

"BREAD OF HEAVEN"

Reading: Psalm 105: 1-6,37-45, Matthew 20:1-16, Philippians 1:21-30, Exodus 16:2-15
Preached at First Presbyterian Church, Baldwin, NY, on September 18th 2011

I admit it. When I am hungry, I'm a grouch. Blame it on the blood sugar, blame it on the stomach sending negative messages to the brain, blame it on my "I eat, therefore I am" nature, but (and my wife Yvonne will agree with me on this one, and that's not something a husband can always say about a wife), when I'm not a regular eater I become a complainer. A Big-Time Grouch.

Exodus 16:2 tells us that '*The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness.*' I read that and I'm thinking, "I don't blame them. They were hungry! I can "High Five" and say "AMEN" to folks with that kind of temperament. I suspect that if I'd been there I'd have been in the line to put my complaint to Moses and Aaron.

In a lot of ways they have a very legitimate complaint. Being slaves under the Pharaoh's repressive regime, was no picnic, yet it was preferable to starving to death in the desert. Some commentators suggest that the people had forgotten how bad it was in Egypt and point to how nostalgia has a habit of glossing over the bad and making too much of the benefits, but, from this stomach's perspective, I beg to disagree.

There are times when it's O.K. to complain. You meet somebody and you ask them, "How's things?". They sigh and say, "Oh.. well.. I can't complain .. and even if I did nobody wants to listen". When people say "Can't complain" sometimes what they really mean is, "You wouldn't believe how cruddy life is right now, and I'm at my wits end and I really don't know how I'm getting through."

British people have often got this off to a fine art! The Australians call the British "Wingin' Poms", because some of my fellow countryfolk have such a reputation for constant moaning and groaning, under the guise of saying "Hey everything's O.K, really, don't worry".

I think it's in the movie about the Griswald's European Vacation, that there's a scene where one of the ex-Monty Python actors, Eric Idle gets knocked off his bicycle, then he falls over, then something else bad happens and all the time he just keeps saying, "Oh no. No problem. Quite all-right." Or I think of that scene in Monty Python's "Holy Grail" movie where the two knights are in combat and after one of them is almost totally dismembered, he says, "Oh no, just a flesh wound, I've had worse".

Nobody likes a complainer. People of all nationalities try and avoid making it look like they are complaining even when they are. Yet, in spite of all that, I maintain that there are times when complaining is legitimate. I think that if I were out in the desert, with a whole host of people facing starvation, without even catching a glimpse of the Promised Land I would feel I had grounds for filing a grievance.

From a human perspective it seems that getting mad at Moses and antagonizing Aaron would be justifiable. But, and I hate to say this, from a Divine perspective, their complaining was entirely the result of a lack of faith. Their problem isn't that they had forgotten how bad it was in Egypt, but rather that they had forgotten how good God was in bringing them out from Egypt.

"God is Good.. all the Time
All the Time.. God is Good"

They failed to remember that this God who had led them into the wilderness, had, when they were in Egypt, heard their cries, seen their tears and acted on their behalf. They had lost sight of the fact that God still heard their fears, still saw their plight and was still acting on their behalf.

Being a disciple of Jesus Christ opens up to us options that are not available to people who don't have faith. Become a disciple of Jesus Christ and you will unlock your life to a whole spectrum of possibilities. A disciple can, in any given situation, make a choice as to how they will view their circumstances. We can look at life from the human side, and find a whole lot to complain about, or we can look at things from a Divine perspective and discover whole areas of life in which we are called to exercise trust in God.

The community calls Moses and Aaron to account for themselves. *"What are you doing, bringing us out here to starve?"* Did you pick up on the answer that they give the people? Moses firstly assures them that by the time evening came around they would know that the lord God had led them out of Egypt. Then, Exodus 16:8 *'Moses 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 us but against the LORD."*

To complain about hunger and express legitimate fears was one thing. God had heard that complaint and was doing something about it. To suggest that the whole Exodus from Egypt had somehow been the work, not of any divine agent, but attributed to Moses and Aaron's hands, that was the mistake.

