

THE ART OF COMPLAINING

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Exodus 17:1-7

I want to complain. I want to complain about this pandemic that we find ourselves in and how it is derailing our lives. I want to complain about having to wear a mask all the time. Yes, I know it is the best thing to do, but wearing a mask makes me feel guilty that I might be contagious (even though I'm not) or paranoid that you might be contagious. I want to complain about wearing a mask and I want to complain about those who don't. I want to complain about being restricted to my home and not being able to go out to eat or to gather freely with friends. I want to complain that my daughter, a college senior, is missing out half of her final year. She's been stuck at home with her parents for seven months with at least three more to go.

I want to complain about church. Church is a social community. The word church is from the Greek word *ekklesia* which means "assembly." But we haven't assembled in months. I have no idea when we might again. I want to complain about having to rethink everything we do here. It is exhausting. I want to complain about having to become an audio-visual expert and the anxiety that this technology brings each Sunday with its added layers of complexity. You don't just turn this stuff on and forget about it. There's always something that is going to go wrong. I miss the days when the only technology was a microphone. When that didn't work I just talked louder.

I want to complain that in the U.S., over seven-million people (that we know off) have gotten ill with the coronavirus. I want to complain that over 200,000 people have been taken from us too soon by this disease, and the numbers keep rising. I want to complain that there are some in this country who share a sentiment that because many of the dead were elderly that their loss is not significant, that somehow they are expendable. I want to complain about the growing anxiety I feel from the uncertainty of our situation.

I want to complain that our nation's leadership—the people we elected to steer the ship of state through perilous waters—is not doing more to provide guidance to its citizens. The information and recommendations that we do receive are often inconsistent and contradictory.

I will stop there. That is enough complaining for now. I know that we share a number of complaints in common and that you have your own as well.

As I read our scripture for today, you may have noticed that it contains a bit of complaining. The Israelites had been slaves in Egypt for generations. God hears their cries and leads them out of Egypt for the promised land. But their journey to

the promised land takes them through the wilderness. This time in the wilderness—forty years—becomes a time of formation for the Israelites. It is where they learn to be God's people. They learn what God expects of them. They learn that they can trust this God. There are, however, some stumbles along the way, and one of these takes place in this reading from Exodus.

With Moses as their leader, God has brought these people into the wilderness. But the people complain. In this instance, they complain that they did not have water. They demand that Moses do something, and they yell at him saying, *Why did you bring us out of Egypt, [are you] trying to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?*

This story is one of several in the wilderness saga that recalls an occasion when the people complained. They complained that they didn't have water. They complained that they didn't have meat. They complained that they were tired of the food that God was giving them each day. They even complained that there were too many snakes.

These stories are not flattering to the Israelites. These people had been slaves in Egypt forced to toil at difficult tasks. God hears their cries of anguish and with the assistance of Moses, leads the people out of Egypt. They are chased by the Egyptian soldiers, but the chariots get stuck in the mud and the soldiers are drowned when the Red Sea collapses in on them. No longer pursued, the Israelites are free to embark towards the land that God has promised for them.

But the going is not easy. They are in the wilderness—a harsh, nowhere place between what they were and what they will be, a journey of pain and promise. The wilderness often lacks food and water and comforts. All the people have is themselves and God. And so they push on, like their ancestor Abraham—called by God to an unknown future.

They journey across the wilderness and come to a place known as Rephidim. They set up camp there. Why they choose this place is something of a mystery. There was no water to be found. Maybe there had been water and it dried up. We don't know, but it seems like a bad decision to establish camp without a supply of water.

Because there is no water, the people turn on Moses and demand that he do something. Moses asks them, *Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?* Moses clearly believed they should put themselves in God's hands, that God would care for them. Moses regarded the current lack of water as a non-issue. Moses had faith in God. But the people persisted and complained and confronted Moses, *Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us... with thirst?*

Moses turns to God and wants to know, *What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.* So, God gives Moses instructions. God tells Moses to travel on ahead of the people and take with him some of the elders. Also take with him that staff he used back in Egypt—the one with which he struck the Nile River

which turned the water to blood and killed all the fish and made the water undrinkable. God said go to the rock at Horeb and God would be waiting. Strike the rock with the staff and good water will gush forth. Moses follows God's instructions and the water appears just as God promised.

