

THE COMPLAINT DEPARTMENT

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Exodus 17:1-7

If there is one thing that we Americans are good at, it is complaining. I don't know how we would stack up in a global complaining competition, but I do know that we would more than likely hold our own.

When I talk about complaining, I don't mean just whining, or persistent griping about how bad your life is. Everybody is good at that. I mean that when we see that something is amiss, we feel free to address the situation. Maybe it is poor service, or a defective product, or an injustice that we have observed. But we Americans feel comfortable, if not empowered, to lodge a complaint and to expect a timely and satisfactory resolution.

So, why is it that we complain like this? Maybe it is indeed a sense of entitlement borne out of the notion that all are equal, that each deserves to be treated fairly.

Maybe it is based on the conviction that "the customer is always right." (Those of you who work in retail know how deeply flawed that ideal can be.)

Clearly there is something in our national conscience that fuels our capacity to complain.

This summer, when I dipped my toes in the political pool, I heard more than my fair share of complaints. For some reason, a lot of people feel that civic involvement consists of complaining about their community. No solutions, mind you; just complaints.

In our scripture reading for today, from the book of Exodus, we find a lot of complaining. The book of Exodus—the second book of our Bible—tells the story of the Israelite's escape from Egypt. In Egypt, the Israelites had been forced into arduous labor as slaves. God heard their cries for deliverance and summoned Moses to help lead the people to freedom, to guide them to a land that they would call their own.

God shepherds the people out of Egypt and into the wilderness. Now, the wilderness is not an easy place to live. There is a reason that no one resides there. It is an in-between-place.

The people set out on their journey from Egypt to the land that God promised would be theirs. But the going is slow. It will take them forty years to cross the divide. Along the way, they will learn what it is like to be God's people.

The going is not easy, and it doesn't take long for the Israelites to begin complaining. In the book of Exodus, we encounter four episodes of the Israelites lodging

complaints. And they don't complain against God. No, they always complain to Moses, their leader. Everything that goes wrong is his fault. It doesn't matter that they have been delivered from slavery, that for the first time in generations their people have hope. No. Any challenge or setback is pinned on Moses because he had the misfortune to answer God's call.

In Exodus, there are four different occasions of complaint. The first takes place just as the people are making good their escape. Despite having promised to let them go, the pharaoh changes his mind and dispatches his army to catch the Israelites and force them back to Egypt.

As the fleeing people watch the horses and chariots draw near, they cry out to Moses, *Were there not enough graves in Egypt that you needed to bring us out to the wilderness to die?* They then attempt to re-write history by claiming that they never wanted to leave Egypt in the first place. That was Moses' idea. He dragged them out here. They tell him that it would have been better to serve the Egyptians as slaves than to die in the wilderness.

With the Egyptian army bearing down on them, Moses parts the waters of the sea that was before them and ushered the people through on dry land. Then, once they were safe, the waters returned and drowned their pursuers.

You would think that after experiencing this event that the people would learn. But they don't. It is not long after that they arrive at a site known as Marah. Unfortunately, the water at this place is undrinkable. The people say it is bitter and they complain to Moses. Moses turns to God who instructs Moses to throw a particular piece of wood into the water. He does and the water becomes drinkable.

The third complaint comes when the people run out of food. They complain to Moses saying, *If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt. At least there we had meat and could eat our fill of bread. You've brought out to the wilderness to die of hunger.* Moses turns to God who then sends the mysterious manna to the people—the manna which will sustain them through their journey.

The fourth complaint is the one we read today, and it has to do with water. The Israelites have been moving slowly across the face of the wilderness. They have now made camp at Rephidim. We must assume that they are weary and that there were no options about where to stop, because at Rephidim, there is no available water. As we know, living things need water in order to survive. Human beings are about 60% water by weight. Every cell in our bodies depends on water. Without water, we won't last very long. The same goes for livestock—cows and sheep and goats—they need water just as we do.

