

## 1 Sermon, November 24, 2013

Texts: Exodus 16:2-4, Exodus 16:9-15

Title: "The Story of the Love of God: Manna in the Wilderness"

1. God sends us times of testing
3. God blesses us in the midst of our grumbling

### 1. God sends us times of testing

Today's readings from Exodus give us a picture of a group of people – ethnically related, having gone through harrowing threats to their lives, and now fearing starvation.

We read that they were murmuring against Moses and Aaron, in a similar way to the way people murmured about Jesus. They questioned Moses' and Aaron's leadership, they questioned their wisdom, they probably asked if Moses was really an Israelite or maybe an Egyptian in disguise; maybe this was an Egyptian plot – a sinister conspiracy to eliminate the Israelites in the desert.

You know how it goes even today. People are suspicious. There are people who believe in various conspiracies: that the World Trade Center disaster was coordinated by the Bush Administration to give them more influence; or that there is no such thing as climate change, instead it is a plot by the Obama administration to gain more influence. And, of course, there have been various conspiracy theories about the JFK assassination for the last 50 years.

People who are going thru tough times have a tendency to forget the hardships of the past, and look back at earlier days with rose-colored glasses. The Israelites in the desert forgot the pains and hardships of slavery and remembered how they were able to eat meat in Egypt.

We human beings are naturally complainers and grumblers. When we're going thru a painful time, we want to talk about it, "vent" about it.

When we're tempted to complain, it's probably a time of testing for us. According to Exodus, this time in the desert was a time of testing for the Israelites.

What are the times of testing for us?

They are times when we have to make decisions.

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Maybe there's a power struggle going on at work. How do you respond? Maybe there's a family member who's making a bad moral decision. What do you say or do? Perhaps you have a temptation to use a little too much alcohol when things get stressful, and that's a time of testing. Maybe you face a health challenge, and the doctors can't seem to help. Maybe there's an argument going on in the family, a situation that could make you depressed, a challenge to fulfilling your responsibilities.

All of these can be times of testing for us.

During the Israelite's time of testing in the wilderness, they had to decide if they were going to trust God. You'd think that the miraculous deliverance through the sea would have been enough to get them to trust God. And then there was the time they came to a place with water, but the water was undrinkable. At God's command, Moses threw a piece of wood into the water, and the water became sweet. Then they were led to an oasis where there was plenty of water.

But here the people of Israel were faced with another crisis: hunger. And they forgot the blessings they had received before and reverted to complaint.

How many times do we forget the blessings we've received, and choose to respond with complaint, thinking we're the righteous ones? Oh, poor me!

And just like with Moses, we often pick a target for our complaints. Our target might be the president, the congress, the Catholics, the Muslims, big business, the unions, the pastor, the poor, the rich, the butcher, the baker or the candlestick maker.

### 3. God blesses us in the midst of our grumbling

But the story doesn't end there. God is patient, and God doesn't treat the Israelites as they deserve, but rather leads them along so that they can become the chosen people. God decides to answer their complaints with grace.

God spoke to Moses, saying:

"I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not.

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Moses then said, "When the LORD gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the LORD has heard the complaining that you utter against him--what are we? Your complaining is not against Aaron and me, but against the LORD."

Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, 'Draw near to the LORD, for he has heard your complaining.'" And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud.

In the evening quails came up and covered the camp, and it's not stated, but you get the idea that the Israelites killed and ate the quail. Then in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew evaporated, there on the surface of the ground was a fine flaky substance.

When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" And here's one of the puns in the Bible. Manna literally means "what is it?" The Israelites called it "whats-it." Later in the chapter, it is described as "like coriander seed, white, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey."

So often we complain and worry, but the thing we complained about really never became a problem. Instead, it was something else that we never thought about that became a problem.

That thing we were worrying about? God took care of it.

So it was with the Israelites. The things they thought were problems, things like water and food and Moses getting lost – those external things — they turned out not to be problems.

What were problems were the temptations to worship other Gods, and their failure to listen to God and obey the commandments.

That's the way with us, too. The things that plague us most are not those things outside of us but the things within us, the things that lead us to conceit, to greed, to excess, to jealousy, to self-righteous anger.

As Jesus said in Mark 7:

... Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?"

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And he said, "It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person." Mark 7:18-23, NRSV.

These internal challenges – internal temptations are the real test. Just like the Israelites were tested in the desert, we are tested within.

Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, when the church at Corinth was involved in some questionable practices, saying:

"Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you? -- unless, indeed, you fail to meet the test! I hope you will find out that we have not failed. But we pray to God that you may not do anything wrong--not that we may appear to have met the test, but that you may do what is right, though we may seem to have failed." 2 Corinthians 13:5-7, NRSV.

The good news is that, as Paul says, Jesus Christ is in you. Christ gives us the power to overcome temptations. Christ gives us the strength to meet those internal tests. You have more spiritual resources than you realize.

Each of us is tested. We are tested in how we react in spirit to the challenges we face. I pray that you will meet the test with grace and graciousness.

Amen.