

This Spirit must be controlled, Joshua seemed to imply—we need to do something! We need to restrict this awesome power of knowing God to carefully selected leaders.

But Moses rebuked Joshua, because Moses knew that the Spirit would blow where it would—the Spirit would touch those whom God had directed be touched, and instruct those whom God wished to have instructed.

Because the Spirit of God was just that—the Spirit *of God*—so the Spirit was only doing what God wanted done. Because the Spirit *was* God—the very breath of Yahweh, the great, “I AM,” the God whom Moses knew and loved. “There’s nothing to be afraid of,” Moses seemed to tell Joshua. “There’s nothing to be afraid of at all, because our God is nothing to be afraid of. Our God is a wondrous God—I only wish *everyone* could know God as I do!”

It would be some time before Moses’ prayer was answered. It would be nearly fifteen hundred years, in fact, before all of God’s people were able to receive the Holy Spirit. There were things that had to happen first, you see—things like God coming to us in human form in the person of Jesus Christ, things like Christ’s death and resurrection, which made it possible for us to approach God and know God directly, *without* a prophetic or priestly intermediary like Moses.

But Moses’ prayer *was*, eventually, answered. Because all these things came to pass, because we were reconciled to God through Christ, the gift of the Holy Spirit *was* given to everyone—to you, to me, to *everyone*—so that we could come to know God in a new and special way.

This is what we celebrate on Pentecost—this gift of the Holy Spirit, whom God has seen fit, incredibly, to bestow upon each and every one of us. Each and every one of us is now able, through Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, to *know* God in a completely new and different way.

Because in answering Moses’ prayer, God gave us the same power that God gave Moses—the power to know God as Moses did, so that we, like Moses, can understand that God is a God of love, a God who provides, a God who will always be there for us, just as God promised, teaching us and instructing us about who God is, so that we, like Moses, can trust in God and God’s promises.

Amen.

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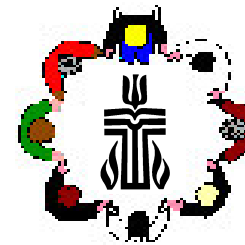
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## “The Gift of the Spirit” Sermon by Rev. Nancy Lynch

Pentecost  
May 11, 2008



Numbers 11:24-30



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“Reaching Up to God ...  
Reaching Out to Others.”

## Numbers 11:24-30

A little bit of background on today's Scripture passage from the book of Numbers: The action takes place in the wilderness, during the first forty years that God's people are wandering around in it after having been freed from slavery in Egypt.

It's been a tough forty years in many ways—a journey fraught with uncertainty. Israel constantly faced life-threatening challenges with respect to basic necessities like food and water, and even though God always managed to provide exactly what they needed, exactly when they needed it, Israel still had more than a little doubt about God's willingness and ability to provide.

Despite the many miracles that God had performed on their behalf—the ten plagues in Egypt that convinced the pharaoh to set them free, the parting of the Red Sea, the manna that appeared out of nowhere in response to their hunger—despite all of these miracles, God's people continued to doubt in God's ability to provide. Despite all of these things, God's people continued to doubt *God*, period.

But really, though—can you blame them? Think about it. Back then, back when God first chose Israel to be God's people to be in a very special relationship with God, Israel really didn't know God all that well. And, as in any new relationship, there's always a period of time when you're learning about the other person, whether that relationship is a romantic relationship, a business relationship, a friendly relationship, or whatever—there's always that phase when both parties are getting to know one another. They're learning what the other person is like, they're learning what they can expect from one another, they're learning what's expected of them.

So, in a sense, that's what God and Israel were doing out there in the wilderness—they were getting to know one another. Israel was getting to know God, and God was getting to know Israel.

God, of course, knew everything there was to know about Israel—after all, God *created* Israel. But there was still an element of uncertainty there about what Israel would do, because God had given Israel free will, so it was by no means a foregone conclusion that Israel would act as God wanted them to act.

