the Jewish Publication Society translation

¹ The people [who had left Egypt] took to complaining bitterly before the LORD. The LORD heard and was incensed: a fire of the LORD broke out against them, ravaging the outskirts of the camp.

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² The people cried out to Moses. Moses prayed to the LORD, and the fire died down. ³ That place was named Taberah, [literally “burning place”], because a fire of the LORD had broken out against them.

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⁴ The riffraff in their midst felt a gluttonous craving; and then the Israelites wept and said, “If only we had meat to eat!” ⁵ We remember the fish that we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. ⁶ Now our gullets are shriveled. There is nothing at all! Nothing but this manna to look to!”...

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¹⁰ Moses heard the people weeping, every clan apart, each person at the entrance of his tent. The LORD was very angry, and Moses was distressed.

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¹¹ And Moses said to the LORD, “Why have You dealt ill with Your servant, and why have I not enjoyed Your favor, that You have laid the burden of all this people upon me? ¹² Did I con-

ceive all this people, did I bear them, that You should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom as a nurse carries an infant,’ to the land that You have promised on oath to their fathers?

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¹³ “Where am I to get meat to give to all this people, when they whine before me and say, ‘Give us meat to eat!’ ¹⁴ I cannot carry all this people by myself, for it is too much for me! ¹⁵ If You would deal thus with me, kill me rather, I beg You, and let me see no more of my wretchedness!”

For Discussion

In an overall sense, how does this story strike you?

What details stand out for you—either because they seem especially surprising or especially significant or especially puzzling or whatever?

What might this story sound like if we were to recast it in a modern context?

Do we—or anyone in our modern world—ever behave like any of the characters in this story? In what ways?

Comment 3

The eleventh chapter of Numbers is filled with great irony—and some startling details.

The story is remarkably vivid. We are told that the very people who had been dramatically freed from enslavement and exploitation in Egypt are now complaining to the very One who freed them. Like so many people today, they become bitter because their bountiful blessings aren’t all that they hoped. They’re living in what most normal people would call “the wilderness.” It’s hot. It’s dry. And it’s in the middle of nowhere.

“How could you bring us here, O LORD?” they cry.

Comment 4

Then the text offers up a clever play on words.

We’re told that, figuratively speaking, this bitter complaining has caused God to become “incensed.” This colorful language implies that, figuratively speaking, the complainers have accidentally “set God on fire.” The very One whose

Presence has surrounded them—the liberating LORD whose unseen “arms” have been so graciously protected them—this God has been set aflame.

Comment 5

With a sly grin and much comic irony, the text then tells us that the complainers suddenly find fires bursting out all around the camp. It’s “a fire of the LORD,” verse 1 tells us.

In effect, through their selfish complaining, the complainers have “lit a match.” And then, without quite realizing what they were doing, they have thrown the “match,” as it were, into their own house! They’ve thrown the “match” into the “lap” of the very One in whose arms they are resting!

Comment 6

When the complainers cry out in alarm, Moses prays—and the fires thankfully die out. The people in the camp call the place Taberah, which literally means “the burning place.” In other words, it’s that crazy place where bitter complainers foolishly set their own camp on fire.

All of this is perhaps a bit like those cranky, self-centered politicians in our own world who deny that there is any human involvement in climate change or any human involvement in the destruction of our environment. And then, through their stubborn denials and refusal to change their behavior, they make *worse* the very problem that they are so eager to deny. In effect, through their own selfishness, they set their own “house” on fire.

Comment 7

If we read Numbers 11 with little more than a somber, super-serious attitude, we will miss its deepest power. What Numbers 11 offers us is a masterful comedy. Its crafty writers understand something important. They understand that comedy can often speak to us more powerfully than can tragedy.

So in this masterful comedy, does anybody learn a helpful lesson from these blazing fires?

No, indeed!

Comment 8

In fact, almost immediately after the fires die down, we are told that “the riffraff” in the camp begins to feel “a gluttonous craving.”

The wording is significant.

