

Date: May 24, 2026 (Pentecost Sunday, series A)

Text: Numbers 11:24-30, John 7:37-39

Title: “God’s Abundant Spirit”

Numbers 11:24-30

²⁴ So Moses went out and told the people what the LORD had said. He brought together seventy of their elders and made them stand round the tent. ²⁵ Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke with him, and he took some of the power of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders. When the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied – but did not do so again.

²⁶ However, two men, whose names were Eldad and Medad, had remained in the camp. They were listed among the elders, but did not go out to the tent. Yet the Spirit also rested on them, and they prophesied in the camp. ²⁷ A young man ran and told Moses, ‘Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.’

²⁸ Joshua son of Nun, who had been Moses’ assistant since youth, spoke up and said, ‘Moses, my lord, stop them!’

²⁹ But Moses replied, ‘Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the LORD’s people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!’ ³⁰ Then Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.

John 7:37-39

³⁷ On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and cried out, ‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. ³⁸ Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, out of their heart will flow rivers of living water.’ ³⁹ By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.

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Some of you are probably familiar with “the rule of 72.” It’s a useful little rule of thumb for calculating the doubling rate. Let’s say you want to know how long it’s going to take to double your investment, at a certain rate of interest. Divide the number 72 *by* that interest rate, and there’s your answer! So, if your interest rate is 6%— then, $72 \div 6 = 12$. Your doubling rate is 12 years. That assumes, of course, that you are *compounding* your growth by keeping that 6% return as part of your investment every year (not spending it!). But as long as you do that: If you start with \$1,000 and earn 6% on it every year (*keeping that 6% invested*)—after 12 years, you will have doubled your money and ended up with \$2,000.

What got me thinking about this, last week, was the way *numbers* keep popping up in all of today’s readings, as they tell us about God’s abundant gift of the Holy Spirit. Let me explain.

Our Old Testament reading (from the *book* of Numbers—coincidentally!) tells us how God gave the Holy Spirit to *a number of different people* among the people of Israel. At first it was just Moses who enjoyed that gift, and even then, only when he was listening to God *outside* the camp where all the people lived. But on this one occasion, we’re told that God himself “**took some of the power of that Spirit that was on [Moses] and put it on 70 elders [also],**” when they were outside the camp *with* Moses. (Num 11:25) *Then*—as odd as this sounds—some of that power of the Holy Spirit “leaked out”!—and ended up “**resting on**” two other elders who (for some reason) had *not* gone outside the camp (with the rest of the elders), but “**remained in the camp.**” (v.26)

What’s fascinating in this story, is that *that* becomes the story. Yes, the 70 elders who “did the normal elder thing” (outside the camp, away from the people)—they definitely received “**the power of the [Holy] Spirit.**” Whenever that Spirit rested on them, “**they prophesied**”—as long as that Spirit was with them. (v.25)

These other 2 guys, though—Eldad and Medad—what a story! There they were, *inside* the camp, “**prophesying**” the same way all those other “authorized” elders were, *out there* (away from the camp).

We never hear anything about how, or why, this happened. All we really come away from this story with is a sense that this was totally weird (on the one hand) *and* totally in line with God's will (on the other).

So, the starting-place for the "math" I'm interested in, is not those 70 elders who did everything by the book, but these 2 other characters who received the *unexpected* gift of the Holy Spirit. God surprised them, and all the people, and us, by pouring out his Spirit on people you would never think he would bless in that way.

So: keeping that number (2) in mind, let's jump ahead to our second reading, from the book of Acts. That reading opens with "**all of *them***" being "**together in one place.**" (Acts 2:1) Problem is, we're never told who "**they**" are, anywhere in this reading—or even *how many* of "**them**" there were. But: going back to the previous chapter, what Luke seems to be telling us here is a story about *the whole community of Christians* there in Jerusalem. And just a few verses before this story begins, Luke tells us that that group included "**about a hundred and twenty people.**" (Acts 1:15)

This is where "the rule of 72" kicks in—and makes things really interesting. The numbers we're interested in (again) are the 2 people who received the Holy Spirit in a surprising sort of way (in Moses's day), and these 120 people who were *equally surprisingly* "**filled with the Holy Spirit**" on the day of Pentecost. (Acts 2:4)

2 people back there in the book of Numbers; 120 people here in the book of Acts. How long did it take that 2 to grow into that 120? Well—

- If the Exodus (from Egypt) took place in **1446 BC** (which many people think it did), and if *this* Eldad-and-Medad story took place a year later (which is what the book of Numbers tells us): then, there were **1,445 years** up to the change of the era (from BC to AD).
- Then, add **30 more years** from that year up to the time that our Acts reading took place (which is also pretty certain)—and we've got a total of **1,475 years**, from the time we had *only 2 people* receiving the Holy Spirit in a very unusual way, and the time we've got *120*.

