

Sermon 12 March 2023 St. Luke/San Lucas (English Version)

- [Exodus 17:1-7](#)
- [Romans 5:1-11](#)
- [John 4:5-42](#)
- [Psalm 95](#)

God of Truth, in your wisdom, Enlighten us.
God of Hope, in your kindness, Heal us.
Creator of All People, in your generosity, Guide us.
Amen.¹

On Thursday evening, I delivered the sermon for my seminary class, and today, I am speaking with you. The Old Testament readings for both days are from the Book of Exodus. In reviewing these texts, I noticed a pattern. Thursday's reading has the Hebrew people in the desert, complaining because they are worried about food. God hears them and provides food. Then, in today's reading, we have the Hebrew people in the desert, complaining because they are thirsty. God hears them and provides water.

Looking at commentaries and sermons on these passages, there is a lot of material about God's generosity. Several sermons entitled, "God will provide." A few on following the rules for collecting manna (because there are always those who see rules as the be all and end all of a sermon). A couple with rather extensive discussions over whether it was appropriate for Moses to hit the rock. And one had an interesting take on how we should respect our clergy leaders and follow their instructions without question—not sure I agree with the theology behind that one, although it was an interesting read.

But what kept coming to my mind as I worked through my hermeneutical circle, was all the complaining! Doesn't it seem like the Hebrew people are awfully whiney? It's too hot! It's too cold! It's too big! It's too small! I'm hungry! I'm thirsty! Goldilocks and the three bears all over again, but without the "just right" part.

Couldn't they see that God had provided a leader, in Moses, and even a sidekick, in Aaron? Didn't they remember all the powerful works God had done earlier, all the plagues? Had they already forgotten about the way God parted the Red Sea, allowing them to walk across on dry land, and then had caused the waves to come crashing back when the Egyptian chariots tried to cross, drowning the chasing soldiers, and letting the Hebrew people escape? And even if they had managed to forget all of that in just a couple of weeks, how could they fail to notice the pillar of clouds by day and the pillar of fire by night, the always visible presence guiding them through the desert? What is wrong with them—God's power and guidance is right there, literally in front of their faces?

¹ Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., excerpt from "Shake Us From Our Slumber"

Most of the commentaries I saw presented the Hebrew people as ungrateful, unfaithful, disobedient misfits who couldn't seem to follow even the most basic of instructions. Yet, time and time again, God hears their cries. God hears their cries and acts.

So finally, I decided to look a bit more deeply into complaining. Yes, part of this is, hopefully, because of the Spirit's guidance, but part of it is also because I have experienced a lot of complaining over the years in various churches. While we like to sit in our pews on Sunday, listening to the stories about the Hebrew people and thinking, they sure are slow at learning about God, after the final hymn, we so often go to coffee hour and engage in the same type of non-stop complaining.

And one of the items I discovered, courtesy of the Veteran's Administration website², is that complaining is one of the frequent (and frequently missed) after-effects of trauma. Let me say that again, complaining is one of the frequent (and frequently missed) after-effects of trauma.

And the Hebrew people certainly had undergone trauma. As a community, they had spent nearly four hundred years in slavery to the Egyptians. Without agency. Without self-determination. Without the ability to engage in free speech, free assembly, freedom of worship. Overworked. Underfed. Beaten. Abused. And even, facing efforts at genocide, as the Pharaoh tried to have all the male babies killed.

Instead of looking at the Hebrew people as a bunch of weak-willed complainers, unable to see all that God had done and continued to do for them, let's instead look at them as a community who has undergone centuries of abuse. As a community still suffering from the after-effects of trauma. As a community that was tender, fragile, delicate, trying to find its feet again after so much suffering.

And rather than being pampered in a hospital or greeted with welcoming arms by loving family members, this community escaped into a desert, an unfamiliar hostile environment. They had the clothes on their backs, what they were able to carry with them as they hurried away. They had some animals and some jewelry.

They also had with them their elderly, their babies, their infirmed, their pregnant women and those who had just given birth. Likely, they also had with them women and men who had been injured, physically and mentally beaten down by the years of servitude they endured.

And now, they were heading out into the unknown, led by Moses, a man most of them didn't really know all that well and the only one of them who had probably ever even been in the desert. I'm not really surprised they were complaining. Frankly, I'm somewhat more surprised that they hadn't just planted themselves around the first water source they came to and stayed. To say, "Let Moses and Aaron follow that pillar if they want, I just want to rest."

