

“A God Who Hears Complaints”

Exodus 16:2-15

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Prayer: O God, let the truth of your Word feed our minds and hearts that we may be strengthened in our faith journey. Amen.

A story tells of a monk who joined a monastery and took a vow of silence. Ten years of complete silence pass. His superior calls him into the office and tells him that, as a reward for keeping his vow, he may speak two words. He asks the monk if there is anything he would like to say.

“Food bad,” the monk says. And he goes back to silence.

Another ten years pass. The superior calls him into the office again. Again, he lets the monk speak two words.

“Bed hard,” the monk says. Then he goes back to silence.

Another ten years go by—thirty years total now. The monk is called into the office for the third time and is given two more words.

“I quit,” the monk says.

The superior looks at him and says, “That doesn’t surprise me one bit. You’ve done nothing but complain since you got here!”

And the Israelites weren’t much different. They had a habit of looking at what was going wrong and forgetting what God had already done for them. From the moment they left Egypt, there always seemed to be something else to complain about.

You know the Exodus story. God delivers the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. But they have barely left Egypt when they find themselves trapped between the Sea of Reeds (traditionally called the Red Sea) and Pharaoh’s army in hot pursuit.

With their backs to the sea and the Egyptians closing in, the Israelites panic. They turn to Moses and complain, “Why did you bring us out here to die?”

Moses says, “Don’t be afraid. Stand your ground, and watch the Lord rescue you today” (Exod. 14:13).

And God does. God parts the waters, and the Israelites walk across on dry ground.

You’d think that would build their faith. But within days, they were complaining again—this time because they had no water.

Again, God provides. God leads them to an oasis.

Refreshed and ready to go, they continue in their journey through the wilderness. But it doesn’t take long before they run into another problem.

And that’s where we pick up the story this morning in Exodus 16. The Israelites are roughly a month into their journey. They have reached the wilderness of Sin, a very dry and sandy region in the southwestern part of the Sinai Peninsula. They are tired. They’re frightened. And they’re hungry. Once again, they begin to grumble against Moses and Aaron.

“Why didn’t God let us die in comfort in Egypt, where we had lamb stew and all the bread we could eat?”

“All the bread we could eat.” It sounds almost like they are remembering Egypt as some kind of all-you-can-eat buffet. Of course, it wasn’t. They were slaves in Egypt. But hunger has a way of changing how we remember things.

It’s easy to judge the Israelites, but let’s be honest: when we’re hurting and facing uncertainty, we lose perspective, too. Something goes wrong, and suddenly it’s hard to remember all the things God has brought us through before. When we’re scared about what comes next, yesterday’s blessings can feel very far away.

And for the Israelites, their hunger was real. This wasn’t just complaining for the sake of complaining. They were in the wilderness. They didn’t know where their next meal was coming from.

If you have ever watched your children go to bed hungry, you know that’s serious.

But here's the surprising thing about this passage. God doesn't tell them to stop complaining. God doesn't say, "After everything I've done for you, this is how you respond?"

Instead, God hears their cries. God listens to their complaints. And notice how often the passage says that God hears them. Again and again, we are told that God hears their complaint. (16:7–9, 12).

Maybe that's hard for us to believe. We sometimes think that we have to clean ourselves up before we come to God. We think we have to get our acts together, get our attitudes right, find the right words, or make ourselves sound more faithful than we really are.

But the Israelites don't do that. They complain. They grumble. They tell God, in effect, "We don't understand what you're doing. We're hungry. We're afraid. We don't know what's going to happen to us." And God hears them.

Maybe that's where we are right now. The good news is that we can tell God we're tired. You can tell God you don't understand.

You can even tell God that you feel forgotten. Abandoned. Or even angry with God. And you know what? God can handle our complaints.

Remember Jesus on the cross? He cries out, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" (Psalm 22:1; Mark 15:34). Jesus doesn't hide his anguish from God. He cries out. And so can we.

There are times when we don't have a neat prayer to offer. We have a question. We have a complaint. That's all we've got.

Like the psalmist in pain,

*How much longer will you forget me, LORD? Forever?
How much longer will you hide yourself from me?
How long must I endure trouble? (Ps. 13:1-2)*

So perhaps we don't need to fear our complaints, even when our anger is directed at God. As Franciscan priest Pat McClosky notes in his book *When You Are Angry with God*, the real danger isn't anger itself; it's suppressing it: "When I am angry at God—for whatever reason—the worst

thing I can do is to deny that feeling or allow someone else to shame me into silence.”¹ So, yes, we can bring those things honestly into God's presence. We can because God isn't intimidated by our complaints.

And maybe that's part of what this passage invites us to practice—not just knowing that we can be honest with God, but actually taking the things that are weighing on us and bringing them to the Lord.

So here's something you might want to try this week. Find a quiet time by yourself. Tell God honestly what troubles you, what frightens you, or what disappoints you.

Then, before you finish, remember one time when God helped you through something before.

Then ask God for what you need today. Maybe it's grace. Maybe it's courage. Maybe it's simply enough strength to get through the day.

And then sit quietly for a moment. Take a breath. And remind yourself: God hears me. I am not alone.

You don't need to solve anything in those few minutes. You don't even need to feel better. Just bring your complaint to God.

Because that's what we see in this story. The wilderness is real. The hunger is real. Uncertainty and fear are real.

But so is God's presence. So is Jesus's promise to be with us to the end of the age (Matt. 28:20).

Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ Pat McCloskey, *When You Are Angry with God* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 10.