



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Grumbling

Exodus 15:22-17:7

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Last Sunday—Trinity Sunday—I spent some time explaining why it's important that we have a correct understanding of who God is—that we worship, submit to, and trust in the God who is, not the false gods of our own making. Idols don't save. Put your faith in false gods and you'll be in a world of trouble. In fact, that's why our world is in the state it is: because our basic problem as humans is that we've rejected the God who is and put idols of our own making in his place. Now, that doesn't mean our theology has to be perfect. We're saved by God, not by our theology. We can say that *this* is correct and *that* is wrong, but our salvation isn't based on making sure we get a certain number of doctrinal propositions right. God is gracious. But that doesn't mean doing our best to get him right, to understand him as he has revealed himself in Scripture, isn't vitally important.

But idolatry isn't the only problem we face. Sometimes our intent is to worship and to follow the God who is, the God who reveals himself in the Bible, but we draw false conclusions about him that then become an obstacle to real faith, trust, obedience, and worship. Let me give you two related examples that tie into our lesson today as we continue with Exodus.

First, a number of weeks ago, after I preached on the plagues the Lord sent on the Egyptians, someone commented to me, "I like Jesus, but the God of the Old Testament just seems too angry and judgemental. It bothers me and so I stick to Jesus." I've heard people make comments like that a lot of times, thinking that in the Old Testament God is all about judgement and wrath, while Jesus is all about love and mercy. It's a common error and it was the first major heresy the Church dealt with. A man

name Marcion, back in the early Second Century, taught this idea. In fact, he cut the whole Old Testament from his Bible. More recently, popular preacher Andy Stanley has been arguing that Christians need to unhitch ourselves from the Old Testament. It's just not relevant, he says. It's a form of Marcionism-lite. It's very common, but as I said last Sunday, the God who is is the God we know as the Holy Trinity. You can't cut out the God of the Old Testament and leave the Trinity intact. You can't cut out the God of the Old Testament and leave the story of redemption intact, for that matter. But people do it all the time. It's one of the reasons I very much dislike the little New Testaments distributed by groups like the Gideons. I know it's for reasons of cost and they think having the Old Testament might confuse people who are unfamiliar with the Bible, but the New Testament alone simply is not the Bible. It's not the whole story. You can't understand the New without the Old.

Now, the second mistake Christians sometimes make and one maybe more directly related to our text from Exodus: Being angry with God. When things go wrong in life it can be very easy to get angry with God. It doesn't help that there are preachers and counsellors out there who actually say that being angry with God is a good way to get over our problems. I had a chaplain once tell me, "It's okay to be angry with God. He's a big guy and he can take it." Some years ago I was talking with a woman who had suddenly lost her husband. A counsellor she had gone to recognised that this woman was already angry with God and so she told her that she needed to forgive God to get over it. Brothers and Sisters, does God ever do us wrong? Does God ever sin against us? No, he doesn't. To do so would be to go against his character and his promises. To be angry with God—or then to forgive him because we think he's done us some wrong—ends up becoming an obstacle to faith. You can't trust a God who is untrustworthy. To be angry with God—or to grumble against him as we'll see the Israelites doing—is ultimately to reject him.

We'll pick up the story at Exodus 15:22. Remember that the Lord has just

rescued the Israelites at the Red Sea, leading them across on dry land and then drowning Pharaoh's army. Most of Chapter 15 was a song they sang in praise of the Lord. We now read that Moses leads them on a three-day journey from the sea, into the wilderness of Shur. (Again, we don't really know much about these locations, but it's safe to assume it's somewhere in the southern part of the Sinai Peninsula. After three days, their water supply was exhausted. They finally came to place they would name "Marah", meaning "bitter". They found water and it's not hard to image how excited they were: thirsty people in the desert finding water! But when they tested it, they discovered it was undrinkable. Again, it's not hard to imagine the disappointment. Verse 24 says:

And the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?" And he cried to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a log, and he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet. (Exodus 15:24-25)

The people grumbled. They grumbled against Moses, but as the Lord's representative, they were really grumbling against the Lord. And it almost passes by unnoticed. They were thirsty—maybe even dying of thirst—and to make matters worse, they had the joy of finding water and the huge let-down when it turned out to be undrinkable. So they grumbled. But hey, no big deal, right? God heard them and had Moses throw a certain tree in the water and—*miracle*—it fixed the water. They cried out to God when they were slaves in Egypt, he heard, and he delivered them. Seems similar...but it's not.