What's the *growth rate* between those two numbers? Just a titch over **1/4 %**-- more exactly, **0.28%**. Not very high, right? If, for example, we applied that same growth-rate (1/4 %) to *our congregation today*, it would take us **80 years** to grow from our present membership of about 80 people, to 100 people. *Eighty years, to add 20 more people!* A quarter of a person, per year!

Obviously, all I'm really doing here is playing a bit of a game... goofing around with numbers... giving my imagination a workout. I am *not* even *pretending* to be coming up with the *accurate*, "real-world" growth-rate of God's people—not back in biblical times (between our two readings), nor today (here in our church). If I *did* want to "run the numbers" right now, here at Our Saviour Lutheran Church, our growth-rate over the last few years would be **a little less than 4%** (if we look at the number of people on our contact list), **or a little more than 6%** (if we count our official members).¹

Either way though, those numbers are kind of flaky. They are *suspect*, not because I did the math wrong, but because the growth of the church *that really matters*, takes place invisibly (and therefore can not be counted). Maybe you remember me talking about this in last week's sermon too. Absolutely, there *is* such a thing as "the visible church"! That's the place where we *can* count things like—

- how many butts there are, in the pew on Sunday morning...
- how many noses there are, around the table in Bible study...
- how many sets of offering-envelopes we issue every year to regular attenders...
- how many people we have on our mailing list...
- how many of *you* have signed-on in a more formal way, to become voting members.

All these things *matter*, for very good "everyday reasons," and it's important for us to keep track of them, and do whatever we can to help those numbers grow.

¹ Contact list: growth from 100 in summer 2021 to 116 in summer 2025 (4 years). Members: growth from 63 at end of 2020 to 86 at end of 2025 (5 years).

I hope it's also clear, though, that the invisible growth of the invisible church *matters even more*. And *its* existence (and size, and growth, and health, and everything else) are real in *ways we cannot measure, in a realm we cannot see*.

Jesus himself takes that “hiddenness” of the true church for granted in our Gospel reading, when he says: **“Whoever believes in me—it is out of *that person’s heart*, that rivers of living water will flow!”** (John 7:38) And that *is* how it works in *real life*—right? Believing in Jesus is a process, and an action, and a reality that unfold **“in a person’s heart.”** None of us can *see* “belief in Jesus” taking root. We can’t measure its growth. We can’t even count the number of people in whom *that wonderful saving faith in Jesus* is present! All we can do is *guess* at such things, based on what we hear from people’s lips, and see in their behaviour. Only *then* can we consider, in a secondary way, whether or not such a person is also a member of the *visible* church. The visible and invisible churches are not the same, even though there usually is a pretty high degree of overlap between them!

Along with that tension (or at least that *ambiguity*—between the *visible* church and the *invisible* church), any “math” you and I might want to apply to the growth of the church has to deal with the fact that the Holy Spirit causes the church to grow *at God’s initiative, not ours*. That’s what Jesus was getting at back in John chapter 3 when he told Nicodemus that **“The wind blows where it pleases, and you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is”** (Jesus told Nicodemus) **“with everyone who is born of the Spirit!”** (John 3:8) In a similar way, *based on Jesus’ words*, we as Lutherans recognize in the words of the Augsburg Confession that **“the Holy Spirit works faith when and where it pleases God, in those who hear the gospel.”** (Article 5)

When I think about what all of this means in *practical* terms, I think right away about all the different churches I’ve belonged to, or served in, over the years.

- The church I grew up in (Bethlehem Lutheran church in Vancouver) has *declined* to the point of almost disappearing. It’s barely holding on.
- Most of the churches I’ve served as a pastor are *doing okay*. They’re *stable and holding their own*.
- *This church, by the grace of God, is growing!*

Again, I’m only taking an outward and external view here, and thinking about a church’s *visible* growth as a “proxy” for its spiritual growth. But the same pattern holds when we think about the growth and decline of Christ’s church on a global scale, over time.

- In *some* times and places, the church has grown very fast: Think of the Roman Empire in the early 4th century (after the emperor, Constantine, became a Christian)—or Africa today.
- On the other side of the equation, think about the terrible *decline* the Church suffered, all around the Mediterranean, when the Muslims swept in, during the 8th century—or think about Europe (and much of our country too) today, under the pressure of relentless relativism.

