

God Blessed Complainers
Exodus 17:1-17
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Did you notice the title of the sermon today? Did you think the word blessed was a verb or an adjective? Well, I imagine it depends on if you are looking from Moses' perspective or God's. My guess is that by this part of the journey, Moses had more than a few derogatory adjectives to describe the Hebrew people. I also have observed that God has a great deal of patience and unconditional love and seemed to continue to bless the people regardless of their attitude. It has not been an easy time for Moses or the Hebrew people. Let me remind you of the back story. I just heard that phrase not long ago and thought I'd try to work it in to a conversation next time I had a chance. You remember of course that the Israelite people found themselves enslaved in Egypt. Do you remember how they got there? Maybe you remember the Joseph stories and how exasperated his brothers were with him until finally they were mad enough to kill him and then thought--what good will that do?--we can sell him to this caravan that conveniently came by about that time and make a little money AND get rid of the obnoxious brat! But Joseph was one of those people who always landed on his feet and before anyone knew what was going on, Joseph had become the second most powerful man in Egypt--second only to the pharaoh.

A famine came over the entire land and through Joseph's effective administration, Egypt was saved and in fact, Joseph's brothers came to Egypt to get food and eventually, packed up lock, stock, and barrel and moved there. You may want to read all of the Joseph stories that are recorded in Genesis chapters 37-50.

All was well, Hebrews and Egyptians living happily as neighbors until, the scripture tells us: "there arose a king, who knew not Joseph". The Hebrews were multiplying like rabbits and there were so many of them, that the king perceived them as a threat. You know--there were way too many foreigners living with them. Never mind, that they weren't posing any problem, nor had for generations; it's just that they were, well, different. Something had to be done, before those people who weren't quite like us, took over. So the plan was to oppress them into forced labor--that is slavery. But it seemed the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied. Drastic times call for drastic measures. The decision was made to kill all the baby boys by throwing them into the Nile River. Moses was born during this time, and I'm sure you remember that story--if not from the Bible, at least from the movie, which is nearly accurate. Moses was adopted by the Pharaoh's daughter and raised in the palace, but he never forgot his early years when he had been with his own family.

One day Moses kills an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew slave. Pharaoh heard of it and Moses fled to Midian. He was about 40 years old. He lived in Midian--married, had a family, and then about 40 years later, God calls Moses to go back to Egypt and free the Hebrew people. Moses comes up with great excuses, but God counters all of them

and promises to be with Moses. Soon enough Moses is back in Egypt confronting Pharaoh and finally after many conversations and ten plagues, the people are allowed to leave. God provides direction for them through a pillar of cloud during the day and a pillar of fire at night. After the people were well on their way, Pharaoh metaphorically hits his head like a V8 add, and says, "What have we done, letting Israel leave our service?" So away the army goes in hot pursuit of the Israelites. This is the point where we hear the first complaints from the Israelites: "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, 'Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.'" In other words, they preferred slavery to the risk of freedom. But God prefers people to be free. The sea was miraculously opened and the people made it through--with the Pharaoh's army close behind.

But as the chariots became mired in the mud, the sea closed back upon them and they drowned. The people were free. At least free from slavery and Pharaoh's army. But as we shall see, they weren't free of their negative, whining, complaining attitude. They were in the wilderness for three days and finally found some water, but it was bitter. Whine, whine--the water is bitter. So God instructed Moses to toss a piece of wood in the water and it became sweet. Maybe it was at this point that the Hebrews learned that whining works. God made a little pact with them at that point--if they would listen to God, they would be free of disease. Again, the people complained--they were hungry, they had no clue as to how to survive in the wilderness--their food and water had been provided for them when they were in Egypt. "We should have stayed in Egypt" they complained. "At least we had food." So God sent them manna. Every morning there was enough food for that day and in the evening there were quails provided so they had meat. That brings us to today's scripture.

Throughout this time, the Hebrews were wandering about in the wilderness so they were at different places. This time, they were again at a place where water was scarce.