In other words, it’s *not* that these folks are genuinely hungry. It’s *not* that they honestly need something more to eat. Rather, they *crave gluttony*. Like so many people even in our own day, they *crave excess*. When it comes to food, they want it *all*. And they want it *now*.

Comment 9

The scene is comical in the extreme. With big but fake tears rolling down their cheeks, these cravers of gluttony recite the many wonderful foods on which they *supposedly* feasted while serving as enslaved laborers in Egypt. We aren’t told if they are deluded, demented—or simply putting on an act.

“Oh,” they sigh. “Things were great when we were enslaved. We had all the meat we wanted, fish at every meal. There were cucumbers and melons and leeks and onions and garlic in abundance! Before a cruel God dragged us out here to the wilderness, life was wonderful. Slavery was glorious. There’s nothing better than those meals we had while enslaved and exploited!”

Comment 10

It’s enough to make us burst out laughing, but then the text adds an even funnier detail. It says that not only was everyone weeping, but they went out of their way to make sure that their sorrow was widely known. The text says that they all sat weeping, *not* inside their tents *nor* in a particular gathering place *but rather* in the open doorway of all their tents. It’s as if they wanted their big, sad tears to make a strong impression—not only on God but also on Moses.

“Look at us!” they cried. “See our tears. See what you’ve done to us. Isn’t it time that you let us practice a little *gluttony*? Shouldn’t we be allowed the same degree of *greed* that we saw so of-

ten in our oppressors? Shouldn’t we be allowed to grab and grab—and keep for ourselves as much as we can get?”

Comment 11

In this comic tale, Moses becomes deeply distressed. So he goes to the LORD, and like those weepers who are sitting in the doorway of every tent, he too starts complaining.

“You’ve dealt ill with me, O LORD!” he cries. “In fact, to put it frankly, you’ve *never* shown me any favor! You’ve *never* shown me any grace! Think about it: you’ve laid the burden of this people on *me*—and they’re not even mine. Why should I be responsible? Did I conceive them? Did I give birth to them? No! Yet you ask me to nurse them. It’s *you* who made a way for them out of no way, yet you expect *me* to carry them in my bosom! You expect *me* to lead them to the land you promised! Listen, God, the best thing you can do for me right now is to kill me. Just put me out of my misery! This situation is more wretched than I can bear!”

For Discussion

What are some of the insights into our own selves or our own world that we might gain from this first part of this comical story?

Numbers 11:16–23 (slightly abbreviated)

From the Jewish Publication Society translation

¹⁶ Then the LORD said to Moses, “Gather for Me seventy of Israel’s elders of whom you have experience as elders and officers of the people, and bring them to the Tent of Meeting and let them take their place there with you.

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¹⁷ “I will come down and speak with you there, and I will draw upon the spirit that is on you and put it upon them; they shall share the burden of the people with you, and you shall not bear it alone.

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¹⁸ “And say to the people: Purify yourselves [as if preparing for a sacred feast], and tomorrow

you shall eat meat, for you have kept whining before the LORD and saying, ‘If only we had meat to eat! Indeed, we were better off in Egypt!’

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“The LORD will give you meat, and you shall eat. ¹⁹ You shall eat not one day, not two, not even five days or ten or twenty, ²⁰ but a whole month, until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you. For you have rejected the LORD who is among you, by whining before Him and saying, ‘Oh, why did we ever leave Egypt!’”...

For Discussion

If you had been whining Moses, in what ways, if any, might God’s response have seemed like a blessing—and in what ways, if any, might God’s response have seemed like a new burden?

What do you make of the message that Moses is asked to deliver to a whining people? Do you think it would have seemed like a blessing—or a burden?

Comment 12

The hard-hitting comedy in this section of Numbers never seems to stop.

The people whom God has led from slavery to freedom have been whining. And Moses, the leader on whom God’s Spirit has graciously rested—he, too, has been whining.

So now God responds to the whiners. We may find ourselves chuckling about what this whining has wrought. But even as we chuckle, we can find ourselves feeling ill at ease, for we know how readily we, too, can whine or complain, wanting “more” for ourselves without thinking about what the “more” will cost.