Definitely, as Jesus says, both the wind *and* the Holy Spirit **“blow where they please, so that we cannot tell where they come from or where they are going!”**

But—do you know what? That’s okay. On *both* sides of the ledger, whether the church is growing *or* declining, the church is okay! The point of *all* of our readings today is that God provides such an abundance of his Holy Spirit that his chosen and beloved people will never run out of it—whether their numbers are large or small! In fact, the gifts that *the Holy Spirit* brings to God’s people are so abundant that they practically overwhelm us.

Think about it. In our Old Testament reading, **“the Spirit rested on Eldad and Medad, so that they prophesied in the camp.”** (Num 11:26) Moses’ young vicar (Joshua) was *pretty jittery* about that—whether those guys *ought* to have been prophesying *in* the camp, or not—and as you may have noticed, Joshua even asked Moses to stop them. But remember what Moses said? **“I wish that *all* the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his Spirit on [all of] them!”** (v.29) That didn’t *happen*, right then and there, but clearly that was what Moses was *hoping for*. And even just this *tiny little* “edging past” the *expected* number of people who *heard and spoke* the Word of God (which is basically what prophesying is)—even that little, tiny increase was growth that Moses was glad to see, and eager to have God build on.

Then: On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was poured out not only on the 12 apostles (who you and I might have *expected* to receive it) but on *all 120 of those first believers in Jesus*. Wow! And the *result* of that outpouring, overflowed in another way as well.

- I don't know if you knew this, but "**Galileans**" typically struggled to pronounce the *guttural* consonants in the Hebrew language (א, כ, ג, and ע).
- Along with that sort of regional "speech impediment," Galileans were also known for "swallowing" syllables—
 - like what we do in English, when people say **fam-lee** (2 syllables) instead of **fam-i-ly** (3)
 - or **com-fter-bul** (3), not **com-fort-a-ble** (4).

Anyway, it was those Galileans ("of all people!") who God suddenly gave the ability (*through* the Holy Spirit) to speak the "**native languages**" of people from all around the Mediterranean basin. (Acts 2:7) And *even more than that*: When Peter "**stood up with the Eleven**" to explain all this, he looped it all back to a prophecy in the book of Joel—that *one day*, God would "**pour out his Spirit on all people**"—men and women, young and old—so that "**everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.**" (vv.17-18, 21)

That, you see, is what Jesus was promising in today's Gospel reading. "**Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink,**" (Jesus said). "**Whoever believes in me—as the Scripture has said, 'Out of their heart will flow rivers of living water!'**" (John 7:37-38) It's a cycle, you see? The Holy Spirit *brings us* to faith in Jesus, and then—as we believe in Jesus—more of that Spirit-fed "**river of living water**" pours out of us (in ways, and times, and places we don't anticipate). The Spirit unlocks the gift of Jesus, then Jesus unlocks the gift of the Spirit! That's what you call a "virtuous cycle," a mutually-reinforcing pattern where each side encourages and feeds the other, so that we get this *compounding effect* over time (aha!). More of the one, leads to more of the other—*growth*, on *both* sides, over time—certainly in the life of God's people, *and also* in the life of individual Christians.

- So: The more I worship, the more I grow... The more I grow, the more I want to worship!
- Likewise, more Bible-reading produces more growth. More growth produces more Bible-reading!

Whether or not you and I have the tools to *track* such numbers, or *plot* them on a chart, is not the point. In fact, the growth God gives to his church (and individual believers) is *rarely* growth we can really even *see*—let alone calculate a doubling-rate for.

"**Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit,**" is what the Lord told his servant Zerubbabel, in those hard and difficult days that Zerubbabel and his people found themselves facing, after they came back from exile in Babylon. (Zech 4:6) God wanted to *encourage* him (and them) "to keep on, keeping on!"—even when their spirits were faltering, and the numbers looked bad, and the troubles they were facing seemed to be overwhelming.

That is always how it works in the kingdom of God. Under his gracious care, we *always* "beat the numbers," in spiritual terms—no matter *how* high or low those *actual* numbers happen to be! As Jesus says, the Holy Spirit causes "**rivers of living water**" to "**flow from the hearts**" of *everyone* who "quenches their thirst" in him. That is true whether we are

inside the camp, or *outside* the camp...

authorized elders or apostles (or pastors), or laypeople...

early Jewish believers in Jerusalem, or Christians like you and me, here today.

The *abundance* of God's gracious and powerful Spirit will never fail us, as that Spirit wells up in our hearts and lives through faith in Jesus.

May it *always* be so, gracious Father!

May it be so, living and reigning Lord Jesus!

May it be so, faith-giving and faith-sustaining Holy Spirit!

In your divine name we ask it: AMEN!