² <https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/related/anger.asp>

And what happened when the Hebrew people complained? Did God send down flames to burn up all the ungrateful? Did God take away their voices, so God didn't have to hear their incessant whining? Did God turn away?

No, God listened. God "heard their complaining." And God gave them what they needed. Physically, God provided bread from heaven, manna, for them to eat and fresh water from the rock, to drink. Emotionally, God provided them with constancy, a regular source of sustenance, manna arriving six mornings out of seven, with enough to feed them all. Spiritually, God provided them with love, generous, healing love.

Dr. Guy Winch, in an article in Psychology Today, states, "Just as ineffective complaining can damage our mental health, complaining effectively and getting results can be incredibly empowering and it can affect our mood and self-esteem for the better."³

As they spent that time in the desert, the Hebrew people were able to complain effectively. They were able to call out to God with their concerns, from the most mundane—what will I drink—to the most profound—does God love and value me. God, recognizing that they were hurting, answered them, time and time again. With pillars of clouds and fire for guidance, with manna and quail for food, with fresh water to drink, with leadership, with laws, and something that I had not fully appreciated until now, with time.

Too often, we look at that time in the desert as a punishment—if they had truly believed, if they had been obedient, they would have been able to go straight to the Promised Land, to claim that territory and to build a wonderful, powerful kingdom.

But perhaps there's another way to look at those desert wanderings. Perhaps, instead, we can view these years as a time of healing, a time for a traumatized people to regroup, to find their feet again, to learn to trust their God. As they poured out their concerns before God, they also experienced the constancy of God's visible presence, God's generous provision, God's love and mercy and grace. And with this constancy, with this presence, with this love, they were able to develop the strength they would need to take the next step, to face the challenges of establishing a new nation in an unfamiliar place.

As we look at our communities today, we need to recognize, to acknowledge, that as a group, we have also undergone a type of trauma. The Covid pandemic and the accompanying social isolation, the continuing levels of racial violence, the assaults on civil rights that we had thought were guaranteed, international conflicts spilling over into war, economic uncertainty, climate change—all combine in a seemingly unending barrage of negativity.

³ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-squeaky-wheel/201201/does-complaining-damage-our-mental-health>

And many in our communities are suffering, are experiencing the after-effects of these traumas. We see it in the short tempers, in the lack of empathy. In the inability to hold a civil conversation. And yes, in the complaints—multiple complaints, loud complaints, organized group complaints, parking lot conversations and hurtful chain emails.

It is tempting to say, “Enough already.” To respond to these complaints and these complainers as so many theologians seem to have responded to the murmurings of the Hebrew people—by labeling them whiners, by questioning their faith, by advocating for greater obedience to leadership.

But that wasn’t God’s response. God listened. Over and over and over again, God listened. God met their needs. God responded and, in responding, changed those potentially damaging complaints into empowering ones, building their self-esteem, and preparing them for the challenges ahead.

So how do we change the damaging complaints in our communities, in our churches and in our society? How do we change them into empowering complaints? How do we respond in such a way as to build self-esteem rather than descending into the pits of shared despair?

First, as challenging as it can be at times, we need to listen to the complaints. To take them seriously. To look beyond the words to the often-unexpressed needs and buried hurts and fears that are generating such negativity.

We also need to be constant in our support, to continue to act with grace, even when it is not always well received. We need to be able to demonstrate empathy—over and over and over again.

And finally, we can use this season of Lent, this time when we wander in our own desert, to heal. To pray. To let God know our needs, our longings, our hurts. And then to begin looking around us for those signs that God is with us, those pillars of clouds and of fire that guide us, those unexpected and unmerited blessing that rain down on us from the heavens. Because they are there, they are there.

God is preparing us for the challenges ahead. We’re not ready yet. We’ve still got more desert wandering to do. But now, we can see the pillars in front of us and we know that there is a way forward. God heard our complaints and is sending us the healing we need.

And what God did for the Hebrew people in the desert, what God is doing for our community at St. Luke/San Lucas, God can do for each of us, in our own communities, with our own traumas, with our own complaints. God hears, God gives us what we need, and with this Lenten time in the desert, God heals.

Amen.

