

“Complaining To God”

In today’s text from Exodus 16:2-15 we have a crisis of faith between the Israelites’ bondage in Egypt and their well-being as they make their way through the wilderness to the promised land. The wilderness remains a troubling place for them as it does not supply them immediately with the necessities of survival. As we learned last week, emancipation was attractive but now how do the Israelites act when they face hardship. It is difficult to maintain a revolution, because one loses all the benefits of the old system well before there are tangible benefits from what is promised.

The lesson for us today is how do we respond to physical and spiritual hardship in our lives. What do we do when we go through a wilderness in our lives? Do we have a right to complain to God? Is there a hierarchy of those who get to complain?

Israel faces a material crisis with great anxiety over what to eat and what to drink. The wilderness offers little to support them. This is not a theological issue; it is a practical issue. How do we survive? The provisions they brought out of Egypt will only last so long. Hunger can result and lead to death. There is also a leadership issue as the people complain to Aaron and Moses.

The complaint of Israel makes a sharp and unfavorable contrast between the wilderness and Egypt. Egypt is remembered favorably as a place of pots of flesh (meats) and bread. Although in bondage, they did not lack bread. This attitude shows how present anxiety distorts the memory of the recent past. They suffered deep abuse and heavy-handed oppression under the Egyptians. Yet, the immediacy of food overrides any long-term hope for freedom and well-being. It reminds one of Esau's story, who gave up his birthright for immediate satisfaction from a bowl of soup.

Israel's complaint is even more amazing when one considers that Yahweh had just performed a miracle to save them from the Egyptian army. How can these people continue to be such curmudgeons? Why can't they just have faith in God?

We have been traditionally taught to not to complain to God, to not to be angry at God. But this text teaches us otherwise. If we are not to complain, God would have given up on Israel and told them to survive on their own. But he did not. Israel is not reprimanded. God hears their complaint, but they are expected to receive food from God's provisions.

Yahweh takes over the complaint directly and makes a promise which has two parts. First, there will be bread from heaven. This is bread from God's storehouses, not Pharaoh's storehouses. God does not depend on the technical

apparatus of the bureaucratic arrangements of Egypt for the delivery of bread but gives Israel bread out of the richness of God's own treasure house. This bread is a strange thing. It is not the same thing that was eaten in slavery. It will only last a day. The Israelites ask "What is it?" In Hebrew this is *man hu*, which is where we get manna.

Second, there is a special provision for the Sabbath, so that manna given on the sixth day is enough for the seventh. This is to get the Israelites used to making the Sabbath a day of rest.

God answers the complaints precisely. In place of Egyptian flesh, they are given quail. With the manna given, is Israel willing to receive bread and life under God's terms and in completely changed conditions?

In the exchanges between Moses, Aaron, and Yahweh, there are three themes. First, it is affirmed four times that God has heard Israel's complaint. Second, it is twice asserted that "you shall know." You shall know that Yahweh has rescued. Third, the wilderness, which appears to have no life, will be the context of God's glory. In response to the complaints, in v. 10 we have the glorious presence of the Lord appear in the clouds. It is important to show glory to the Israelites. Israel still associates glory with the prestige of Egypt. The wilderness

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September 20, 2020

holds little attraction to the glory of Egypt. But God gives glory to the wilderness in what he does for the Israelites.

How do we apply this story to our lives today? We must be careful about sacrificing our freedoms for short-term satisfaction. With many of the issues today faced in our country and in our church, many harken back to a time which they think was better. They think they will be better off, as the Israelites harkened back to their time in Egypt when they could fill their bellies. But be careful. These former times were not necessarily better, and do not be fooled by the promises of quick, easy fixes to problems.

Are we willing to wait for God's rewards and let God supply our needs? A major lesson from today's story is when we face the giants, the anxiety that makes us afraid, trust God. We must remember that God gives life. In John 6:41, Jesus says, "I am the bread that comes down from heaven." This is a direct symbolic statement of the manna provided by God to the Israelites. When Israel had no resources of its own, God provided. God has provided Jesus for us for our resources. Are we willing to adapt our lives, if needed, to respond to what God will do for us? God will give us what we need.

We do have a right to complain to God. What has bothered me as a minister is learning that Christians are often told they cannot complain to God. They are

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taught that it shows a lack of faith. But grumbling, criticizing, and complaining are part of life. I recently had a conversation with a close friend of mine who lost his wife of thirty years this January. After a five-year battle with lung cancer, and what appeared to be a remission of the disease, she contracted pneumonia and succumbed to the disease after a few weeks. In addition to having survivor's guilt, he has been dealing with anger at God. Why did this happen? I told him he had a right to be angry at God. He just has to understand that God is there to comfort him. Ultimately, we have to resolve our anger with God. That is the key, complete trust in God.

Is there are certain hierarchy for complaining which is acceptable? Is it okay to complain about the death of a child or young adult but not an 89-year old grandmother? Does the manner of death matter? Who is our society is allowed to complain about the harsh condition in their lives that, for some, lead to an early death?

At this time, the United States is still knee-deep in a pandemic with no end in sight. People are still being infected. People are still dying. We really do not know when there will be a vaccine. People cannot see their loved ones in nursing homes. People's lives are disrupted. Who has a right to complain to God? Is it only

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those who have gotten sick? Is it those who have to work in dangerous situations?

Is it those who believe their freedoms have been violated?

We have further complaints about the need for our society to make reforms for social justice, that certain people in the United States are being mistreated because of the color of their skin. We have complaints about violence occurring among the protests for justice. God is hearing a lot these days.

Is there a hierarchy of who gets to complain? I think God's response to the Israelites tells us there is not. We all have the right to take our complaints to God. Who determines who gets to complain? I think we leave it up to God to make that determination. Whether God thinks the Israelites' complaints are valid or petty, he responds. God is still God. God can bear our complaints---our sorrows, laments, and frustration---while offering provisions. We can mourn, we can be rightfully angry, and still be on the receiving end of love and peace via the Spirit's presence in our supportive family, friends, and fellow congregants.

We have to resist the urge to serve two masters, Yahweh and Pharaoh, and to trust in the two bread supplies, the bread of heaven and the bread of the sweat of our brow. In Matthew 6:24, the teaching of Jesus urges us that seeking to have it both ways brings endless anxiety. Have you felt that anxiety? The only way out of the anxiety is to make a clear unambiguous decision. The gospel is the affirmation,

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made earlier in the wilderness, that God knows what is needed and that God faithfully supplies everything required in life. Let us always remember this as we deal with the stresses of today, as we know that God is our resource in the midst of the wilderness.