

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
August 5, 2018
Exodus 16:2-15
“Grumbling”

I'd like to tell you that I just can't understand the Israelites in this Old Testament lesson. The problem is that I understand them all too well.

The people of Israel are in the wilderness, and they're grumbling. They're grumbling because they're hungry. As they note, they're not in Egypt anymore, where they used to have lots to eat as they gathered around the loaves of bread and the pots of meat cooking over the fire. That's what they say to Moses, though they conveniently leave out the part where they were slaves. They fail to mention the hard labor and the cruelty of Pharaoh. They fail to mention the part where Pharaoh decreed that their newborn sons must be murdered. No, they've conveniently forgotten all the bad parts about Egypt, and they're focused on the food they used to eat.

Well, okay. I can understand that. People get tired, worn out, burnt out. So after a few years of wandering around the desert, I can understand it if the gripe count starts to climb. But this isn't after a few years of wandering in the desert. This is Exodus 16. In Exodus 14, God parted the Red Sea and led them across on dry land, then drowned Pharaoh and his army. In Exodus 15, the people sang their praises to the Lord, for He had triumphed valiantly: He'd thrown both horse and rider into the sea, thus rescuing His people. This is Exodus 16, the next chapter. The people aren't worn out from years of wandering. The Red Sea is recent history. But rather than rely on the Lord, they adopt a short-sighted, what-have-you-done-for-me-lately attitude and grumble: "Would that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger" (Exodus 16:3).

So soon after the Lord's mighty miracle at the Red Sea, they're convinced that He's going to let them die. We note a few things about the Israelites, because they're uncomfortably way too much like sinners today...like us today.

For one thing, they're incredibly short-sighted. Rather than remember the Passover and the Red Sea, and thus remember God's promises to deliver them, they've forgotten all of that in the face of the current crisis. Forget those promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob about them being a chosen people. Forget the fact that the Lord has brought them out of Egypt and that the Promised Land awaits them and their descendants. Forget those promises of the world's Messiah to be born through their nation. Right now, they're hungry; and for sinners, that's reason enough to doubt the Lord's care.

For another, they don't pick their fight with God: they blame Moses and Aaron. Part of it is that people want to point to the problem, and Moses and Aaron are standing right there. Part of it is that they don't want to pick a fight with God—therefore, it must be the fault of these men who have gotten them into this predicament. And part of it—maybe—is that they think that they're

providing God with an “out,” thinking maybe God will blame Moses and Aaron, too. It doesn’t make sense, I know: but I’ve met people like that, and I’m simply suggesting.

To put it mildly, the people of Israel do not acquit themselves well in this text. Things weren’t better in Egypt: they were slaves being worked to death. The Lord has kept His promise and rescued them, and so they’re grumbling that He’s doing a fairly crummy job: in fact, they’re saying that Moses and Aaron have brought them into the wilderness to die.

How does the Lord respond? He is displeased with these grumbling people—but they are still His people, and He’s promised to be faithful and to bless the world through them. He tells Moses that He will send the food—meat in the evening and bread in the morning. He will provide, and this provision will also serve as a test to see how well they walk in His Law: He specifies that they are to gather no more of the heavenly bread than they need for a day; except on the sixth day, when they are to gather a two-day supply.

Furthermore, as He promises this bread, the Lord is present with those people. He comes to them in His cloud of glory to relay this promise to Moses. He doesn’t withdraw because of their grumbling, because they are still His people.

That night, quail land in the camp: the people eat meat. The following morning, when the dew lifts, a heavenly bread—fine as frost—is on the ground for the people to eat. “Manna?” they ask; or, in English, “What is it?” Moses tells them, “It is the bread that Yahweh has given you to eat” (Exodus 16:15).

The Lord remains faithful. He provides what is needed to keep the people alive on the way to the Promised Land. How do the people do? You can read about it in the verses following our lesson: they fail the test. Some of them gather more manna than they need for the day, contrary to God’s command, and they find it rots before they can eat it. Some of them fail to gather twice as much on the sixth day, contrary to God’s command, and so they go hungry on the seventh day.

The people fail the test. But the Lord keeps giving them bread.

This miracle in Exodus 16 is more than the Lord’s provision to keep the Israelites fed in the wilderness: it points to Jesus. In our Gospel lesson this week, the people say to Jesus, “Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat’” (John 6:31). He’s just fed five thousand men with five loaves and two fish, but they want more proof that He’s the Messiah. So Jesus tells them plainly, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst” (John 6:35). He tells them that He is someone better than Moses and something better than manna. He’s the long-awaited Savior. He’s come to deliver them from this wilderness, this sinful world. He’s come to deliver them to the Promised Land of heaven. What great news!

And how do the people respond? You'll hear about it in the upcoming Gospel lessons. They grumble. They don't like the way Jesus is going about saving them. They want Him to be different. By the end of John 6, many—if not most—of those following Jesus have left Him.

The people fail. But the Lord doesn't. He keeps His promise, holds to His Father's will, and goes to the cross to die for the sins of the world. Their sins. Your sins.

