Numbers 11:23 23The Lord said to Moses, “Is the arm of the Lord too short? Now you will see whether what I have said to you will happen or not.”

In speaking of this text I want to begin by going back to the Book of Exodus. In Exodus, chapter 18 we find that Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law comes to visit Moses. When Jethro sees Moses sitting as judge over all the people he gives Moses some advice. That advice is as follows: “**What you are doing is not good. You will certainly wear out both yourself and these people who are with you, for the work is too much for you. You are not able to handle this alone. Listen to me now. I will give you advice, and may God be with you. Represent the people before God, and bring their disputes to God. Instruct them about the regulations and laws, and show them the way they are to live and the things they are to do. But you should select capable men from among all the people, God-fearing, trustworthy men, who hate dishonest gain. Then place them over the people as officials over groups of a thousand, a hundred, fifty, or ten. Have them judge all the disputes of the people at the first level. They can refer any difficult case to you, but every easy case they can judge themselves. Make your load lighter; they can carry it with you. If you will do this, and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all these people will also return home satisfied.”**

The next verses of chapter 18 indicates that such is exactly what Moses has done. He appointed men, just as Jethro had suggested, to help him take care of problems among the people. As far as we know, this group of men have been functioning all of this time, that is, until the time of our text. Here is the time frame. They arrive at Mt. Sinai on the third month after leaving Egypt, that’s when Jethro visits them. In Chapter 10 of Numbers we are told they leave Sinai and we are told it is the twentieth day of the second month in the second year. In other words, they have been at Sinai for the last two years.

What have they been doing? They have been visited by God. They have worshipped the golden calf and been duly disciplined for it. They have built the Tabernacle of God, established the priesthood, arranged for how the camp will move and live and in general put themselves into a position to march on as a unified people following the Lord their God. And so when we are told they are leaving Sinai, it is because the pillar of cloud has risen up and clearly God has given them marching orders. They are heading for the land of Canaan, the land God has promised will be theirs.

But as you listen to the words of our text, it is obvious that something is going wrong. Not long after they have started out the people start to complain against Moses, to complain about the hardship of their travel. The Lord hears that complaining and we are told fire burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp. Moses prayed to the Lord and the fire then stopped. Mind you, as they travel there is that pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night to guide them. The cloud rises they move. The cloud sets, they camp. That is important to remember because it tells you these people always had a visible sign of the presence of the Lord among them.

And then, because of what Scripture calls “foreign rabble” the people began to complain about the food. So far all they had was manna, that miraculous food of the Lord. They are complaining that they want meat. They are complaining because supposedly they remember the good old days in Egypt where according to their memories, they had plenty. (Seriously, they seem to have forgotten that they were slaves. Slaves treated very badly. Slaves who were mercilessly killed, including their children. No, their lives were so horrid that they cried out to the Lord for deliverance! Funny how sometimes our memories of what was aren’t necessarily an accurate picture of what was!) Because of this complaining, Moses complains to the Lord. Here is what Moses says.

**“Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in your eyes? Why do you put the burden of all these people on me? Did I conceive all these people by myself? Am I the one who gave birth to them so that you tell me to carry them in my arms to the land which you swore to their fathers, just as a woman who is nursing carries a baby? Where is there meat for me to give to all these people?...I am not able to carry all these people by myself, because that is too much for me. If you are going to treat me this way, please kill me right now. If I have found favor in your eyes, do not let me see my own ruin.”**

It is clear that Moses also complains to the Lord. But that is the right thing to do. Note that Moses does not just whine and moan, gripe and crab to the people or even among the people. Moses turns to the Lord. There is one of the differences between Moses and the people. The people complained among themselves. The people complained to each other and among each other but it does not seem that the people take their difficulties to the Lord. How much different things might have been had the people properly and with trust turned to the Lord to help them. It’s not that their complaint is invalid or that somehow the Lord wouldn’t grasp their complaint. It is that they complain to themselves. They don’t turn to the Lord for help but just complain. And even though Moses complaint seems pretty dire, please note that Moses goes to the Lord! That’s the wonder of it. Moses goes to the Lord. He lays out before the Lord his deepest thoughts, yes, even his dark thoughts of **“kill me”** but Moses does so with confidence and trust that the Lord will hear him and the Lord will help him. Moses will not be disappointed.

First, the Lord addresses the problem of Moses feeling he has to bear the governance of this people by himself. The Lord wants seventy elders brought before him. Seventy of the most prominent men are to come before the Tabernacle with Moses. By the way, I do believe this seventy are probably the same seventy who got to go up on Mt. Sinai with Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and Joshua. There we are told they saw the Lord and they ate a banquet in the presence of the Lord. These same seventy men are once again called before the Lord. But now their roll will change. Not just the men who got to see the Lord and eat with him but now a group men who will serve the Lord and speak for him. In other words, they will become leaders among the leaders of the people.

