

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI

“Grumbling Against God”

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“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 16)

Everybody grumbles. It’s part of what makes us human. We are wired to grumble, and it seems everybody’s doing more of it.

These last couple of weeks I’ve been monitoring my social interactions, keeping track of the grumbling. It’s been quite a revelation. I had grumbled . . . a lot. My kids had grumbled. My friends and coworkers had grumbled. Of course, there was tons of grumbling out on the golf course, and the tennis courts, and on a group bike ride. There was a group of older gentlemen having coffee one morning in a Madison cafe. It looked like one of those groups that meets regularly, maybe daily. Big time grumbling going on there!

I challenge you to keep track of your interactions with others, because I think you’ll be surprised too, as I was, to see how many of our conversations are composed of grumbling.

Much of the humor on T.V. is grumbling, because grumbling can be funny. And psychologists say one way we make friends is through grumbling. One person grumbles in an interesting way, and you respond with grumbling of your own. Normally we think of friendships as the fruit of shared interests, but many friendships are actually gumblepacts, friendships built on interesting and humorous grumbling.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the verb to grumble comes from the French verb *grommeler*, a verb that applies to animals, especially those that growl between their teeth. That is, there’s something animalistic about grumbling.

Though related to complaining and arguing, usually grumbling doesn’t involve as much reason and logic. It’s more of an animalistic snarl.

We live in a culture where everyone has a grievance about *something*. Some call it the “grievance culture.” And so, of course there would be more grumbling today, because we all have grievances, right? We’re all victims of something. Grumbling is a way of expressing those grievances when you don’t have all the logic and rationale worked out.

And this is important. Almost all grumbling suggests the superiority of the grumbler. When you grumble, you’re saying your opinions are superior, your wisdom higher, your decision making better. If I were in charge around here, I would do it this way.

When we grumble, we elevate ourselves above others, even God. When we grumble, we sow the seeds of resistance and rebellion against those in charge, even when it’s God.

Well, to our text which is all about the people of Israel grumbling in the desert. Eight times in just thirteen verses we see the word grumble, which is just remarkable, because not long before these people were slaves in Egypt. But with an outstretched arm the Lord freed them and made them his own people: the ten plagues, the pillar cloud by day and pillar of fire by night, the parting of the Red Sea, the destruction of the army of Pharaoh . . . all these miracles, one after another. They've done nothing to earn it; it's all generated by his mercy. But now they're starting to feel some hunger pains, and so they grumble.

I said earlier there's something animalistic about grumbling; it doesn't necessarily involve a whole lot of reason or logic. If they had just been a little more reasonable, they would have figured out that the One who saved them from captivity with all those miracles, probably didn't bring them out into the desert only to watch them starve. If he saved them from Pharaoh and his army, he's probably strong enough to save them from hunger. If he had plans for them earlier, he probably has plans for them now.

You recall earlier, Pharaoh wanted a sign from Moses showing he had God's authority to demand the freedom of the Israelites. So Moses threw down his staff in front of Pharaoh, and it became a snake. That should have been enough for Pharaoh. Nobody gets hurt and the people are released from slavery. But Pharaoh hardens his heart. So God goes to Plan B, the first plague, where Moses strikes the Nile river with the staff, and it turns into a river of blood. *That* should have been enough for Pharaoh. The fish die and the river stinks, but still, no Egyptian is hurt. But again, Pharaoh hardens his heart. So God goes to plan C, the frogs, then to plan D, the gnats, and plan E, the flies. Each plague a little harsher than the one before. You can see God is showing restraint, but Pharaoh is obstinate. So God ups the ante and sends a plague against Egyptian livestock, and then the plague of festering boils on the *people*, and still Pharaoh refuses to let God's people go. One after another, until the very worst, the plague of the firstborn males. Finally, Pharaoh is persuaded.

Now, if the Israelites had just paused to remember what God had already done for them, they would probably have figured out that God's not intending to kill them off in the desert. If God had all these earlier plans for them, it stands to reason he has additional plans for them, even an alphabet worth of contingency plans to deal with hunger and thirst and other obstacles. But grumbling isn't so reasonable and rational. It's more animalistic: a growling between the teeth. And you can see there's a little shared humor in their grumbling as well. "Were there not enough graves in Egypt that you had to bring us out here to die?" Some friendships, some grumble pacts are being made out there in the desert.

