

“Finally Free, the People Complained”
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 Old Stone Presbyterian Church ~ Lewisburg, West Virginia
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Psalm 105: 1 – 6, 37 – 45

- ¹ *O give thanks to the LORD, call on his name, make known his deeds among the peoples.*
² *Sing to him, sing praises to him; tell of all his wonderful works.*
³ *Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice.*
⁴ *Seek the LORD and his strength; seek his presence continually.*
⁵ *Remember the wonderful works he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he has uttered,*
⁶ *O offspring of his servant Abraham, children of Jacob, his chosen ones.*
- ³⁷ *Then he brought Israel out with silver and gold, and there was no one among their tribes who stumbled.*
³⁸ *Egypt was glad when they departed, for dread of them had fallen upon it.*
³⁹ *He spread a cloud for a covering, and fire to give light by night.*
⁴⁰ *They asked, and he brought quails, and gave them food from heaven in abundance.*
⁴¹ *He opened the rock, and water gushed out; it flowed through the desert like a river.*
⁴² *For he remembered his holy promise, and Abraham, his servant.*
⁴³ *So he brought his people out with joy, his chosen ones with singing.*
⁴⁴ *He gave them the lands of the nations, and they took possession of the wealth of the peoples,*
⁴⁵ *that they might keep his statutes and observe his laws. Praise the LORD!*

Exodus 16: 1 – 15

¹ *The whole congregation of the Israelites set out from Elim; and Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. ²The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. ³The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”*

⁴ *Then the LORD said to Moses, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. ⁵On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.” ⁶So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, “In the evening you shall know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, ⁷and in the morning you shall see the glory of the LORD, because he has heard your complaining against the LORD. For what are we, that you complain against us?” ⁸And 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.”*

⁹ *Then Moses said to Aaron, “Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, ‘Draw near to the LORD, for he has heard your complaining.’” ¹⁰And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud. ¹¹The LORD spoke to Moses and said, ¹²“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.’”*

¹³ *In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp.* ¹⁴ *When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground.* ¹⁵ *When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat.*

It seems, at first glance, a bit ungrateful that the Israelites are complaining. They have, after all, just been liberated. God has taken them from slavery and their first stop is an oasis.

Literally. Elim, another proper noun of a place, with springs and palms.¹

But then they leave that and travel into the wilderness of Sin. Don't read too much into this name.² This is not a punishment, but it is a place of wilderness, where things are not easy.

It is here they are hungry.

It's the very first bump in the road, and they complain to Moses and Aaron about it. They grumble and mumble their outrage, and all of them doing it together creates quite a stir.

And at first glance, it seems a bit ungrateful.

It's been almost thirty years since the movie "Steel Magnolias" was released.³ The movie was filmed in Louisiana, and the Christmas scenes were filmed in August. It was hot. Not pleasant. And there was a decent amount of complaining about the heat. Shirley MacLane remembers, it was really hot. There was Dolly with a waist cincher no more than sixteen inches around and heels about two feet high and a wig that must have weighed twenty-three pounds. And she's the only one who ... never complained about anything. Never. Julia Roberts, finally, turned to Dolly and said, "Dolly, we're dying and you never say a word. Why don't you let loose?" Dolly very serenely smiled and said, "When I was young and had nothing, I wanted to be rich and famous, and now I am. So I'm not going to complain about anything."

And I'll admit. In addition to making me love Dolly Parton even more, that's kind of how I feel about the Israelites.

Except. Except. When we remember that these are not a whole people. These are a broken people. They have been enslaved for generations. Their how-to-live-life-in-a-free-world

¹ <http://biblehub.com/hebrew/362.htm>

² <http://biblehub.com/hebrew/5512.htm>

³ Julia Reed, "Thirty Years of Steel Magnolias: The untold story of what would become one of the most beloved touchstones of Southern culture." *Garden & Gun Magazine*, April/May 2017.
<http://gardenandgun.com/feature/thirty-years-of-steel-magnolias/>

muscles have, literally, never been used. They don't know what it is to trust and follow God for everything that they need in the open air.

Subjugation and disenfranchisement is not a get-over-in-one-generation kind of thing. It takes time. Lots of time. And most of us don't have the patience for it.

Add to that the plagues and the miraculous way in which they escaped, and their anger begins to take on a new perspective.

It turns out, this is a thing that has been studied. As the flood waters of Harvey began to recede I listened to an interview with a former government official who had worked with some of the recent recovery efforts here in the United States. She said, that it's quite normal for there to be overwhelming joy in the first days. Joy in surviving. Joy in just being alive. But, in a few days, the chaos and realization about what the road ahead will require, and despair takes a seat at the table. And anger, too. Why wasn't this prevented? Why weren't we better protected? Even when the people in charge aren't making any mistakes and even when they are doing their best, it's more than most people can handle.⁴

Given this context, the Israelites begin to make more sense. They are hungry. And this is scary. And even though they likely don't realize it will take them 40 years to learn the lessons God has for them, they can tell it's going to be a big change.

I suspect it's difficult for most of us to relate to just how disorienting this must have been for the Israelites.

