

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Fourth Presbyterian Church
25th Sunday in Ordinary Time
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From Whining to Wonder

Exodus 16:1-15; John 6:30-35

*The whole congregation of the Israelites
complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness.*

It might be tempting to say, in light of this passage,
there are two types of people in the world,
those who see only their lack, their obstacles, their emptiness,
and spend all their energy (and much of the energy of others)
complaining about it;
whereas there are others who recognize their blessings, their gifts, their fullness,
and spend their energy
appreciating and enjoying and sharing it with others.
Who do you tend to be?

Of course, when it comes to our spiritual dispositions
it is never quite that simple!

As I so often am reminded,
we are, none of us, such flat, two-dimensional people;
we are rather complex and multi-dimensional!

**We all have souls that are given both
to griping and to gratitude,
to whining and to wonder.**

Surely, there were those among the people of Israel
who did not join in the complaining,
but the thing about complaining is that it doesn't really take many complainers
to spoil the whole lot,
particularly if they are rather practiced at achieving the right pitch.
If enough join in the furor, raising the decibel levels,
the whine can become toxic, poisoning the whole community with rancor,
so that the face of the whole people becomes soured,
and the voice of the whole ascends into an incessant frenzy of whining
well known by any parent of a young children.

Unfortunately, whining seems to be part of human nature.
We all, every now and then, revert to our inner two-year-old.

**But when I hear myself complaining
it is surely time for me to examine the words coming out of my mouth
and the condition of my mind and heart
which is generating these complaints.**

If, as the great Socrates famously said,
“The unexamined life is not worth living,”
then surely the unexamined complaint is not worth making,
and when I hear the pitch of my voice rising,
it may be time to take a look inside.

Granted, the Israelites’ complaints may have been well founded!
They have been on their journey from the land of Egypt for one month and 15 days
when they come upon a vast wilderness that stretches out before them.
They look and see no food in their sacks and no fertile ground before them.
*And the whole congregation of the Israelites
complained again Moses and Aaron in the wilderness.*
For the Israelites,
the root of their complaint is hunger.
And there is something of a metaphor there for us,
since *all* of our complaining is, at its root, about hunger –
hunger of one form or another,
unmet need,
unsatisfied yearning,
unfulfilled desire.

When my son James was a sweet little 3 year old, just learning his words,
his 5 year old sister was trying to get him to play with her.
James was quite content with what he was already doing, but Langley persisted,
until James finally expressed his frustration this way,
“I wanna do what I wanna do, and I don’t wanna do what I don’t wanna do!”
**What a profound articulation of the human condition,
the lowest common denominator of all our complaining!**

So when I begin to hear myself complain –
if I am self-aware enough
to recognize the whine coming from the back of my throat –
the question to ask is,
What is my hunger?
What is my unmet need, my unsatisfied yearning, my unfulfilled desire?

And the next question, perhaps,
if Moses and Aaron are correct,
is whether or not I am actually directing my complaint to the right person.
And whether any human person is the right person!

So often, when we are pointing the finger at another human being —
a brother or sister, a spouse, a parent, a child, a co-worker, a fellow believer —
**we are, in fact, pointing our finger beyond them,
to the One who we feel is really responsible for our lack,
to the One who is the only True Source of our fulfillment,
to the Lord who has brought us into this wilderness
in the first place.**

The people complain that it is Moses and Aaron
who have brought them out into the wilderness.
But was it really?
Or was it God who brought them there?

Now it is interesting just how quickly the people of Israel can change their tune.
Just one chapter earlier in Exodus,
they have been singing praises to the Lord
who has just saved them from the entire Egyptian army
after liberating them from Pharaoh
by the most extravagant signs and wonders.

They have just been standing at the shore of the Red Sea, singing...
*The Lord is my strength and my might,
and he has become my salvation;
this is my God, and I will praise him,
my father's God, and I will exalt him...*

Perhaps they are aware of this praise having so recently come out of their mouths,
and they are feeling a little awkward about complaining to *God*.
It is, therefore, much easier
to complain against Moses and Aaron.

But Moses and Aaron will have none of it.

And they call out their dear fellow Israelites:
*...the Lord has heard your complaining against the Lord.
For what are we, that you complain against us?
...Your complaining is not against us but AGAINST. THE. LORD!*

This puts the people in a difficult spot
because it drives their self-examination
to a deeper level than they want to go.

They would rather keep their whining at the surface level,
focusing only on the presenting problem: **no food!**

But the deeper problem is a spiritual reality:

the fear that God has abandoned them;
the suspicion that the Lord is as fickle as they are,
and now that he has delivered them from bondage
he is going to forget about them in the wilderness;
the anxiety that the Lord will not provide for them
in the way *they think* the Lord ought to provide for them.