Comment 13

“Listen, Moses,” says the LORD, “you claim that you can’t go on. You claim that the burden of carrying this people all by yourself in your bosom is just too much responsibility.

“So I’m giving you more help, like you wanted. But what you are getting is not just a single helper, ever eager to please you. Nor am I giving

you two or five or even a mere ten or twenty. Instead, you will have to deal with *seventy*—seventy new helpers, all with their own ideas, all trying to move in their own direction. Your committee meetings and planning sessions? With all those competing voices, they’ll be pandemonium. And that Spirit with which I blessed you? You’ll need to give up a big portion of it, for you’ll need to share that Spirit with seventy helpers. They’ll each need a big dose of that which has been exclusively yours.”

Comment 14

“And those many people in the camp who have been whining,” says the Holy One, “those folks from every clan who have been weeping big tears, claiming that life was wonderful back when they were enslaved, claiming that what they really crave right now is gluttony?

“Well, gluttony they will have! Tell them that I will give them meat—not just for a single day or for two days or five days or even ten or twenty. No, tell them that they will be eating meat until it comes out their nostrils. Tell them they will be *practicing gluttony* until it becomes loathsome to them. They’ll have more, all right—more than they will be able to stand.”

Numbers 11:24–29

From the Jewish Publication Society translation

²⁴ Moses went out and reported the words of the LORD to the people. He gathered seventy of the people’s elders and stationed them around the Tent.

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²⁵ Then the LORD came down in a cloud and spoke to him; He drew upon the spirit that was on him and put it upon the seventy elders. And when the spirit rested upon them, they spoke in ecstasy, but did not continue.

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²⁶ Two men, one named Eldad and the other Medad, had remained in camp; yet the spirit rested upon them—they were among those recorded, but they had not gone out to the Tent—

and they spoke in ecstasy in the camp.

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²⁷ A youth ran out and told Moses, saying, “Eldad and Medad are acting the prophet in the camp!”

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²⁸ And Joshua son of Nun, Moses’ attendant from his youth, spoke up and said, “My lord Moses, restrain them!”

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²⁹ But Moses said to him, “Are you wrought up on my account? Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets, that the LORD put his spirit upon them!”

For Discussion

Are there comical elements in this part of the story? If so, what?

Why do you think the youth, as well as Joshua, are portrayed as running to Moses, complaining about Eldad and Medad, who are engaged in ecstatic speech in the camp?

In what ways, if any, might we today sometimes behave like Joshua or the youth?

Numbers 11:30–34 (slightly abbreviated)

From the Jewish Publication Society translation

³⁰ Moses then reentered the camp together with the elders of Israel.

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³¹ A wind from the LORD started up, swept quail from the sea and strewed them over the camp, about a day’s journey on this side and about a day’s journey on that side, all around the camp, and some two cubits deep on the ground.

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³² The people set to gathering quail all that day and night and all the next day—even he who gathered least had ten *homers**—and they spread them out all around the camp.

* *A “homer” was a very large unit of measure.*

In today’s terms, each “homer” would be equal to about 6-1/2 bushels. So “ten homers” of quail would be an almost ludicrous amount of quail for one person. We are clearly supposed to chuckle!

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³³ The meat was still between their teeth, not yet chewed, when the anger of the LORD blazed forth against the people and the LORD struck the people with a very severe plague.

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³⁴ That place was named Kibroth-haattaavah [literally, “the graves of craving”] because the people who had the craving were buried there.

For Discussion

What do you hear this portion of the story suggesting?

How might we apply insights from this story to our own lives and to our own world?

Comment 15

Even today, there are occasionally situations where large flocks of migrating birds are blown off course by a severe storm. Weak and exhausted, they land on the ground—and either die from lack of nourishment or become easy prey for anyone seeking to catch them.

The story in Numbers 11 suggests that something like this happened—and the whiners who had been craving a chance to practice gluttony ran out and gathered up huge quantities of sick and diseased quail, which they promptly ate with such gluttonous craving that they, too, became sick and diseased. Many died from the illness that resulted from their selfish greed.