You and I are the same sinful flesh as the people of Exodus 16 and John 6. While the Lord faithfully promises forgiveness to you and me, you'll be tempted to grumble about how He goes about it. The devil will tempt you in all sorts of ways.

For one, remember how soon the people grumbled after crossing the Red Sea; and beware of the mountaintop experience. Or at least, beware of the day after. We speak in our society of emotional highs and lows. We look forward to the emotional highs—and every now and then, things come together just right to give us a rare perfect day, a mountaintop experience. There may be nothing wrong with such a time, and for such wonderful memories we give thanks to God. However, the devil will tempt us to dissatisfaction: you'll want every ordinary day to live up to a mountaintop experience. And when it doesn't, you'll find yourself grumbling that your life isn't all that it could be.

For example: music concerts were big when I was in high school. They still are today, of course. I would sometimes go to a youth gathering and there would be a concert; now, there's something about singing or moving with lots of other people that makes for a powerful emotional high. There's not necessarily anything wrong with that. But after such a mountaintop evening, church on Sunday morning would seem far less powerful emotionally. Could God really be at work in His Word and Sacraments, when it didn't feel nearly as powerful as the concert a night or two before? At such times, I found fault with church because it was boring. Ha, there I go like the people of Israel who grumbled against Moses and Aaron. Truth is that, when I was grumbling about the church, I was grumbling against the Lord. But the Lord was still faithful.

So beware the mountaintop experience and the temptations that follow. The Israelites had just been saved by the Lord parting the Red Sea. Now they were grumbling against Him. You'll face the same temptation, too.

Another temptation: like the Israelites of Exodus 16, you'll long for captivity at times. Living as a new creation in Christ can be so inconvenient. Some of the activities of your old sinful nature were fun: like gossip, laughing at a dirty joke, going along with the crowd. There's the temptation to immorality and filling your mind with trash or turning a blind eye to the immorality of others. The pull of your sinful nature is strong: like the Israelites of Exodus 16, you'll want to be one set free who gets to keep souvenirs from your past as a slave to sin. But those activities of your old sinful nature were part of your slavery to sin, and you've been delivered from that. As Paul writes in Romans 6, "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?" (Romans 6:1-2). You can't be a slave and free at the same time. To return to willful sin is to

reject the grace and freedom Christ has won for you. And even when you resist the temptations, you'll find yourself grumbling at times that the Lord doesn't let you "have any fun."

A third temptation: like the Israelites of old, you may grumble at times at the Lord's means of deliverance. For them, it involved waiting for arrival at the Promised Land. In the meantime, it meant a daily gathering of the bread that the Lord gave them to eat. They didn't like the wait, and they didn't like the bread. They grumbled about it more than once. Rather than give thanks to God for the means of salvation, they found fault instead. Likewise, the Lord tells you that the Promised Land is coming—the Promised Land of the recreated heaven and earth, for Jesus' sake. In the meantime, He bids you to a daily feeding of His Word. He calls you to a frequent partaking of His Supper. He calls you to these things because that is where He gives you forgiveness, life and salvation. You and I will be tempted to grumble that the Lord is taking up too much of our time with His Word and Sacrament, when we have so many other things to do.

One more temptation: part of the sinful nature is that we always want a reason to grumble. God gives a loving spouse, and we focus on faults. The Lord provides house and home, and we focus on the amenities it doesn't have. The devil hates contentment, because contentment goes with thankfulness to God and trust in Him to provide. You'll always be tempted to grumble about what you don't have, rather than give thanks for what you do.

Grumble, grumble, grumble. Human nature hasn't changed since Exodus 16. In so many ways, we still fail the test.

Here's the good news: The Lord is still faithful. When His people grumbled against Him in Exodus 16, He didn't turn away and leave them to fend for themselves. He'd promised to deliver them to the Promised Land, and to deliver the Savior of the world through them. The people failed the test—later on, Israel completely rejected the Lord and turned to false gods instead. But the Lord kept His promises, and in His time the Savior was born.

When the Savior, Jesus Christ, declared to the people in John 6 that He is the Bread of Life, many grumbled. They didn't believe. They stopped following Him and went away. But He remained faithful. He kept His promise, went to the cross and gave His life as a ransom for many. Rather than grumble about the thanklessness He received, instead He prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

That's your hope. Though you fail the test, the Lord is faithful.

He went to that cross for you. He's called you to be His own in Holy Baptism—made you His own child. Parents don't throw young children out of the house whenever they grumble: they continue to train them and provide for them. The Lord does the same for you, but far more righteously. He does not cast you aside for your grumbling. Instead, by His Law He warns you that your discontent is a temptation to lead you back to sin and death. By His Gospel, He declares that He has died for your sin, sins of grumbling and discontent included. By His Supper,

He still comes to be present to provide for you, though not in a cloud of glory. Your Savior, the Bread of Life, comes to you in bread and wine, so that you might never hunger or thirst again. For your salvation, He is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat.

Dear friends, beware of grumbling. It is a common sin that denies all the good that God does for us, made even worse by the truth that we deserve nothing good in the first place. But though you grumble, the Lord does not grumble against you. He calls you to repentance, that you might receive His grace and life. He does not fail the test, for He has conquered even death and grave so that He might tell you that He has forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.