At Rephidim, there appears to be no spring or creek or pond or any source of water. And so, the people complained. Technically, the Hebrew text tells us that they "quarreled" with Moses telling him to give them something to drink. Moses

responded with two questions. He asked, *Why do you quarrel with me?* and *Why do you test the Lord?* By asking these questions, Moses is challenging the people to recognize what they are really doing. They are not only demanding water, but they are questioning God's ability to provide for them.

Once again, the people turn on Moses and accuse him of a nefarious plan. They ask him, *Why did you bring us out of Egypt? Did you do it just to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?*

Leadership is lonely, and having no one else to turn to Moses cries out to God asking, *What shall I do? They are about to stone me?* Now, it is unlikely that the people would actually stone him. That form of punishment had fallen out of favor. However, Moses does fear a mob uprising that would challenge his leadership.

As God has done three times before, God instructs Moses as to what to do. God tells Moses to take some of the elders and to take his staff and to go out ahead of the people. Go to the rock at Horeb and God will be waiting. Strike the rock with the staff and water will pour from it. Moses does all this with the elders as witnesses.

Moses then gives a name to this place. Actually, he gives it two names. One name is *Massah* and the other is *Meribah*. *Massah*, it turns out, sounds like the word for "quarrel," and *Meribah* sounds like the word for "test." It was at this place that the people quarreled and tested the Lord and asked the question, *Is the Lord among us or not?*

This story is pretty straightforward. It is a story that gives us an etymology for two place names. If this story had taken place in Wilson County, they would name the place Watertown.

But the story is far more than simply an explanation of the origin of two place names. It is a story of faith (or rather a lack of it).

When the people complain to Moses and Moses turns to God, God's response is surprising to us. God does not question the complaints or chide the complainers. Rather, God quickly and simply rectifies the situation and fulfills the needs of the people. The people complain about hunger; God sends bread from heaven, they are thirsty and water flows from a rock, they are scared, and God protects them.

From my point of view, the Israelites should have been a little less complaining and a little more grateful. They act like children.

But that is understandable because they are children. At least in their relationship to God, they are like children.

When a child is hungry and begins to whine, we feed them. Especially, if it is getting to be around mealtime when they should be expected to be hungry. We don't berate them for claiming to be hungry.

The Israelites WERE hungry, they WERE thirsty, they WERE afraid. Their complaints were legitimate.

Most of us here have long, if not life-long, relationships with God. On top of that, our relationship with God is built on top of the relationship of thousands of years of faith and billions of believers. We are not new to God.

On the other hand, the Israelites in this story have only just been plucked from slavery by a God they had long forgotten. Taken from Egypt they are now in the wilderness seemingly fending for themselves. When things get tough, they complain to their leader Moses who takes these complaints as indictments against God. Moses had developed an understanding of God. The people have not—God is too new to them.

These stories of hunger, thirst, and fear are not sophisticated in their theology. They are like (short i) primers on living with the Lord. The lesson here is clear—God is faithful.

This is the first lesson to learn. God is and always will be faithful to God's people.

As our relationship with God has developed, it has also grown richer and more complex. We see this in the subtlety of Isaiah, the emotional complexity of the Psalms, the overlapping dimensions of Jesus' parables. Through episode after episode, we have learned that God can be trusted, that God is faithful to us, that God will stay with us.

And yes, when we need to, it is okay to complain. Complaining is not a sign of one's lack of faith. It can be an expression of faith. When I complain to a business about poor service or a defective product, I am complaining with the belief that someone is there to hear me. I am not simply complaining into a void (although sometimes it seems that way.)

Even Jesus invites us to complain. He tells a parable (Luke 18) about a woman seeking justice from a judge who takes little interest in the women's case. She is persistent and wears the judge down until he grants her justice. Jesus closes the parable saying, *And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?*

We are God's people. We are in relationship with our Lord. When may raise our voices when we have needs. God will hear us.

And if you are afraid that by complaining that you are testing God. Don't worry. God can handle it.