There's a difference between crying out to God and grumbling to God. Maybe the problem is that we're so often grumbly about things, even if it's not to God. It's our way...at least for a lot of us. Especially when there's not much we can do to change our situation. Kids grumble about parents. Parents grumble about kids. And our jobs. And the government. And about each other. But grumbling against God? Grumbling is a way to express dissatisfaction. It's

rarely productive. But when it comes to God, do we really have any reason to be dissatisfied with him? We can be dissatisfied with a situation or with life in general. Suffering is real. And there's nothing wrong with being dissatisfied *when there's actually something really wrong*. But it's never okay to grumble against God. The world around us is a mess, not because of God, but because of us. He created it good. We're the ones who sinned and brought corruption into the world. God, on the other hand, is the one who reveals himself to sinners, seeks us out, pours out his grace on us. He came himself and died for our sake. He's the one setting his creation to rights and doing it patiently and slowly *so that* you and I can have a chance to repent, turn to Jesus, and be spared that final day when his project is finished and he wipes every last bit of sin and evil and death from Creation. If things are bad, it's not his fault; it's ours. He's the gracious one working to fix everything we've broken. He's the one who reveals himself over and over and over and over through history to be perfectly good, perfectly wise, and perfectly faithful.

Brothers and Sisters, to grumble against God is to slander his character and to blame him for the fallout from our sins. In contrast, people who have faith in the goodness and wisdom of God cry out to him in from their troubles. They cry out to him—like the Israelites did in Egypt—because they know he is good and wise and faithful, because they trust him to meet our needs, even if that means holding our hands as we walk through our trials rather than taking the trials away. This is the sort of crying out we see in the Psalms. Over and over the psalmists cry out to God in pain or grief or despair or danger, but they do so in faith, knowing that they can trust in God's goodness.

But it's interesting that in this case, the Lord doesn't rebuke the Israelites for their grumbling. They should know better. It's been a week since they saw the plagues. It's been three days since the Lord led them through the sea and drowned the Egyptians. But already they've forgotten the Lord's power and

the Lord's goodness because they're thirsty. Three days. That's all it took to lose faith after the amazing things they'd seen. But the Lord is patient. Instead of getting angry at their fickle lack of faith, he gives them the water they need. And he gives them a gentle reminder of who and what he's calling them to be. Look at verses 25-26:

There the LORD made for them a statute and a rule, and there he tested them, saying, "If you will diligently listen to the voice of the LORD your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give ear to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, your healer."

"Listen to me and trust me," says the Lord. He's given them every reason to. But he's patient. They've been in Egypt for four hundred years. The Lord is, for the most part, a stranger. They've picked up Egyptian ways and they've worshipped pagan gods. The Lord knows that even with all he's done for them, it's going to take time to trust him. And yet there's a warning here too. "Listen to me and trust me and I won't bring the sorts of plagues on you that I brought on Egypt." And now we see the bitter water is a subtle reminder. He had made the water of Egypt undrinkable, but with a touch of Moses' staff it was fine again. Here he leads Israel to undrinkable water and has Moses throw in this tree or this piece of wood and it's fine. What happened to Egypt can happen to Israel. It turns out that leading Israel to this bitter water in the desert isn't a bad thing after all. It's an opportunity given by the Lord—who is good and wise—to teach his people his character, to give them yet another reason to trust him, and start teaching them what sort of people he has called them to be.

Even though they've grumbled—and grumbling against a king in the Ancient Near East was the first step in committing treason—the Lord is patient and gracious. In verse 27 we read that he led them to a place called Elim. There were twelve springs and seventy

palms—a spring of water for every tribe. Is this that evil and angry God of the Old Testament so many people think of? Hardly. This is the God who gives his own Son to restore his people to himself. This is a patient God of grace and love.