They started up with the complaining again--the same old tune--"we're thirsty, we don't have water, there was plenty of water in Egypt, why did you bring us out here into the wilderness? Not only will we die, but also our livestock." Moses had had it! He was up to here with their complaints and he took his complaint to God. "What shall I do with this people? They are about to stone me." God had a plan. God tells Moses to take some of the elders with him as well as his staff that he used during one of the plagues when he struck the Nile and turned the water into blood. He was to strike a rock with his staff and sure enough, water sprang forth. Not to suggest that Moses didn't have a very talented staff--but the geological truth is that in that area are igneous rocks that hold water just beneath a thin rock like cover and when the covering is broken, water comes out. I don't know how you feel about it, but I really don't care how God performs God's miracles--they are miracles of God just the same. But I digress.

I could preach about the ungrateful Hebrews and their continuous complaints--even in the face of God's continual faithful acts: calling Moses back from Midian, sending the

plagues on Pharaoh, providing guidance with the pillars of cloud and fire, getting them across the sea, providing them with water, manna, and quail. The list goes on--and still they complained.

No doubt about it, the Israelites were whining, ungrateful, disappointed and thankless. For them, God never did enough. Rather than expressing thanks for God's faithfulness, the people respond to each circumstance as self-centered humans who would rather bang out a letter of complaint than a word of thanks and praise. How about you? Do you count your blessings or whine about what's wrong? Something to think about, but that's not the sermon for today.

Today, I want us to see what we can learn from Moses about how to handle criticism. No doubt, Moses took all of the complaints personally, although in reality, the people were complaining about God's actions. But after all, Moses was God's agent and he was the guy hearing all the belly-aching. I must admit if I had been in Moses' situation, I would have been tempted to take one of those quail and stuff it down their whining, complaining throats! Maybe that's why God hasn't called me to such a situation.

Let's see what we can learn from Moses' response to criticism. First, he **listened** to the criticism. Those who dismiss every negative remark as simply sour grapes or signs of jealousy miss the opportunity to learn from the criticism. Not long ago, Adam and I were having a little teta te. He shared a perception he has of me in a particular area of my work--it was rather hard to hear--but I had to admit there was some truth to it. The beauty of that exchange was that Adam had the courage to share his perception and because he did, I took seriously what he said. If we look closely at even the harshest criticism, we may discover that there is a grain of truth buried in it. When Moses listened to the Israelites' complaints he was reminded of how dependent they were on him--and it confirmed to Moses how dependent he was on God. So we should listen to the critical voices around us--we don't have to accept it hook, line, and sinker--but we should listen with discernment for what truth may be contained in the criticism. Moses did.

Secondly, Moses learned from this critical situation. He learned that he couldn't do everything himself. God told him to take the elders with him. God was intent on creating a community of faith then, and I believe that is still God's intent. We here at St. John don't have all the answers--we don't even have all the questions, but we invite you to be on the faith journey with us--we can learn from each other. These Andrew Sundays when we encourage bringing visitors to church not only offers to the guests an opportunity to be a part of our faith community, it creates the possibility of new ideas and ministries for the church. Everyone gains.

Third, Moses didn't let the critical remarks stop him. He turned to God for advice and then he continued to move toward their goal.

Fourth, Moses kept linked to God. He didn't let the criticism he heard or the fears he felt keep God from working through him. Having found the courage to keep moving

forward, Moses committed himself to taking action. Taking the elders with him, he took the necessary decisive steps that would bring life-giving water to his people. One wonders what the people said when they heard the solution was to go hit a big rock with a stick--but I suppose when the water started flowing they were too busy quenching their thirst to criticize any longer.

So what can learn from Moses when we are targets of criticism?

- 1) listen for the kernel of truth behind the words,
- 2) seek the help of others,
- 3) Don't let the criticism stop you--continue toward your goal,
- 4) remember that God is always with you.

God continued to bless those complaining, criticizing Hebrews--God blessed them and God blesses us--Blessed be the name of God. Amen