Comment 16

Numbers 11 says that in Hebrew, the place was called Kibroth-haattaavah, which literally means “the graves of craving.” It’s a startling name—and a powerful reminder that our selfish cravings can be deeply deadly, not only for others but for ourselves.

When we “want it all”—whether it’s more sweet desserts or more bountiful money in the bank or greater social status or more highly esteemed academic degrees or an accumulation of grand houses or a bigger and richer church congregation or more personal acclaim or a stronger measure of religious authority for ourselves—we

are often simply digging for ourselves a bigger grave. The “graves of craving” are among the saddest graves of all.

Comment 17

In 1878, Edwin Hatch wrote a prayer hymn that recognizes the importance of our being cleansed of our selfish cravings so that we might be filled with life anew.

The words of his hymn were these:

*Breathe on me, breath of God,
fill me with life anew,
that I may love the things you love
and do what you would do.*

*Breathe on me, breath of God,
until my heart is pure,
until with you I will one will,
to do or to endure.*

*Breathe on me, breath of God,
my will to yours incline,
until this selfish part of me
glows with your fire divine.*

John 4:27–38

From New Jerusalem Bible translation

²⁷ At this point, his disciples returned and were surprised to find [Jesus] speaking to a woman, though none of them asked, “What do you want from her?” or “What are you talking to her about?”

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²⁸ The woman put down her water jar and hurried back to the town to tell the people, ²⁹ “Come and see a man who has told me everything I have done; could this be the Christ?”

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³⁰ This brought people out of the town and they made their way towards him.

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³¹ Meanwhile, the disciples were urging him, “Rabbi, do have something to eat.” ³² But he said, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.”

³³ So the disciples said, “Has someone brought him food?”

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³⁴ But Jesus said:

“My food
is to do the will of the one who sent me,
and to complete his work.

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³⁵ “Do you not have a saying:
‘Four months and then the harvest’?

Well, I tell you,
look around you, look at the fields;
already they are white, ready for harvest!

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³⁶ “Already the reaper is being paid his wages,
already he is bringing in the grain for eternal
life,

so that the sower and reaper can rejoice
together.

³⁷ For here the proverb holds true:

‘One sows, another reaps.’

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³⁸ “I sent you to reap
a harvest you have not labored for.
Others have labored for it;
and you have come into the rewards of their
labor.”

For Discussion

What are some of the ways in which this scene can be understood as “intersecting” in interesting or meaningful ways with the comical—but very pointed—accounts that we found in Numbers 11?

In light of Numbers 11, what do you hear God’s “breath” whispering to us through brief verses in John 4?

Comment 18

Here in John 4, we are offered a scene in which the disciples have been away. They return and discover Jesus sitting by a well, speaking with a Samaritan woman. “What do you want from her?” they ask. “You have us. We want to be your exclusive partners. We crave it all! Please don’t go sharing yourself with others!”

Before long, the woman leaves. She has felt

the breath of God. She glows with fire divine. So she runs into town, serving as a vocal agent of grace for others in a way that the disciples themselves had utterly failed to do.

Comment 19

Free of this pesty woman, the disciples try to get Jesus to join them in a feast. They're eager to eat. More and more physical food is what they crave. But Jesus isn't interested. He doesn't share their gluttonous craving. "I have 'food' to eat that you know not of," he says. What is this 'food'? It's "to do the will of the One who sent me." It's to bring in the "grain" of eternal life.

"You, too, ought to be reaping," says Jesus to his disciples. "Not to satisfy your selfish cravings but to enrich and sustain the lives of others." In effect, Jesus was calling on his disciples to follow the example of the woman whom they had despised, the example of the woman who had chosen to pursue a joyous life of sharing rather than a selfish grave of craving.