In Chapter 16—which we only have time to summarise—the people move further into the desert—into the Wilderness of Sin. "Sin" is related to "Sinai" and has nothing to do with our English word "sin", by the way. It's now a month into their journey and, verse 2 says:

The whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, and the people of Israel said to them, "Would that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

They grumble again. This time it's because they don't have enough to eat. It makes sense. They had their flocks and herds, but ancient people didn't eat their livestock—at least not the common people. Their livestock gave them milk and wool, pulled their wagons, and turned their mills. Sinai isn't known for being hospitable. It's a desert wilderness. But, again, instead of crying out to the Lord for deliverance, they grumbled against his representatives. And they let their present difficulties colour how they saw things. They didn't just grumble about being hungry. They even grumbled about the Lord having delivered them from Egypt—as if that was a bad thing. In a month they've forgotten just how horrible it had been to be slaves.

Look at how the Lord responds. He was patient before, but they're needlessly angry again. Still he remains patient—because that's his character.

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I am about to rain bread from heaven for you, and the people shall go out and gather a day's

portion every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in my [instruction] or not. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather daily.” So Moses and Aaron said to all the people of Israel, “At evening you shall know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD, because he has heard your grumbling against the LORD. For what are we, that you grumble against us?” And Moses said, “When the LORD gives you in the evening meat to eat and in the morning bread to the full, because the LORD has heard your grumbling that you grumble against him—what are we? Your grumbling is not against us but against the LORD.” (Exodus 15:4-8)

The Lord had threatened to afflict Israel as he had Egypt, but instead he responds to their hungry grumbings against him by giving them food—and plenty of it. The Lord drew his people to him and manifested himself in a cloud of glory and said, “At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the LORD your God.” (Exodus 16:12). The Lord will patiently and graciously feed them in the wilderness, because that’s the kind of God he is. Do see how his desire is for them to know him and to grow to trust him as they see his loving and good character?

What the Lord promised is exactly what the Lord does. In the evening quails covered the camp and in the morning there was a flake-like substance all over the ground that tasted like honey. They called it in Hebrew *man* or *man hu*. Literally, “What is it?” or “Whatzit bread”. That turned into *manna* in Greek. Just like the tree that made the bitter water drinkable, people have tried to find all sorts of natural explanations. Quails migrate across Sinai and maybe they were so tired that they just sat there and let themselves be caught. Some have speculated that the manna was some kind of insect or plant secretion.

And yet the manna, in particular, started as soon as the Lord promised it, it was there every morning for forty years, and the day the Israelites cross the Jordan into the promised land it stopped. The explanations, however feasible they might be, miss the point. This was the Lord’s doing. It was his provision for his people.

To stress this, to drive this home, there were two other miraculous things associated with the manna. First, no matter how much was collected, it was always just the right amount—an *omer* or a bit more than two litres per person. Gather a little or gather a lot, somehow you always got the same amount. And it didn’t keep overnight. People tried and it rotted and bred worms. *But*—and the second miracle—on the Sabbath there was no manna, but the day before the people collected double the usual amount and somehow it kept so that they had full bellies on the Sabbath despite having done no work. On the Sabbath the Lord takes his rest, but even as he takes his rest, he ensures that his people are provisioned so that they, too, can rest. Again, it’s a wonderful picture of his character.

In fact, the manna was so important an illustration of the Lord’s goodness and faithfulness through his provision, that a third miracle happened. A jar of manna was collected to be kept with the ark of the covenant in the tabernacle. It was there for the benefit of future generations who hadn’t travelled through the wilderness and known the Lord’s goodness there.

If you knew nothing of Israel’s history, you might think that this was the end of the grumbling. Water, quails, manna. The Lord is good! Praise the Lord! But in Chapter 17 the Israelites move further into the desert and at a place called Rephidim they were once again thirsty. You might think that they’d simply cry out to the Lord for water. If he could give them water once, certainly he could give them water again. I mean, they’d just had miracle bread for breakfast and now they need water to wash it down. Ask and ye shall receive, right? But, no. Again, they grumble. Look at 17:2-3:

Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, “Give us water to drink.” And Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?” But the people thirsted there for water, and the people grumbled against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?”