Moses gives that place a name. He calls it Massah and Meribah—names that sound like the Hebrew words for quarrel and test—because at that place the people *quarreled and tested the Lord*. They complained and demanded to know, *Is the Lord among us or not?*

That is truly the question that is at the heart of this incident. The question is not ‘will we die of thirst in the wilderness,’ the question is whether or not God is truly present. God exists, yes, but is God watching out for us? Does God care for us? Does God hear our complaints? Is God there? When the people demand water, they are quarreling with God and testing God. ‘Show us that you are here; show us that you care.’ That is also the heart of our complaints, Is anyone there? Does anyone care?

This is the question that follows us around every day—Is the Lord among us or not? I wake up, I go through my day, I go to bed, I ask, “Is God with me?” If things are going well I'm probably going to say, “Sure, God is with me.” But if things are going poorly, and I find that I'm in a wilderness—lost, alone, afraid—I might answer “I'm not sure if God is with me. I expected things to be better than this.”

It is, after all, the wilderness that tests us. When we are confronted by a troubling diagnosis, a job loss, the death of someone close to us, a surgery, a disability, a change we didn't anticipate, a pandemic—any number of occasions when our soul becomes dry—these are our wilderness moments.

We read this story and we wonder if the people should challenge God with their complaints. Is it okay to complain to God? The answer is yes. It is okay to complain and it is okay to complain against God. If we don't believe that God is with us, then why bother to complain.

For the past couple of weeks, I've been reading up on complaining because of the many complaints I have that are crowding my soul. There is a great deal of academic and scientific research on the subject of complaining, and the consensus is that, if done correctly, complaining can be healthy. There is an art to it.

Human beings are social animals. We like to be around one another. However, we are not very good at conveying our emotions. But we are good at complaining. Complaining is one way that we can release our pent-up feelings. Complaining is okay. You just don't want to get in the habit of doing it. One researcher puts it this way, “The more you do something, the more entrenched that path becomes in your brain and the more you continue to do it.”¹ This includes complaining. We don't want to become entrenched complainers.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/06/smarter-living/how-to-complain-.html>

As social animals, complaining can be a useful tool in bonding. A shared complaint strengthens a relationship. Shared complaints can help us process emotions such as stress and frustration.

Complaining can be broken down into three practices: venting, problem solving, and ruminating. It is healthy to know which practice you are engaged in. We all know what venting is. It is when we just need to let off steam. We vent when we say, “You know, it really bugs me when people let their dogs poop in the park and don’t clean it up.” We say it. We get over it. We feel better. We vent. The researchers point out that it is especially helpful if you inform the person you are speaking to of your desire to vent. They then know what to expect and how to respond.

The second category of complaining is problem solving. This one is the most productive. We vent, but then we choose to take action. We might say about dogs in the park, “Persistent puppy poop in the park is my pet peeve, but I have an idea on how to address it.” That is problem solving; that is helpful.

The third category of complaining is the least healthy, and it is called ruminating. We also call it dwelling or wallowing, and that is when we get stuck in a pattern of ceaseless griping. If you come to me and say, “I need to vent,” I will gladly listen. But if you are someone who regularly spews out litanies of misery, I might steer clear.

I started out offering a list of my own complaints. Although I am serious about each of these, I do see them with perspective. I recognize that there are so many people with legitimate complaints far greater than my own. But still, like everyone, sometimes I need to vent. And there is nothing wrong with that. When kept in control, complaining can be healthy, sometimes even productive. As we see in the story of the Israelites in the wilderness, complaining can be a tool for change. The people complained to God about the lack of water. One might even argue that they bonded in their complaining. They came together over an injustice and they spoke out until the injustice was righted. God heard their protests and brought them water.

We can look at their story and say the Israelites lacked faith in God, that they doubted God to care for them. Or we can turn it around and say that the people did have faith. They complained to God because they had faith in God’s power to bring change. We can learn from the Israelites. I’m not suggesting that we all start complaining about everything, but that we do have faith in the ultimate power in our lives, that in times of need we turn to our maker and creator, the one who led the people through the wilderness as a pillar of fire and smoke, the great I Am, the source of true change, the one who is love. Our God.