So there they are, gathered before the Lord. As they are gathered the Lord takes the Spirit that is on Moses and he also puts it on the seventy elders. Note we are told “they prophesied.” What that means is that they were moved to be spokesmen of the Lord. Some would say this was some sort of “ecstatic” speech, where the men babbled and maybe even danced about as the spirit moved them. I believe such an understanding would go contrary to the way of the Lord. The Lord is a God of order. It would be no good to have 70 men babbling and bouncing around like modern people like to do when they claim to have the Spirit. I find nothing in Scripture to support such a teaching or practice. A prophet has always been someone who speaks for the Lord, who shared the Word of God and sometimes in sharing the words of the Lord gave knowledge of coming events, some near and some far away. The prophets act for and speak for God. So what you have here is 70 men, standing together and together doing one of two possible things. They are preaching one at a time, each speaking and then the next speaking. Or they are uttering the very same thing, the word of God in unison. And what might they be saying? Maybe what is found in verses 18-20, **“Say to the people, “Consecrate yourselves to be ready for tomorrow. You will eat meat because you have wept and the Lord has heard you say, “Who will give us meat to eat? Yes, things were good for us in Egypt.” Therefore the Lord will give you meat, and you will eat. You will eat not just for one day, for two days, for five days, for ten days, not even just for twenty days, but for a whole month, until meat comes out of your nostrils, and you begin to loathe it. This will happen because you have rejected the Lord, who is among you, and you have wept in his presence, saying, “Why did we come out of Egypt?”…”Is the arm of the Lord too short? Now you will see whether what I have said to you will happen or not.”**

All those gathered before the Tent of Meeting are doing this. Moses, Aaron, Joshua and the other 68 men gathered! It is clear, they will all now function as spokesman for the Lord. The Lord will speak to Moses and Moses will speak to Aaron and Aaron will speak to these men and then these men will speak to all the people. They are prophets, spokesman for the Lord. This first time is done in this way so that everyone will grasp that these men have the backing of the Lord, just like Moses!!

Now, notice we spoke of 68 men. That’s because we are told that two of the men, Eldad and Medad, did not go to the Tent of Meeting. We are not told why they didn’t go, but I will say this, you don’t get to disobey the Lord without a really great excuse and still be considered a spokesman of the Lord. Clearly they had a legitimate reason for still being in the camp. The Holy Spirit still comes upon them. They prophesy, and it is more evident that the Holy Spirit is doing this if these two men are both together uttering the same words. I think these men are from the same tribe (thus the similar names) that both had been very ill, had been cured and then were standing together uttering the same words all the rest of the 68 were uttering.

What I said before stands then. This first time is done in this way so that everyone will grasp that these men have the backing of the Lord, just like Moses!! When a young man ran and reported this to Moses, Joshua, Moses’ aide, thought they should be stopped because he thought that the position of Moses was somehow diminished. It is not. Moses acknowledges Joshua’s concern, **“Are you jealous for my sake?”** The next words put it all into perspective and in truth serve to be very prophetic of what is to come.

**“If only all of the Lord’s people were prophets so that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!”** Do you know how Isaiah spoke this truth? 44:3 **“I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring, and my blessings on your descendants.”** Ezekiel speaks this way: **“I will have poured out my Spirit on the House of Israel.”** Joel says this (and remember Joel’s words are quoted at Pentecost!), **“After this, I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh. Your sons and your daughters will prophesy. Your old men will dream dreams. Your young men will see vision. Even on the servants, both male and female, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.”** Moses couldn’t wait until the day when all would be recipients of God’s Holy Spirit, when all would have the wonder and marvel of God’s Word to share with the people around them. In other words this event serves as a prelude, a shadow of Pentecost and what it would bring.

Now, in all of this what can we learn? That’s why I chose to highlight the words I did even though they weren’t a part of the text. This is the wonder and marvel of God. This is our Lord showing his wisdom of what will be, showing his strength and power and yet also showing his grace and love. Moses needed help, God has given it and will continue to do so. The people wanted meat, you will find the verses following our text are about that meat being delivered, quail that covered the camp in places three feet deep! Is the Lord’s arm too short? Can God carry out what he promises and what He desires for each and every one of us?

Of course, we realize the answer is positive. Nothing is impossible for God. All of this to make sure we understand that Jesus and what He did was no accident. It was all foretold! It was all the plan of God to save us from sin, death and the devil. Jesus came to be our Savior from sin, to deliver us just as Moses delivered the people. To take care of us and mediate for us just as Moses did for the people. Jesus came that we might all have the Spirit of the Lord poured upon us so we too can grasp that we are the children of God and heirs of eternal life. All of this God carried out in such a unique way by sending his Son, having His Son serve as our substitute in damnation and then raising his Son Jesus from the dead that we might grasp this awesome and wonderful gift of God.

Is the arm of the Lord too short? No! He is still watching over us. He still guides us with His Holy Spirit through the gospel in Word and Sacrament. He still provides “elders” or pastors to preach and teach among the people that they might hear the wonder of God. In other words, God is still in action. Only it is the one who is at his right hand who does it all. Jesus. As we see God taking care of his prophet and people in the Old Testament, so God continues to take care of all of us. Because nothing is impossible with God! Amen.