Once again, dire circumstances override what they know to be true of God. They let their circumstances undermine their faith. And yet once again the Lord is patient:

And the LORD said to Moses, “Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink.” And Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the quarreling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the LORD by saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?” (Exodus 17:5-7)

Yet again, the Lord is patient and full of grace. The people grumble against him and he gives them water anyway. Of course, if the Lord was only gracious to people who honour him none of us would be here. Our rebellion and our idolatry are the very things the Lord is working to overcome and so this is what he’s about. One of our problems is that we forget who and what we are. We’re the rebels. God is the faithful one. But someone we start thinking of ourselves as the faithful ones and we turn everything on its head. We make demands. We get angry when things don’t go our way. We blame God for the problems our rebellion has created. But God is patient and merciful anyway.

Now, God won’t always be so patient with Israel’s grumbling. In Numbers 20, two years later—after Israel’s been

¹ *Torah*, ESV reads “law”.

given plenty of time to get to know the Lord—there's a repeat of this event. Again, they grumble. And this time Moses, in his anger, disobeys the Lord's instructions to call forth water from the rock. And the result was that Moses was barred from entering the promised land. When the people grumbled in fear about the well-fortified cities and armed warriors in Canaan instead of trusting in the God whom they had every reason to trust, he turned them around to wander in the desert for forty years. That unfaithful generation would not take part in the promise because they had no trusted in the Lord. It's remarkable how a people who had seen the Lord do such might things and had known his loving provision, could so easily accuse him of being unfaithful. As we read in 17:7: "They grumbled and they tested the Lord by saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not?'"

But, Brothers and Sisters, we are, I think, just as prone to accusing God of unfaithfulness and grumbling against him. And then we wonder why we struggle so to walk with God and to be obedient. We wonder why we struggle to love him. Because it's awfully hard to trust someone whom you think is untrustworthy. It's hard to obey someone whom you think may lead you astray. It's hard to love someone whom you doubt has your best interest at heart. It's hard to care about his Word when you doubt his goodness. And we're not usually all that inclined to take joy in the gospel, let alone to tell others that good news, when we doubt the goodness of the God behind it. It's hard to fully let go of our idols—money, sex, power, politics, work, self—when we're afraid to take hold of God with both hands because we're afraid he might let us down. Brothers and Sisters, a lack of trust in the goodness and wisdom and faithfulness of God is a stumbling block to faith.

And so we need a reality check. We need to once again immerse ourselves in the story of the God who is and let it dispel our misconceptions and our idols. When we're tempted, for example, to think of the God of the Old Testament as angry and vengeful, we need to

actually steep ourselves in the Old Testament and see that he is as gracious and loving there as he is in the New. And we need to steep ourselves in the New Testament to see how, over and over again, Jesus is the same God who revealed himself to Israel. We need to immerse ourselves in Scripture to be reminded that *we* are the ones who have made a mess of Creation and that, yes, God is angry towards sin—because it corrupts what he made good and because it works against everything he has done and is doing to set Creation to rights. If we're immersed in Scripture we realise that wrath against sin is a *good* thing. And then, Brothers and Sisters, we see that in his lovingkindness, God has not simply destroyed sin and sinners, but has given himself in Jesus—humbled himself to become one of us and even given his life at the cross—to forgive us. And we see, too, that he's filled us with his own Spirit, to give us life and to set us right in faithfulness to his promises in the Old Testament.

We grumble like the Israelites sometimes: "Is the Lord among us or not?" Dear Friends, of course he is. He has taken on our flesh. He has died for our sake. He has risen and sent his Spirit to dwell in us. He has made us his temple. Come this morning to his Table and be reminded by the bread and by the wine that God is with us. He was in the midst of the Israelites and he is even more present with us, his new Israel. Come and eat the manna he offers and let your faith in his goodness and faithfulness be strengthened. He has given his Son and he has given his Spirit in fulfilment of his promises. Here we're reminded that we are already partakers of his new creation and his presence. Let us never forget and let us love and trust him fully.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, in the Collect we acknowledged our weakness. We can do no good thing without you. Even our faith is a gift of your grace. You have made yourself known in the Scripture and in your Son and in your Spirit. Teach us to avail ourselves of your revelation and the life you've given that we would truly and deeply know

your goodness, your love, and your faithfulness. Strengthen our faith, we ask, as we read your story, as we meditate on Jesus and his cross, as live and experience the new life you have given by your Spirit, and as live together as your people with you in our midst. Strengthen our faith as we come to know you better each day, that we might love and trust you more faithfully. Through our Lord and Saviour Jesus we ask this. Amen.