

“Bunch of Whiners”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Lent III – March 23, 2014

Exodus 17: 1-7

Earlier this week, I said to my daughters, Erin and Heather, “Hey, guess what the sermon title is for this week?” “What, Daddy?” “It’s ‘Bunch of Whiners.’” Do you know what Erin said? She said, “Oh, is it about us?”

I will give them credit, though. When I asked them to think about what story in the Bible that title might refer to, they got the Israelites in the wilderness on their first guess!

As members of the human race, I believe it is engrained in our DNA to complain. It can be about something as small as our order at a restaurant not being prepared precisely to our liking. It can be about something as large as our elected leaders and their lack of integrity or leadership. Often times, we complain louder and with greater frequency when we are tired and worn out, both physically and emotionally.

For instance, I believe the past three months of hard, cold winter weather have raised the frequency of our complaining. I found it revealing how we received complaints here at the church about events being called-off or rescheduled due to the winter weather, even though we had done everything we had said we would do regarding notifying people of changed plans. The complaints weren’t truly about the decisions regarding the weather; the complaints were about the weather and our collective frustration with being out of our routine due to something we had absolutely no control over. We were weary of disruption, and needed to vent that weariness in some way.

And just because we are Christians doesn’t mean we are less-inclined to complain about something within the life of the church. It can surprise me sometimes how good we are at whining in the church. The service is too early; the service is too late; the music is too loud; the music is too soft; so-and-so isn’t doing things the right way; it’s too cold in here; it’s too hot in here; why can’t we do things the way we used to do them; why can’t we do things different than we’ve always done them? There are likely times that someone from the outside could look at any church and label them a “bunch of whiners.”

At first glance, this passage from Exodus appears to be about whining. The Israelites are complaining in the wilderness, and Moses is like an impatient parent with a griping child. And while that is what it looks like at first, what we might eventually discover is that it’s actually about God’s abiding and never-ending presence and love, even to a bunch of whiners like us.

If you only read the two chapters preceding what we’ve read this morning in Exodus, you might think the only thing the Israelites did was

complain. As soon as they crossed the Red Sea, and the Egyptians were left behind, the Israelites immediately started complaining. First, it was the water at Marah which was too bitter to drink (15:22-27). Then it was their hunger for something to eat in the wilderness (16:1-36). In both cases, the people “complained against Moses,” and even wished they were back in the land of Egypt. In both cases, Moses turned to God and asked, “What shall I do?” And in both cases, the Lord answered Moses’ plea: he turned the bitter water sweet, and he sent manna from heaven, so that the Israelites would not starve.

Now, we come to the waters at Meribah. The Israelites have been feasting on manna, but now they are thirsty. When they camped at Rephidim, we read, “there was no water for the people to drink” (17:1). So, the people do what anyone does when they aren’t getting what they need: they complain to the leader. We read, “the people quarreled with Moses, and said, ‘Give us water to drink!’” (17:2). You’ll notice that they didn’t say “please” or in the form of a question: “Moses, can you maybe work on finding us some water to drink? Thank you!” No, the people quarreled, even demanded, that Moses satisfy their pressing need. “Give us water to drink!”

One of the things we discussed in our bible study this week was how this interaction between Moses and the people unfolds. After the Israelites demand water, Moses, in his interaction with the people, almost equates himself to God: “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?” At first glance, that may seem a bit arrogant of Moses. But we have to remember that it’s been through Moses that the people have known and experienced God. It was Moses who confronted Pharaoh, who led the people through the Red Sea, who has been the direct communicator between God and God’s chosen people. It’s not surprising that Moses would see the people’s complaints as challenging Yahweh, their God.

But that doesn’t stop them, does it? In fact, the Israelites’ whining goes to a whole new level. “But the people complained against Moses and said, ‘Why did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?’” (17:3). In their eyes, Moses not only has failed them in not providing for their needs, but his motives are now brought into question. They could have had water and food and security in Egypt – albeit under the burden of slavery – but surely that’s better than being stuck out in this barren wilderness with nothing to drink!

This time, instead of engaging the people, Moses engages God. “So Moses cried out to the Lord, ‘What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me!’” (17:4). Have you ever felt that way? As a parent, you throw your hands up and wonder, “What am I supposed to do?” As an employee or supervisor, you are at your wits end with a very difficult situation. As a resident, you are frustrated by a neighbor’s behavior. As a member of the church, you are exasperated by someone’s outlook on life. “What shall I do, Lord?” I believe we’ve all said something to that effect at some point in our lives.

