

**August 4, 2024**  
**“Complaints and Confessions”**  
**Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15 / 2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a**  
**Pastor Tim**

It's a Communion Sunday, so as is usually the case, consider this more a meditation than a full-on sermon. Just some relatively brief reflections on our scripture texts this morning. We'll see how we do.

I opted to pair two texts from the Hebrew scriptures – the reading from 2 Samuel is the official Lectionary offering for this week; the reading from Exodus is included as an alternative.

They are markedly different stories, but as I read and reflected on them both this week, I was struck by some resonance. We'll get to that.

On one hand, we get the perhaps more familiar account of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness right after their miraculous escape from captivity in Egypt, after the miraculous parting of the Red Sea. Another account appears in the Book of Numbers.

Only three days after the Red Sea, they find themselves without water – or at least water that isn't too bitter to drink. God shows Moses a piece of wood, which he throws in the water – turning the water from bitter to sweet.

Right after that comes this account – officially noted as the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the second month after the left Egypt. This time the Israelites are hungry, and they waste no time in complaining against Moses and Aaron. They feel helpless, devoid of any sense of agency in the desert. Better to have remained captive in Egypt, with plenty of food to eat, than be left to die of starvation in the wilderness, they say – better the devil we knew than this devil we don't.

When life is NOT, or the world is NOT, the way we've imagined it to be, the way we want it to be, the way we know it can be, the way we believe God intends it to be, BELOVED COMMUNITY, we human beings tend to complain. OK, maybe not all of us – I mean, we all know people who don't complain, at least not out loud. Or say they don't. People who say there's no use complaining.

And while they are right that complaining in and of itself won't accomplish anything, make any difference, it's important, always, that we be able, that we feel empowered, to EXPRESS our disappointment, our frustration, our anger, our suffering. It definitely doesn't do any good cooped up in our minds and hearts.

We complain for our own sakes, for our own livelihoods, for our own well-being, but we also complain on behalf of others. In the face of suffering, in the face of violence and injustice, complaining CAN be precisely the place where change begins.

As the story goes, God hears the Israelites' complaining and promises to "rain bread from heaven" – enough for each day, and ONLY enough for each day. They long for the days in Egypt when they could at least eat their fill of bread, but here God promises them just ENOUGH.

And as the story goes, God delivers. "In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning, ... a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground."

The Israelites don't know what it is. By some accounts, this "manna" from heaven, the word itself derives from their question, "What is it?"

"What is it?"

The literal answer to that question is most likely the crystallized honeydew of scale insects which would dry out in a desert environment to become a sticky solid, though some researchers have argued that it may have been a form of lichen. But regardless of what it ACTUALLY is, for the purposes of this story, it "is the bread that the HOLY ONE has given you to eat."

What it is, is ENOUGH – so that the hungry and fearful Israelites, helplessly wandering as they are through an unknown wilderness and into an unknown future, don't recognize what ENOUGH looks like.

Now on the other hand, in our other reading this morning, we get what is perhaps a less familiar account – this exchange between King David and his court prophet, Nathan; though it follows what is likely more familiar to many or most of you, David's adulterous

affair with Bathsheba, wife of Uriah the Hittite, whom David matter-of-factly arranges to have killed by sending him to the frontlines of battle.

And so we pick up with our reading, Bathsheba mourning the death of her husband – and after the ritual period of mourning, King David sending for her to make her his wife. No word, we note, from Bathsheba in the story.

Unlike the Israelites in the wilderness, David, King David, has everything he wants. But after seeing Bathsheba bathing from his rooftop deck, he decides he wants her, too. Another man's wife.

In his power and in his privilege, he has no idea what ENOUGH is. He only wants more for himself. Power and privilege have a way of diminishing self-awareness, blinding the powerful and privileged to their own sin, to their own failure to love; or rather, they see it but find ways to JUSTIFY sin, lovelessness, violence, injustice, in their own minds and hearts.

Racism the most obvious example: a social construct constructed by powerful or power-hungry white men to solidify and justify their privilege and increasing power. To justify all manner of violence and oppression. All, conveniently enough, in the name of God – you know, to help them sleep at night.

David, likewise, has sinned his way through his power and privilege, but HE doesn't, of course, SEE it that way.

God does, OF COURSE. And so does Nathan. How could you not?!

But Nathan, rather than coming out and telling King David what should be obvious, tells him a story. A parable, about a rich man and a poor man. A rich man with many flocks and herds of animals; a poor man with just one little lamb. A ewe lamb he raises like it's his own daughter. So sweet, so tender, so loving.

A traveler comes to the rich man, but rather than turn to his own flocks and herds to accommodate the traveler, the rich man takes the poor man's lamb.