So also with us. Think of what God has done to save us. Think of the trouble he has gone through! That God's Son should take on human flesh, and suffer so much at the hands of wicked men; that he should even be flogged and crucified for us and our salvation . . . Does it really make sense he would, after all that, now abandon us? Do you really think the one who did all that doesn't really care whether or not you're thriving at work or in your most important relationships? If he had all those contingency plans in place for his people, don't you think he has contingency plans in place for you, when you lose a job, or your spouse, or your health? Think it through. Stop your grumbling against God, and put your trust in him.

Maybe you think you are not grumbling against God, just the situation, or the boss, or your spouse. Think again. In our text, the people thought they were grumbling against Moses

and Aaron. But Moses sets them straight. The Lord “has heard your grumbling against him – what are we? Your grumbling is not against us but against the LORD.”

That’s an important point. We may think we’re grumbling against others, but the Lord has good ears. He hears all of it, and to him it all sounds like ingratitude for the gifts he’s given. When we grumble about our work, or the rain, or the kids, or in-laws, or the doctor, or the cop, then we are grumbling about gifts God has given us, and there’s no way of doing that without also grumbling against the Giver of the gifts. In Numbers 14, after another spat of grumbling about their circumstances, the Lord asks, “How long will this people treat me with contempt?” (v. 11). “How long shall this wicked congregation grumble against me?” (v27).

Remember, when we grumble we’re setting ourselves up as superior over others. When we grumble, we’re wanting to be like God, just like Adam and Eve. Our snarling says, “If I were in charge around here, it would be much better.” We owe God our trust and gratitude, but instead, we set ourselves up in judgment over him, and plant the seeds of rebellion against him.

Did it strike you as it did me that though these people were grumbling against God, God still listens to them? He doesn’t turn a deaf ear to their noise. Verse 12, “I have heard the grumbling of the people of Israel.” He loves his people too much to ignore them! So he actually listens to their grumbling. They deserve to be ignored; they get the Lord’s ear instead. They deserve a spanking; they get manna. Verse 31 says it tasted like bread made with honey and coriander seed. Not so bad for those ingrates. What wonderful mercy he has on them! In effect, he chooses to hear their grumbling as prayer, and answers it graciously.

So also with us. Consider the remarkable possibility that your grumbling is ultimately against the Lord, and is a way of telling him you think you’d do a better job of being God than he is doing. And then consider the remarkable possibility that God hears your grumbling, and instead of ignoring you, or giving you what you deserve, he turns your grumbling into prayer, and answers your prayers. He has good ears and desires to bless, not to punish; to build up, not to destroy; to save, and not to condemn.

While we try to elevate ourselves above God with our grumbling, and plop ourselves in the judgment seat over God, our dear God responds by humbling himself, submitting to the punishment of our sin, even on a cross. Everybody around him is grumbling. The crowd is grumbling about how slow and reticent Pilate is to order his crucifixion. Pilate is grumbling about how relentless the religious authorities are. The soldiers are grumbling about having to do this bloody work. The religious authorities are grumbling about the sign Pilate posted over his head. The other two convicts are grumbling about why Jesus doesn’t use his power to save himself and their own skins while he’s at it. Everybody is grumbling. If there ever was a time to strike back, this would have been it. Instead, Jesus hears it all and prays, “Father, forgive them.”

Everybody grumbles. You do. I do. Everybody tries to elevate themselves above God with their grumbling. Everybody grumbles about the gifts God has given us. But the Lord continues to have mercy on us, and listens to our grumbling as if they were prayers.

He had plans for his people out there in the desert. He would see them through. And he has plans for you. He has brought you this far at great trouble and cost. He’s not going to abandon you now. Just as the people of Israel were not yet in the Promised Land, but still in the wilderness, you too are still in the wilderness of this world, and he has much greater things in mind for you. Thanks be to God!