It may be flattering that the people considered Moses and Aaron capable of coming up with such a cunning plan, but the dark side of the picture is that it revealed the people had shifted their focus from trusting God, to trusting in each other. One thing is for sure. We can't always be sure about each other.

Fact is we make compromises, we forget promises, we lose sight of what God calls us to be, and we need each others prayers and encouragement, because at times our service of God feels like a wilderness and we get hungry for something better and the temptation is always for us to look to each other rather than to God to meet our needs.

When we hear of pastors who fall by the wayside or Christian leaders found guilty of some misdemeanor we think, "How can people called by God turn out to be such rotten apples?"

Reformed theology suggests the reason is simply that we are all rotten apples, that aside from the love of God we are all hopeless cases, that for all of us, be we pastors, elders, deacons, youngsters, oldsters, rich or poor, male or female, black or white, whether we put our milk in the coffee before we put the coffee in the cup or whether we prefer to put the coffee in the cup before we put the milk in it, for all of us the natural inclination of our lives is to do anything but serve God and do God's will.

Presbyterian doctrine takes Grace seriously because it takes sin seriously. Somebody was once alleged to have said, "I didn't know what sin was until I met a Presbyterian". In our bulletin we put our "Confession of Sin and Assurance of Pardon" way to the start of our service because we know that it doesn't take us long in the presence of God to realize that we've messed up and need God's renewing and forgiving, before we can get on with anything else in our lives.

Our final hymn this morning, "Guide me Oh thy great Jehovah, pilgrim through this barren land" contains that wonderful stanza, "Bread of Heaven, Bread of Heaven, Feed me till I want no more, Feed

me till I want no more". Over here in America I'm afraid you don't sing this hymn with the same passion as some of your brothers and sisters over in Wales.

See, when the Welsh sing that hymn, it builds to a roof-raising climax. The first "Feed me till I want no more" is echoed by the tenors and basses, "Want no more".. that phrase is often held as long as whoever may be leading the singing can stand it, before it crashes back down to earth with a resounding and resolute "Feed me till I want no more".

Quite what the significance is in that the Welsh seem to sing it as much at Rugby games as they do in chapel, I've never really analyzed, but I'm of the opinion that it's got something to do with passion and feeling and the desire to be a winner – be it on a field of play or in the much less glamorous game of life.

The quails came. The Manna came. And the people turned to God in worship and in praise. They stopped complaining and they started rejoicing. And, (wow!), what a change it can make in a persons life if they can move from being a complainer to being a proclaimer of the Good News that Jesus Christ died for our sins, was raised that we might have abundant life and that the Holy Spirit of God can nurture our lives as though we were feeding on "Bread from Heaven". So what's it going to be? Complainer or Proclaimer?

As a church what a difference it makes when we can shift our focus from what we can do to what God can do. As a body of God's people in this place, what a difference it can make when we face our challenges not as 'cause for complaints' but as "Opportunities to experience the Grace of God". So what's it going to be? Complainer or Proclaimer?

Of course we have bills to pay. Of course we have physical needs. But where are we finding the resources to meet that challenge? Are we making the same mistakes the Israelites did in the Wilderness? Trying to find somebody to blame when actually the problem is we've lost sight of trusting in God?

It is much easier to 'murmur and complain' than take up the challenge of carrying a Cross in Jesus name. There is nothing radical in pretending that everything's all right when there are some things that are wrong and need putting right. I'm not suggesting to anybody that we should put a brave face on things and carry with us some vague hope that we'll get by in the end.

What I am suggesting is that we put our focus where it ought to be as Christians, that we look to our savior Jesus Christ. So again I say; What's it going to be? Complainer or Proclaimer?

In conclusion I'd remind you of some words that are recorded for us in John's Gospel.

John 6:35, "*Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."*

Hear the Word of God.
Hear that invitation afresh today,
"Come to me and find satisfaction for your hunger"
Hear God's call for us to exercise faith
"Believe in me and I will satisfy your thirst"

"God is Good.. all the Time

All the Time.. God is Good”
AMEN.

Rev Adrian Pratt