And Israel, of course, didn't really know anything about God. Oh, sure, there *were* those miracles ... but who was to say God wasn't just putting on a good show, to woo Israel, so to speak? Who was to say that this honeymoon phase of their courtship would last forever? Sure, God had provided for them thus far ... but what if the Promised Land didn't really exist? What if God lost interest in them? What if God moved on, say, to some *other* chosen people, forgetting all about Israel out in the wilderness? What if God, all of a sudden, disappeared?

Fundamentally, then, the basic issue was that Israel didn't really trust God. They couldn't, because they really didn't know God all that well. How could they? Back then, Scripture hadn't yet been written, so Israel couldn't just pick up a bible and know God by reading about God, like we can today. Nor did Israel have the living Word of God, Jesus Christ, to look to for inspiration and guidance, like we do today.

So Israel really didn't have any idea what to expect of God, much less what was expected of them.

God knew this, of course. So God decided to clue them in on who God was, not only through what God *did*, but also through what God *said*, through Moses, who at that

time happened to be the only person to whom God spoke. God had given Moses the gift of prophecy—the gift of being able to hear and interpret what God was saying—and the means by which this gift was given him was through the power of the Holy Spirit. Through the Holy Spirit, Moses was able to understand God, and convey that understanding to others.

When I first looked at the Scripture passages for today, Pentecost, I first thought I'd preach on that famous passage from Acts—that passage we read earlier, where the gift of the Holy Spirit came down on all of God's people in tongues of fire, in fulfillment of Christ's promise that he would always be with us.

But then I read this passage from Numbers, and I noticed something very interesting—that the Holy Spirit didn't arrive *after* Christ died and was resurrected—the Holy Spirit, instead, *was there all along*. In fact, not only was the Holy Spirit alive and well in the days of Moses, the Holy Spirit was actively at work in God's people, through Moses, teaching them and instructing them about who God is, so that God's people could begin to trust in God and God's promises.

Here again, though, the Holy Spirit, at that time, was only in Moses. So the burden of prophecy and leadership rested squarely on Moses' shoulders. It was up to Moses to teach Israel, through the Holy Spirit, about who God is—that God is a God of love, a God who provides, a God who would always be there for them, just as God promised.

But Israel didn't listen to Moses. Israel didn't trust Moses—Israel didn't trust *God*—not really. Israel didn't really believe any of these things that the Holy Spirit told Moses to tell them, time after time after time.

So Israel complained. And complained. And complained. They complained so long and so loud, in fact, that Moses became exasperated,

so exasperated that Moses finally just prayed to God to take him, right there, because the complaining had become so bad that Moses literally preferred death to having to deal with the complaints any longer.

But God, of course, didn't put Moses to death. What God did, instead, was to take some of the Holy Spirit God gave to Moses, and pass it around to the 70 elders God had asked Moses to assemble. In other words, what God did was to give Moses' power of the Holy Spirit to *many* people, so that they, like Moses, could know God as Moses did—so that they, like Moses, could understand that God is a God of love, a God who provides, a God who would always be there for them, just as God promised.

Immediately, upon receiving the Holy Spirit, the elders began to prophesy—they immediately began to hear and understand what God said, just like Moses. This gift of prophecy wasn't permanent, of course—God chose to limit it, perhaps exposing them to the Holy Spirit just long enough to prove to them that Moses knew what he was talking about—but these elders were, for a short while, at least, able to understand God in a new and special way, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

This gift of the Spirit wasn't just confined to those elders assembled outside the tent of meeting, either, which is where everyone else received it. Eldad and Medad, two men out in the camp who, for some reason, didn't make it to the tent of meeting, received the Spirit, as well. And, not only did they receive the Spirit, they had it long enough to keep on prophesying long after the others had stopped.

This, of course, caused *more* complaining, this time from Joshua, one of the leaders of the camp, who immediately ran to Moses to let him know that the Spirit of God was, in essence, loose and running amok, resting not only on the carefully selected leaders of the camp, but on whomever it wanted to rest.