Greg Taylor⁵ spent seventeen years in prison for a crime he did not commit. He maintained his innocence from the beginning, but was only after seventeen years in prison that technology and justice caught up to truth. He was exonerated and released. And, in his words, "It was so exhilarating, but overall it was the release of all of that frustration and confusion I felt for 6149 days"

After he was released his daughter picked him up and took him to the celebratory dinner for his family and supporters.

At the dinner, they gave him a cell phone and tried to teach him how to use it. But Greg says he was focused on something else. Trying to remember how to use a fork. They'd only had sporks in prison. And not only the fork, there was conversation. People trying to make eye-contact. For seventeen years he'd been afraid, and now, in the span of one day,

⁴ Pod Save America, August 31, 2017

⁵ http://www.themonti.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/Podcast-Episode-50_Greg-Taylor.mp3
<http://www.wral.com/news/local/story/8278988/>

he was supposed to do the very things that he had avoided for seventeen years in order to survive.

When Greg told his story to a live audience a few years ago, he admitted that being released has been exciting and joyful, but it's also been challenging. "there's been some issues," he said.

And for him, food was a big deal. Choices were a big deal. Too big of a deal.

In those first few weeks at his daughter's house he would get hungry and go to the refrigerator to eat, something he imagined would be amazing, but when he would open the refrigerator, he said

"you've got all of these items and
you got the choices of the items and
what to put on the items and
items mixed with items
and how to prepare the items and
how to eat the items
and which utensils and all that
and it just went on through my mind until finally I shut the refrigerator door and I wasn't even hungry anymore. Eventually I just learned how to make and eat peanut butter and jelly sandwich and give thanks."

At one point, he even describes this process of adjustment as feeling lost.

Feeling lost.

"Freedom's great [he said], you know, I think I just forgot was freedom was.... It's just something I lost in there that couldn't be retrieved as easy as picking up a bag of personal belongings and taking it home. And it's scary."

Maybe the Israelites complaining, their grumbling and mumbling makes a bit more sense when you look at it through their eyes.

And maybe, manna in the wilderness seems like an awfully boring diet to survive on, but maybe the consistency of their menu and lack of choice was a gift in those early days of freedom when the road ahead might just have seemed overwhelming and scary to them, too.

But where they are, where we are, also raises a few questions. God had promised to take care of them. God had promised to take care of them. God had demonstrated that he was with them.

Why was it so difficult to trust that?

Why do so many of us hold tight to scarcity when abundance is God's vision and plan for us?

Focused on these chapters in Exodus, Biblical scholar and theologian Walter Brueggemann writes:⁶

In answer to the people's fears and complaints, something extraordinary happens. God's love comes trickling down in the form of bread. They say, "Manhue?" -- Hebrew for "What is it?" -- and the word "manna" is born. They had never before received bread as a free gift that they couldn't control, predict, plan for or own. The meaning of this strange narrative is that the gifts of life are indeed given by a generous God. It's a wonder, it's a miracle, it's an embarrassment, it's irrational, but God's abundance transcends the market economy.

The conflict between the narratives of abundance and of scarcity is the defining problem confronting us..... The gospel story of abundance asserts that we originated in the magnificent, inexplicable love of a God who loved the world into generous being. The baptismal service declares that each of us has been miraculously loved into existence by God. And the story of abundance says that our lives will end in God, and that this well-being cannot be taken from us. In the words of St. Paul, neither life nor death nor angels nor principalities nor things -- nothing can separate us from God.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if [we who love to quarrel] came to a common realization that the real issue confronting us is whether the news of God's abundance can be trusted in the face of the story of scarcity? ...People of God counter this tale by witnessing to the manna. There is a more excellent bread than crass materialism. It is the bread of life and you don't have to bake it...

....The text shows that the power of the future is not in the hands of those who believe in scarcity and monopolize the world's resources; it is in the hands of those who trust God's abundance.

Do we trust God's abundance?

Do you?

Do I?

It's hard. In this world where more and more of us live paycheck to paycheck. Where we are told about the rising costs of health care and college tuition and we see the way in which a failure to plan can result in the flood waters rising above our heads.

⁶ Walter Brueggemann, "The liturgy of abundance, the myth of scarcity." *The Christian Century*, March 24-31, 1999.

God's call here isn't from fearful stewardship to no stewardship, it's about faithful stewardship in which we lean into God's abundance. And have our lives demonstrate just what it means to trust that it will be okay.

Not that nothing will ever happen to us. Not that nothing bad will ever happen. Not that nothing good will never happen. But that no matter what happens, we will be okay, because God is with us.

If the relationship does crumble. If the diagnosis comes back cancer. If the grade is not the one you worked for. If the friend doesn't show up where you needed them. If the child goes in a direction you know leads to pain.

God is with us.

And in good times God is the first to celebrate.

In bad God is the first to weep.

God is with you. And it will be okay. Because in this life and the next, it is always and only the love of God that puts everything in its proper place.

It will be okay.

Even on days when fear threatens to take the day.

As Greg Taylor concluded: "And it's scary. But I've been scared before. That I was going to live the rest of my life with no reason, no purpose. So... I'm scared now, but I can handle it. Especially if it means not having to miss another day of life."

Friends. No matter where you are, oasis or wilderness or somewhere in-between. Trust the God of abundance. The God who loves you. The God who gives us these days to live. Each and every one of them.

Thanks be to God. Amen.