And that is very often at the root of our complaining, is it not?

The Lord is not providing for us
in quite the way *we think*
the Lord is *supposed* to be providing for us!

Well, friends, hear the good news.

This story does not end with the Israelites stuck in their whining!

The Lord saves them not only from Pharaoh, but from themselves.

For the Lord is kind and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.
He does not leave his people wallowing in their whining,
but responds to them, reminding them that he is the same Lord
who brought them up out of the land of Egypt.

*And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites,
they looked towards the wilderness,*

and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud.

The Lord spoke to Moses and said,

*'I have heard the complaining of the Israelites;
say to them,*

*"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."*

If you haven't seen the movie *Interstellar*, I recommend it.

It's one of the ubiquitous end-of-planet-earth movies,
this time with the earth being gradually turned into a desert
by massive dust storms.

But it's better than Hollywood's usual apocalyptic drivel.

There's a great line in the movie that captures our spiritual challenge:
The lead character says,

“We used to look up and wonder about our place in the stars,
now we just look down and worry about our place in the dirt.”

That seems to be the particular illness that has beset the Israelites,
and so often besets us – **namely, a great loss of perspective!**

God has created us, and crowned us with glory and honor,
and given us minds to contemplate God's handiwork,
and hearts to love God and God's creation and our fellow human beings,
but we are blinded to all this glory
by the petty little dust storms we stir up
when we stamp our feet in the dirt.

But thanks be to God!

God does not completely tune us out!
God responds, as a benevolent father, as a nurturing mother,
and provides for us,
albeit in ways we would not expect.

God comes to us with a **surprise!**
Our eyes are lifted up,
and the Lord appears, as in a cloud,
and his appearing awakens in us a sense of holy wonder!

It may be some small thing that does it.

A song you haven't heard in a while that reawakens love within you.

An old friend who reaches out and reconnects.

A stranger who surprises you with an act of kindness.

The weather turns from dreary to remarkably beautiful just when you need it.

The light of new insight flickers on in your mind,
and, out of the blue, your thinking is transformed...

...and Wonder returns. The presence of the Lord!

For the people of Israel it was the gift of food.

Quail and Manna in the wilderness,
and the people are almost speechless.

All they can stammer out is two syllables...*Ma-na?*

Which means, “What is it?”

It means wonder

in the face of God's provision

which is often not – at all – what we expect it to be.



If anyone had something legitimate to complain about
it was Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel.
Heschel was forced to flee his home in Germany to avoid being captured by the Nazis.
By way of Poland and England, he finally settled in America.
and began to teach at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City.

This descendant of the complaining company of Israelites,
once wrote:

“We can never sneer at the stars,
mock the dawn, or scoff at the totality of being.
Sublime grandeur evokes unflinching awe.
Away from the immense,
cloistered in our own concepts,
we may scorn and revile everything.
But standing between earth and sky,
we are silenced by the sight...”¹

Near the end of his life, as he lay convalescing in his apartment in New York,
a friend sat with him in quiet conversation.
A few years before, Heschel had suffered a near fatal heart attack
from which he never fully recovered.

He recalled the experience to his friend:
“Sam,” he said, “when I regained consciousness,
my first feelings were not of despair or anger.
I felt only gratitude to God for my life,
for every moment I had lived.
I was ready to depart.
‘Take me, O Lord,’ I thought,
‘I have seen so many miracles in my lifetime.’”

He paused for a moment, then added,
“I did not ask for success; I asked for wonder.
And [God] gave it to me.”

We could ask for many things from God.
For food.
For provision of some other kind.
For success.
For relief from our suffering.
To get everything that we want, and nothing that we do not want.

But perhaps we need to ask, instead,
for the gift of wonder, and the gratitude that arises from it.

Perhaps we need to ask for hearts
that are open to receive the wonder of God's provision,
in whatever way it comes to us,
in whatever strange form,
or through whatever messy and broken human agency.

So Jesus, God's provision in human flesh, said
*...the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven
and gives life to the world.'*
They said to him, 'Sir, give us this bread always.'
*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.*

So listen to yourself!
Examine your life,
in your dry and dusty desperation,
and be open to behold the surprises God has in store for you...
the flaky substance of God's strange provision
which will appear right under your nose
just when you think all is lost.

Then perhaps you, too,
will find your whining transformed into wonder...
...your griping into gratitude...
...your complaining tongue made speechless...
by the ample blessing
of our provident God.

¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *I Asked for Wonder: A Spiritual Anthology* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1983) 20.