

WESTMINSTER
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SERMON

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Stop Complaining

Dr. Jo Forrest

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After the Israelites received the covenantal laws, according to Exodus, they join their voices into a chorus of praise “we will do all these things.”

Shall we wager a guess on how long it took for them to forget that promise and start kvetching? In the timekeeping of the Ancient Near East, about a nanosecond.

They complain that they are thirsty. At God’s command, Moses strikes the rock and water gushed forth. The people crave meat. God delivers quails through the wind – better than DoorDash.

The people refuse to follow the path going through Canaan grumbling “We’ll find our own way to the Promised Land.”

The lectionary reading for today describes the final straw for God. In our Covenant Sermon Series, consider this story the sequel to covenantal law of the Ten Best Ways. It is a foundational story for us to understand the cross of Christ.

Rarely do we read from the Book of Numbers. It receives this name for the literal lists numbering the people by name and within tribes. Then it proceeds with page after page of complaints.

*We are tempted to come asking,
“What have you done for me lately, God”
But that’s not who we want to be.
We want to be the people who
mark your miracles, who
treasure your covenant, who*

*remember the promises you make and keep.
Help us to hear your voice in this story
Help us to accept the grace you offer.*

Numbers 21:4-9

⁴From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom, but the people became discouraged on the way.

⁵The people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.”

⁶Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died.

⁷The people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people.

⁸And the LORD said to Moses, “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” ⁹So Moses made a serpent of bronze and put it upon a pole, and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

Recently that yellow-nosed, red furry monster from *Sesame Street* asked an innocent question: “Elmo is just checking in! How is everybody doing?”

Among his 457,000 followers on social media, this question prompted a tsunami of complaints:

Elmo I’m depressed.

Elmo, I’m broke.

People complained about their misbehaving dog, anxiety of the upcoming presidential election, and the divisiveness in neighborhoods and families.

One poet wrote “Elmo each day the abyss we stare into grows a unique horror, one that was previously unfathomable in nature. Our inevitable doom which once accelerated in years, or months, now accelerates in hours, even minutes.” That same post concluded with: “However I did have a good grapefruit earlier, thank you for asking.”

Within days Elmo’s question was seen more than 140 million times. Later Elmo posted, “Wow! Elmo is glad he asked! Elmo learned it is important to ask a friend how they are doing.”

A professor of digital media at the University of Alabama comments,

Elmo is a “beloved childhood character that we associate with a simpler time in our lives. When Elmo pops back into the social-media feeds of adults facing burnout, inflation and a

complex geopolitical situation, many may find it hard not to vent about how their lives have changed.”¹

One person expressed relief in shared misery “Somehow this actually legit makes me feel better.”

Even though kvetching feels therapeutic, it typically isn’t. Despite temporary relief, complaining is bad for your happiness in the long run.

Arthur Brooks, is a Harvard professor who studies happiness. He notes that when researchers measured people’s mood before and after they complained, they found their moods deteriorated. And those who share negative emotions on social media—a very convenient place to complain these days—they experience even lower levels of well-being.

Sometimes, complaining pinpoints a specific problem, such as lousy service or an annoying family member. Complaining festers into chronic dissatisfaction when grumblers who ruminate on their woes refuse to be calmed.

Brooks concludes a list of examples of complaining with perhaps the most damaging – those complainers who seek a negative kind of solidarity with comments such as, “It’s just not as good as it used to be.” Or, “Don’t you think our boss is a jerk?”²

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/30/style/elmo-x-question.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare>

² Arthur Brooks, “The Happy Way to Drop Your Grievances,” *The Atlantic*, February 2024, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2024/02/complaining-grievance-stoicism-happiness/677521/>

All of this sounds like the Israelites, particularly that last idea.

Finally free from Pharaoh's enslavement and they complain. They complain about Moses. They complain about having nothing to eat and in the same breath they don't like the food.

It reaches a fever pitch when they complain about God.

Under the surface of all the complaining, the Israelites are afraid.

Fear leaks out of us in myriad ways. Rather than say, "I'm afraid," we might complain or get angry. Anger – that's easily thrown at someone else, causing more damage. Fear can also spiral into some paralyzing anxiety of constant worry.

So often in scripture before an angel delivers a task, they anticipate fear and will say, "do not be afraid" such as those encounters with Hagar, Samuel, Zechariah, or Mary. That might work in a one-on-one conversation.

In this wilderness situation, a simple "do not be afraid" would melt before the toxic fear brewing in the crowd.

The complaining about food and water, no place to safely live, death-dealing enemies, plagues, pestilence...all these hint at their fear of dying. After years of wandering in the wilderness, watching so many family members die, these survivors fear death.

Fear twists them into violating God's covenants. Their fear overshadows any trust in God.

The storytellers who composed the Book of Numbers describe a weird, mysterious, even gruesome, scene.