The kind of life that the Samaritan woman was pursuing is lifted up in a song written in 1874 by Knowles Shaw:

*Sowing in the morning, sowing seeds of
kindness,
sowing in the noontide and the dewy eve;
waiting for the harvest, and the time of reaping,
we shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.
Bringing in the sheaves, bringing in the sheaves,
we shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves;
bringing in the sheaves, bringing in the sheaves,
we shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.*

*Sowing in the sunshine, sowing in the shadows,
fearing neither clouds nor winter's chilling
breeze;
by and by, the harvest, and the labor ended,
we shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.
Bringing in the sheaves, bringing in the sheaves,
we shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves;
bringing in the sheaves, bringing in the sheaves,
we shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.*

1 Corinthians 3:3b-9

From the Revised English Bible translation

³ Can you not see that as long as there is jealousy and strife among you, you are unspiritual, living on a purely human level? ⁴ When one declares, "I am for Paul," and another, "I am for Apollos," are you not all too human?

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⁵ After all, what is Apollos? What is Paul? Simply God's agents in bringing you to faith.

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Each of us performed the task which the Lord assigned to him: ⁶ I planted the seed, and Apollos watered it; but God made it grow.

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⁷ It is not the gardeners with their planting and watering who count, but God who makes it grow. ⁸ Whether they plant or water, they work as a team, though each will get his own pay for his own labor. ⁹ We are fellow-workers in God's service, and you are God's garden.

For Discussion

What are some of the ways that we today behave like those to whom Paul is writing?

How might which these admonitions from Paul be understood as "intersecting" with what we encountered in Numbers 11 or John 4?

In light of those earlier texts, what do you hear God's "breath" whispering to us here?

Luke 9:46-50

From the New Revised Standard Version

⁴⁶ An argument arose among them as to which one of them was the greatest.

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⁴⁷ But Jesus, aware of their inner thoughts, took a little child and put it by his side, ⁴⁸ and said to them, "Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me;

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"For the least among you is the greatest."

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⁴⁹ John answered, “Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us.”

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⁵⁰ But Jesus said to him, “Do not stop him; for whoever is not against you is for you.”

For Discussion

What are some of the ways in which these verses could be seen as “intersecting” with what we encountered in today’s other texts?

In light of those earlier texts, what do you hear God’s “breath” whispering to us here?

Comment 20

Today’s texts remind us that we can be selfish cravers. We can whine and complain when God’s Spirit blesses or works through others. We can seek full glory for ourselves—more and more until we, like so many others before us, collapse into “graves of craving,” never having shared our lives or opened God’s house to the hopes and dreams and visions of those who equally bear the image of God’s face.

In 1994, Marty Haugen wrote a hymn that invites us all to build the kind of wide-open lives that can serve as “a banquet hall” in which all are fed with dignity and grace. Its words were these:

*Let us build a house where love can dwell
and all can safely live,
a place where saints and children tell
how hearts learn to forgive.
Built of hopes and dreams and visions,
rock of faith and vault of grace;
here the love of Christ shall end divisions:
all are welcome, all are welcome—
all are welcome in this place.*

*Let us build a house where prophets speak
and words are strong and true,
where all God’s children dare to seek
to dream God’s dream anew.
Here the cross shall stand as witness
and as symbol of God’s grace;
here as one we claim the faith of Jesus:*

*all are welcome, all are welcome—
all are welcome in this place.*

*Let us build a house where love is found
in water, wine, and wheat:
a banquet hall on holy ground
where peace and justice meet.
Here the love of God, through Jesus,
is revealed in time and space:
all are welcome, all are welcome—
all are welcome in this place.*

*Let us build a house where hands will reach
beyond the wood and stone,
to heal and strengthen, serve and teach,
and live the Word they’ve known.
Here the outcast and the stranger
bear the image of God’s face:
all are welcome, all are welcome—
all are welcome in this place.*

*Let us build a house where all are named,
their songs and visions heard
and loved and treasured,
taught and claimed as words within the Word.
Built of tears and cries and laughter,
prayers of faith and songs of grace,
let this house proclaim from floor to rafter:
all are welcome, all are welcome—
all are welcome in this place.*