

“The Lord Has Heard Your Complaining” Sun., Feb. 26 & Mon., Feb. 27, 2023
Exodus 16:1-12; John 6:35-71 NRSV New London UMC Rev. Joyce Rich

Have you ever thought about WHEN you are most likely to complain? Is it when you're bored? Or over tired? Or frustrated? Or angry? WHAT are we most likely to complain about? Is it having to shovel more snow? Or receiving scam phone calls? Or something else that is particularly irritating to us? And to WHOM do we complain? Is it to members of our immediate household or another relative? Or to a good friend? Or to *anyone* who might be within hearing? Or do we target our complaints to someone we think will either understand and commiserate with us? Or do we only complain to someone we think can actually DO SOMETHING about what we're complaining about?

I don't know if this is true for you, but I seem to really pay attention whenever someone complains in the Bible – because it can sound oh so familiar, and yet also seem oh so wrong! I find that odd mixture of comforting familiarity and foreboding concern in today's reading from the book of Exodus and in the passage from the Gospel of John. We might find comfort in knowing that complaining did not originate in our lifetime – even if it may seem more pronounced or prevalent to us in the here and now. But the Bible makes it clear that complaining was nothing new to the Hebrew people. And we can assume that it was also nothing new for God to hear it. But it's that part about God hearing the complaining that especially troubles me, because I think we like to cling to this notion that “if only” we had heard God speaking to Moses – or “if only” we had seen the glory of God light up the cloud that was leading us by day and standing watch over us by night – that we would be more attuned to life with God and have nothing to complain about! “If only” that were true! But we've already read the evidence that such firsthand experience of the holiness and glory of God did not stop the Hebrew people from complaining while they were on the Exodus journey. And it probably wouldn't have stopped us from complaining if we were in their place.

Just imagine how it would be if we had to suddenly begin living this nomadic life of exodus. Wouldn't we probably feel very unsettled, get sick of walking day after day, and be growing anxious about where our next meal would come from in the wilderness – where there were no cultivated crops, no orchards, and not much to pasture animals on? Wouldn't our thoughts wander back to what our lives were like as slaves in Egypt? What would we remember? Surely we'd recall that there would be grueling work to do each day? But wouldn't we also know that there had been enough food to eat, and a familiar place to sleep each night? As a slave, you knew where you were at – there was no wandering around out in the wilderness following a cloud! And after forty-five days of listening to Moses and Aaron, and seeming to get nowhere fast, life back in Egypt could have looked better and better with every step.

It is easy for us to understand that being provided with food and shelter as slaves didn't seem as bad as being free of slavery yet dying of hunger out in the wilderness. And we can understand how the Hebrew people might have started to forget how bitter their complaints had been to God when they were slaves in Egypt. Yet we know they wouldn't even be on this exodus journey in the first place if God hadn't heard their complaining when they were slaves in Egypt – and how God responded to their complaining by helping them to leave Egypt! . . . So here they were in the wilderness complaining to Moses and Aaron, but they were really complaining to God yet AGAIN. And God heard their complaining AGAIN. And once AGAIN God responded to their complaining. God would send “bread from heaven” – and God's people would be able to gather enough of it to eat each day. In response to their complaint of hunger, God would give God's people their daily bread.

Did God's creative provision of daily bread stop their complaining? NO! In no time at all God's people would start to complain that all they ever have to eat is manna, manna, manna, manna, double portion of manna to cover the day of Sabbath, manna, manna, manna – nothing but manna. They basically complained that God provided “bread from heaven” to them – every day, every year, for forty years. Think about it. No matter what this miraculous “bread from heaven” tasted like, or how it must have provided all the nutrients they needed, God's people still complained that they were sick of eating it. Bored by the monotony of their diet they lacked gratitude to God for their daily bread.

Years and years later Jesus offered a different generation of God's people a new take on “bread from heaven.” He said to them:

“Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever, and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

John 6:49-51 NRSV

Is it any surprise to us that God's people complained about this? NO! Their first complaint was that Jesus claimed he had come down from heaven – when they knew perfectly well that he was Joseph's son! Who was he trying to fool with this nonsense about coming down from heaven?! Their second complaint was: “How can this living man give us his flesh to eat? How is that even possible? And why would anyone want to eat it eat?” Understandably, NO ONE wanted to think about literally peeling off a piece of Jesus to eat – because that would simply be very gross and disgusting. But if Jesus didn't mean for them to eat his **physical** flesh, what did he mean? If this was supposed to be some kind of metaphor, well, it was just too difficult for them to understand. And

because it was so difficult to understand what Jesus meant, many people who had *thought* they were disciples of Jesus changed their minds, and they walked away from Jesus. . . . Yet again we have more evidence presented to us of how wrong it would be to assume that “if only” we were face to face with Jesus our faith in him would be rock solid because we’d be absorbing everything he was saying and doing – and we’d have nothing to complain about! In the aftermath of this “bread of heaven” conversation, the crowd around Jesus seemed to have considerably thinned down. To the point that Jesus was easily able to ask his original twelve disciples, “Do you also wish to go away?”

The Twelve were his inner circle. The men that Jesus had called to follow him. But when Simon Peter responded, “Who would we go to? There is no alternative to the bread of life. There is no other ‘Holy One of God,’” he wasn’t speaking for ALL twelve of them. There was still one of them who would complain that Jesus, the “bread from heaven” – the bread of life – wasn’t enough. One of the Twelve who would betray Jesus for thirty pieces of silver.

Does that trouble you? I always find that to be deeply troubling. If someone could be that close to Jesus and still betray him – what about us? Will there also come a time when we, too, will complain that the “bread from heaven” – the living bread that is Jesus – is not enough for us? Will we grow bored of Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus *all the time* – and go looking to find something or someone else? . . . Or will we be like Simon Peter and realize that there is no one else who has the words of eternal life? Will we still believe that Jesus is **the** Holy One, the Bread of Life?

I pray that we will get up each day and be thankful that God has provided our eternal daily bread in Jesus. Amen.