Look at what happens when Moses relies on God for help with the situation, instead of attempting to handle it on his own. Rather than remaining in a state of paralysis, God provides guidance and relief. God tells Moses to not only go ahead of the people, but to also take with him some of his trusted leaders, “the elders of Israel,” to a place that God is prescribing. At that location, Moses is to use the same staff that he used to part the Red Sea, and at that place called Horeb, “strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink” (17:6).

Once again, God provides what the people need – water to drink – just as God has provided for their needs in the past: in the garden of Eden, to Abraham and God’s promise to bless the nations. But it is with particular directions and on God’s terms – not the Israelites’ terms – and in doing so, God reinforces their relationship as Creator and created ones.

Take notice, though, of how this passage ends. It doesn’t end with a comment praising God for God’s providence over the people. It ends with a reminder about the people’s unfaithfulness: “He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, ‘Is the Lord among us or not?’” (17:7). And in that last line, we get to the root of the Israelites’ complaining, and perhaps to our own complaining in faith.

In the minds of the Israelites, if their most basic need of water was not available, then perhaps their God had abandoned them. How would they survive this wilderness journey if God had left them? In their anxiety and fearfulness, they complain and question and demand answers from those in “leadership.”

In our minds, if what we perceive as our most basic needs are not being met, we might question if God is still present. Of course, we interpret our “basic needs” in a variety of ways. It might mean our health, our financial security, our physical safety, our sense of happiness or self-worth, or any number of things. But when we are not experiencing life as we feel it ought to be, then we become anxious and fearful, and we start to question others, as well as quarrel with God.

In many ways, as we discussed Tuesday night, we are like the Israelites in demanding a sign from God. We seek to control God, saying things like, “If I’m supposed to do this, Lord, then show me a sign.” The Israelites needed a sign from God that God has not left them. We seek out signs that God’s presence is still with us. And if we do not believe those signs are presenting themselves in a recognizable way to us, we wonder if God is present in our wilderness journeys.

Here’s the thing about our God that we know from the entire biblical witness: God never leaves us. Even when God is angry or disappointed or frustrated with humanity, God never abandons us. Even when we are impatient or whining or needing something visible and real to trust in God, God never abandons us. Because, as we read in this story, God tells Moses and the Israelites and us, “I will be standing there in front of you” (17:6). Despite our doubt, our complaints, our testing, our whining, God is standing in

front of us. God wants us to know that we can vent and complain and struggle all we want, and in the end, God will be standing there in front of us in love, providing for what we need, and never abandoning us.

Perhaps when we begin to trust God in our faith journey, then we start to replace fear and uncertainty with joy and commitment. Perhaps when we stop expecting God to be at our beck-and-call to meet our needs, then we witness God blessing us in unexpected ways. Perhaps when we stop demanding signs that we think offer proof of God's existence, then we witness signs all around us of God's undying love for us in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Six years ago, our congregation faced a wilderness experience. We began our first capital campaign that spring, realizing that we needed to address major issues with our worship space and facility. We did not know exactly how it all would play out, or whether we would be able to accomplish our vision. But those visions were grounded in a sense of trust that God had called us to stay committed to this community, and to minister in Christ's name in this particular place.

Six years ago, I said the following in my sermon: "But when it is time to make financial commitments, what will we be willing to sacrifice in our own lives for this vision to become a reality? To what degree will we as individuals, as families, as a people of faith be willing to give? If someone were to look at our checkbooks, will they see a people consumed by the world's needs, or a people consumed by God's needs?" ("Look! Water!" Frank Mansell III, John Knox Presbyterian Church, February 24, 2008).

Guess what? You have shown unequivocally that you are a people consumed by God's needs. In your sacrificial giving and consistent commitment, you have trusted in God's vision for us as a congregation, and supported that vision with your gifts of time, talent and treasure. You have not whined or complained about how much longer this will take, understanding from the start that this was a long-term commitment we made to God. We are concluding our second capital campaign this spring, and you will be hearing information in the April newsletter about plans for our third capital campaign to continue to pay down our debt for this sanctuary. But if you are a person who needs a sign, consider this: by this summer, we expect to have paid for almost half of the \$1.5 million project in five short years. That's absolutely incredible for a church our size, and especially to have done all of this during an overall economic climate of recession and recovery.

I can credit that to nothing more than our collective belief that God has been, is, and always will be standing before us. As we continue to envision what is next for us as a congregation, and live into our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ, may we never lose sight that the God of Adam and Eve, the God of Abraham, the God of Moses, the God of Jesus Christ our Lord – that our God is there, standing before us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.