Scholars believe this book, along with the other covenantal books such as Genesis and Exodus, were composed around the time of the Babylonian captivity. The stories express the Israelite's struggle to understand the pain of exile and their relationship to God.

The priests who stitched together the scrolls saw within their old stories a new common theme: They had failed to trust the love of God. They had failed to trust the promises of God. They tell these stories to teach.

No doubt the Israelites encountered plenty of snakes while they wandered in the wilderness, but these snakes are different. These are the snakes that overrun God's people when self-reliance replaces dependence on God's grace, when complaints outrun gratitude, and when lies overshadow the light of God's love. And these snakes bite.³

³ Baron Mullis, "Fourth Sunday in Lent," *The Presbyterian Outlook*, February 26, 2024, https://pres-outlook.org/2024/02/fourth-sunday-of-lent-march-10-2024/?utm_source=Presbyterian+Outlook+Email+Updates&utm_campaign=337437c95c-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2021_10_18_01_23_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_b2a9be72d0-337437c95c-425944898&mc_cid=337437c95c&mc_eid=1b6e975768

Mortal danger opens the Israelites to confess their sin and ask Moses to pray to get rid of the snakes. God does something more life-giving. The snakes remain. Even if God removed these ankle biters, life always presents some risk. Instead, God instructs Moses to craft a symbol of their greatest fear, a fiery serpent, and tells the Israelites to stare at it.

God asks the Israelites to stare at death to learn to trust God with their lives. God takes the worst that could happen and turns it to the symbol of salvation.

The desert is a dangerous place.

Lent is a dangerous time. It begins on Ash Wednesday as we trace a cross on someone's forehead, look them in the eye, and remind them, "from dust you came and to dust you will return."

From that dark evening until the bright light of Easter morning, Lent challenges us to examine the content of our lives, face our mortality, and reorient our living to God's covenant as followers of Jesus.

The Gospel of John relies upon this arcane story in the Book of Numbers when a Pharisee comes to see Jesus in the dark of night.

Nicodemus asks, "We know you're a teacher from God. No one could do all the God-pointing, God-revealing acts you do without God."

Jesus answers, “You’re a respected teacher of Israel and you don’t know these basics? Listen carefully. I’m speaking truth to you....Yet instead of facing the evidence and accepting it, you procrastinate with questions.”

Jesus continues, “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loves the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

Nicodemus left that night but never left Jesus’ ministry. He followed along with the crowds. He listened. At one point, he even steps out to defend Jesus.

At the end of John’s gospel, Nicodemus appears again, staring at the cross from afar. He is the one who cradles Jesus body, and anoints it with a hundred pounds of myrrh, dignifying it with a Jewish burial suitable for a king. Maybe then he remembers the rest of what Jesus spoke during their first encounter.

“God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

Since the very beginning, God seeks to love us, not punish us. Perhaps we can learn from those who stared at death.

I imagine everyone in Pittsburgh remembers the last lecture from Randy Pausch before he died of cancer. This admired

CMU professor taught “problem solving beats complaining.” He said “I’m dying and having fun. Show gratitude. Don’t complain.”⁴

Entrepreneur Steve Jobs delivered the commencement address at Stanford University in the months before he died.

You have to trust in something... Remembering that I’ll be dead soon is the most important tool I’ve ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life ... It is Life’s change agent. It clears out the old to make way for the new. ⁵

Set aside time in Lent to settle into the reality of your life.

When we fall into the trap of thinking everything threatens us, everyone is against us, we can trust no one, even ourselves, and most of all, God, then we become afraid. We get angry. We complain. We start to make life hell for others.

Make amends with who you’ve been. Make changes to trust God, not as an insurance policy for the other side of the grave, but as the roadmap to a joyous life right now.

I’d like to take a moment of personal privilege. Since my mom died in late January, you’ve sent so many cards with tender notes. Thank you. Your care sustains me.

One person sought to sooth me by saying “she’s in a better place.” Mom’s death brought the only relief possible of her

⁴ <https://www.cs.cmu.edu/~pausch/Randy/pauschlastlecturetranscript.pdf>

⁵ <https://news.stanford.edu/2005/06/12/youve-got-find-love-jobs-says/>

final weeks in agony. There's something this person did not know about my mom. Long ago, she had framed an image of Jesus along with a penny minted in the year she was born.

Over the years it faded, the scotch tape yellowed, and the frame became blemished. The bottom of Jesus' image contained his words, "I am with you always, to the end of the age."

That's how she lived. Good days and those days that tried her soul, she never seemed to doubt. I believe because of her faith she lived in a better place on this side of the grave than any other way she might have conceived on her own.

God's grace is so irrational that it offends us before it saves us. When we make a mess, God doesn't punish, God loves us more.

It is by God's grace we become, formed from the dust of the ground, breathed into by God. By grace we live. Through the grace revealed in the cross of Christ, we become again.



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