King David is outraged, declaring that the rich man deserves to die. King David is outraged, seeing – as Jesus would put it later – the “speck in (his) neighbor’s eye” – the rich man’s eye, in this case – but unable to notice the “log in (his own).”

But then Nathan cuts to the chase: “You are the man!” You are the rich man in the story! Nathan reminds David that God has anointed him king over Israel, and given him everything he has – and apparently if all of that had been too little, even, would have given him more.

Enough is enough! Nathan lays out the punishment, and only then – finally then – does King David see.

“I have sinned against the HOLY ONE.” Not to mention against Uriah and Bathsheba, on and on. To sin against our neighbors and ourselves, to turn away from love of our neighbors and of ourselves, IS to sin against God. Is to turn away from God.

His complaining turns to confession. With Nathan’s help, he directs his attention, his energy, from without to within.

David, for the first time, acknowledges his sin. Reclaims at least an ounce of self-awareness to acknowledge his own outsized role, corrupted by his own power and privilege, in fashioning a world that is not as God intends. His own outsized role, corrupted by his own power and privilege, in destroying the world as God intends.

One story is about the oppressed, and the other about the oppressor. One story is primarily about complaint, and the other about confession.

Let me suggest one lesson: when we complain about a situation or context as it is, our lives as they are, the world as it is, we are invited, to consider what is enough. What do we need? What do others need? Maybe our complaining is off-base, short-sighted, narcissistic?

Maybe our complaining brings us to our own need for confession.

Let me give you a simple and self-incriminating example.

I have shared at Calvary before that I tend, when I drive, to let the righteous avenger in me out. I often find myself – and Amy and Gabe, God love ‘em – often find me – complaining about one driver or another. Too slow, too fast. Too aggressive, not aggressive enough. Turning suddenly without a turn signal. Racing ahead, along the shoulder, in a turn lane, whatever, to cut to the front of a long line. I could go on.

One thing and another that impacts my experience on the road, or others'. Honking the horn more often than I care to admit. Yelling in the car, sometimes with language I'm not proud to admit.

Now this is not say that, at least sometimes, my complaining isn't justified. It's not to say that my complaining doesn't, at least sometimes, point to a legitimate grievance. There are a lot of bad drivers out there, amen!

But there are increasingly times, I'm finding, or finally acknowledging, when I know – much as I hate to admit it in the moment – that I am being ridiculous. Or unnecessarily and obnoxiously impatient. Making much ado about nothing. Or insensitive, as Amy sometimes points out, failing to consider, say, what may be going on for another driver that may be causing them to drive in the way that is pissing me off.

I know I've shared this story before, called "The Dervish in the Dish."

*Once a Dervish holy man and his student were walking down a long, quiet road. Suddenly they saw dust rising in the distance. A fine carriage pulled by six horses approached at full gallop. The men soon realized that this carriage was not going to slow down or veer to avoid them. In fact it was coming upon them at such great speed that they had to throw themselves from the road, landing quite unceremoniously in a ditch. The two men got up as quickly as they could and looked back at the carriage as it sped by.*

*The student thought to curse, but not before the teacher ran after them calling, "May all of your deepest desires be satisfied!"*

*"Why would you wish something so good for those men?" the student asked. "They just forced us into the ditch, we could have been hurt."*

*“Do you really think,” replied the teacher, “that if their deepest desires were satisfied, they would go around treating others as they treated us?”*

You get the point. It's about grace. Forgiveness, in this case even before the fact.

How can we, how can I, be more grace-FULL in making my way through the world? In my rush to complain about others, I find myself invited – by God, and the vision of the world God intends – to a quality of self-awareness that opens my mind and my heart to see when confession is what's needed. To see when I'm part of the problem, only making matters worse. To see the log in my own eye, even as I'm quick to point out the speck (or the log) in another's. Confession, and with it, the experience of grace. And from it, God help us, the PRACTICE of grace – the opportunity to change, to do better, to make right.

And while our complaining may sometimes bring us to confession, rightly turning our gaze inward, we know that at other times our complaining IS justified. Our complaining outward does point to a need for change in the world around us.

But it does neither us nor the world around us any good to get stuck in our complaining. That can only lead to bitterness. Resentment. And hard hearts. The worst kind of hearts. I'm finding that to be the case in dealing with one of our immediate neighbors, but that's a story for another sermon.

So again, we are also reminded here that complaining can lead us to action, considering how we might and will be part of a solution. Reparation. How we might inject grace into a given situation or context, into our lives or others' lives, into the world around us.

That is ultimately our calling as God's own, as those held by God's love and grace, to let love and GRACE lead us from complaining against injustice to action for justice.

So, friends, even in our complaining, may our hearts remain soft and so open to wherever love and grace may lead us. To confession, when necessary. To action, when necessary. But all toward the world as God intends.

May it be so.