

## **“STILL GRUMBLING AFTER ALL THESE YEARS”**

Exodus 17:1-7; Matthew 21:23-32

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The book of Exodus is formative of Israel’s identity as a people—and indeed of our history and identity as Christians—recounting the holy history of God’s dramatic act of delivering them from slavery in Egypt. After the Passover and crossing of the Red Sea, God leads the people through a forty-year period of wandering in the wilderness, a time of testing and solidifying their community. While God tests the people, they also—at times—put God (and God’s servant, Moses) to the test. Our passage follows directly after the story of God’s provision of manna to the Israelites in the wilderness. In this passage, too, the people appear not to have developed much trust in God’s providence from the gift of the manna. And so they begin complaining to Moses that he has brought them out of Egypt only to kill them, this time by thirst rather than hunger.

There was traffic as far as the eye could see. Interstate 5 was backed up because of some accident, some construction, something; and, at the time, all I could think about was that something was causing me to be stuck on that section of the freeway when I had better places to be. Oh, and then there was the sign: it simply read, “SPEED LIMIT 70 MPH”: and as I sat there, I became pretty well convinced that it was placed there simply to mock me. All this happened as we were just outside of Chehalis, Washington, last week. And as I sat there, watching minute after minute slowly creep by on the dashboard clock, my frustration began to build. “What on earth is happening up there?” “Come on, people, let’s go. . .” “This is ridiculous; I don’t have time for this.” And so it went. I’m sure Shauna and Grace grew tired of my questions and comments about something that was so completely out of our hands. Looking back, I am sure I was grumpier than I should have been about a traffic jam; and I know it didn’t make the trip go any faster. Finally, after nearly an hour and a half, we did begin to move again; and since I am standing here today, you know my fears of spending the rest of my life stuck outside of Chehalis never came to pass. My reaction to that traffic jam is ridiculous, really, as I look back on it; but at that moment, I tell you Oliver Stone and I had concocted a pretty convincing conspiracy theory that explained why this traffic jam was happening to me. And so, I have compassion for the Israelites as they grew thirsty and frustrated as they wandered in the wilderness. It is so easy to become disillusioned and to begin to see things only through our own eyes. As I sat on I-5, grumpy and complaining, how many people were sitting on the interstates in Texas, running from Hurricane Rita? Then my own traffic jam seems so small. Why did this traffic jam happen to me? Why am I still thirsty? There really isn’t much difference is there? Moses named one of the places Meribah, which meant “to quarrel,” as a response to the fear, anger, and doubt that the Israelites manifested in the wilderness. They had their water; but so, too, they also had a marker of their doubt and anger. I wonder what “Chehalis” means? Probably something to do with “patience” or “quarrelling.”

Another story. This one can sometimes be a little emotionally raw for me, so bear with me. It was my first year in seminary, January 2000. Shauna and I had spent New Year’s Eve bundled up on the rooftop of one of the seminary apartments drinking sparkling cider as we watched

fireworks explode to the west at the Berkeley marina and across the bay in San Francisco. To the south we could see the fireworks in Oakland. Just to the north we could see the Marin County fireworks and the fireworks of Richmond. It was quite breathtaking, and as everyone around us opened champagne and wine, we merely sipped that sparkling cider and smiled and laughed about the year that was yet to come. It was early; too early to tell people. But that night we were celebrating much more than New Year's; we were celebrating a baby who was coming into our lives. It was perfect; I had made it to seminary, Shauna had a good job, and we soon would be parents. Things were falling into place. It was just as it was supposed to be. And then, less than a month later the ultrasound told us that something was horribly wrong. And then there was that word: "miscarriage." And then the others: "I'm sorry." "This happens to many people." And then the testing began: not medical testing, but the testing of God. It happened with tears, with screaming on the beach at the Berkeley marina, with quiet moments, as I bypassed chapel services because I could not listen to songs of praise that week. "God, I went into seminary; I am doing what you wanted. Why? God, if you cared, if you were real, if you loved me, if you have any power at all. . .don't let this happen. God, we want a baby. . .listen to me. . .give it to us. Let it happen; you must, or else you aren't really there. . .you aren't really the compassionate God I have talked about. What do you want from me? I'll do it. . .if only you let us have a child."

As I look back on it, I call it a "cosmic bargain" that I was trying to make with God: How about if I do this (go to seminary, tithe, volunteer in the community, etc.). . . Then what will you do for me, God? I was doing my best "Godfather" impression, trying to find an offer that God could not refuse; and so I ended up angrier and angrier and I yelled louder and louder. I realize now that late in January 2001, I arrived at Massah with a whole litany of test questions for God. Massah looked a lot like Berkeley, but it was Massah for me and for God, together. I know I am not the only one who participates in the practice of cosmic bargaining. What kind of offer did you make to God when you lost your job? What about when your relationship was crumbling? Do you attempt to bargain with God when your child simply won't listen to a thing you say? "Please God, just hear me, just answer my prayer. . .I'll give you anything."

And that is precisely the offer that the Israelites gave to God through Moses. Our faith tradition takes us through a long line of grumbling people; people who paint God into some incredibly tight corners and then expect God to react to us without malice or anger. And what did God do in this circumstance, for the ungrateful Israelites, the ones who should still be full with manna, yet still find time to complain about their plight? Simple. God gave them water. Even though it is obvious from our scripture passage that their behavior did not warrant such a gift, God presented them with the water they needed. And, thus, we see who God is: the contrast between the grumbling and complaining of Israel, and the response of God, is nothing short of dramatic. There is no punishment or threat toward those who grumble with such bitterness. Moses is exasperated, but God simply offers cool life-sustaining water to the Israelites. And it is in the giving of the water that much about God is revealed. This is a parable—as poignant as any that Jesus offered—of God's grace. In this parable, God's patient grace is being revealed to the still emerging nation of Israel and, indeed, to us, as we read and reflect on this passage.

And so there we have it: God will provide and all is well. Although the Israelites did, indeed, find their thirst quenched, that is not the point. In fact, I think that is why Moses made a point of

naming the place: to remember Israel testing and quarrelling with God. The gift of God's grace is the most important thing that is offered to the Israelites—not the water. Sure, the water took away their thirst, which was their immediate need. But God's prophet, Moses, and God's protection, kept them alive then and always. And that is precisely the point of remembering what happened in the wilderness. It was not a natural element or a commodity that saved the Israelites; it was God. So it is with us that we have to remember not to "commodify," if you will, our relationship with God. That is, we cannot make God into merely the provider of things and call that salvation. God, please give me a job, a house, a family, and I will follow you. Commodities surround us every day and give us a great deal of pleasure and ease. Thus, it is easy to begin to see that God has somehow given them to us; and, thus, we are blessed. But the whole point of this passage is to say that it isn't the things you are given or the business ventures that are successful that announce that God is present. It is God's grace that announces that we are loved and protected and cared for beyond all our understanding. And so, those cosmic bargains, all that energy spent grumbling, all that frustration—none of it matters, not one single bit—because it does nothing to change who God is. It does nothing to change the fact that God is there at the peak moments of our lives—celebrating it all with us; and, indeed, God is there in the darkest and saddest moments, too. God's grace supersedes it all—even through our grumbles and complaints. It's beautiful, really: completely undeserved, and yet given freely to all of us. Through our grumbles, our attempts to bargain—through it all—God's grace remains present always. As we visit Massah and Meribah, what more can we ask?