

What is it?
Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15

“What is it?”

That’s what I asked Christen as I pulled the bottle of brown liquid from the refrigerator door and held it out to her.

It had a label that read “Coconut Aminos,” but I still had no idea what it was.

It turns out that it’s a soy sauce substitute that’s less salty and better for you than soy sauce. It also turned out that I’d been eating it in our meals for weeks, and had no idea – which was a bit of a wake-up call that I’d unintentionally put too much of the cooking responsibility on Christen lately.

“What is it?”

In biblical Hebrew, it’s a pun. It’s literally *man hū*, or as our ears are used to hearing it, manna – and it means, “What is it?”

As a pastor, I have to say, this is not one of my favorite Bible stories – not because of how it ends, but because of how it *begins*. You remember how it begins, don’t you? It begins by saying:

“The whole congregation *complained* against Moses and Aaron” (Exodus 16:2). That’s right. The story of the miraculous bread from heaven that we have come to call manna starts with... a dad-gum complaint box.

You know, instead of “complain,” other translations use “murmur” or “grumble,” but I don’t think it would be a terribly inaccurate translation of that particular Hebrew word to simply use “whine.”

I mean, they had been on this exodus journey for less than three months, and already they were *whining*. It’s like the trope of a bad family road trip!

“Mom, Johnny won’t stop touching me!”

“I’m hungry...”

“Are we there yet?”

And the thing is, it has only been two chapters since God parted the Red Sea and delivered the Israelites from centuries of slavery. Their clothes are still damp from the water when they start whining!

Think about it. It took two whole chapters for the Israelites to go from liberated people to whiny children in the back seat of the car, asking, “*Are we there yet? Are there yet? I’m hungry... Are we there yet?*”

I like the way pastor, Jason Micheli, puts it when he says, “I mean, really? All it takes is the munchies for their Bob Marley ‘Exodus’ song to turn Janet Jackson, circa 1986: ‘What have you done for me lately?’”

Hadn’t they seen enough yet? Hadn’t they witnessed enough of God’s power?

The book of Exodus is forty chapters long. We’re at the start of chapter 16 – not even half way through the book – and already we have witnessed: the burning bush, the ten plagues, and the parting of the Red Sea, not to mention the very presence of God leading them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

Hadn’t God’s done enough for them to prove that God wouldn’t fail them? And yet, they grumble, they murmur, they *complain*.

When I read this story about the Israelites and their endless list of gripes, I want to read them an excerpt of one of Rudy Francisco’s poems, called “Complainers.” It goes:

“On May 26th, 2003,
Aaron Ralston was hiking,
a boulder fell on his right hand,
he waited four days,
he then amputated
his own arm with a pocketknife.

On New Year’s Eve,
a woman was bungee jumping,
the cord broke,
she fell into a river
and had to swim back to land
in crocodile-infested waters
with a broken collarbone.

Claire Champlin was smashed in the face
by a five-pound watermelon
being propelled from a slingshot.

Matthew Brobst was hit by a javelin.

David Striegl was actually
punched in the mouth by a kangaroo.

The most amazing part of these stories

is when asked about the experience
they all smiled, shrugged and said
'I guess things could've been worse.'

So go ahead,
tell me you're having a bad day..."

It's easy to look down on complainers, isn't it?

But, I suspect that we all take our turn at the complaint box from time to time. I know I have – and, frankly, it's been a bit of problem lately.

It snowed last week... in September. I *hated* it. I had to pull in all the potted flowers and cover the tomatoes. I had to empty the water hoses and check the furnace. It threw off my exercise routine, too, and the dogs were nuts because they didn't get their morning run.

The sun didn't shine for what seemed like a couple of weeks, at least. And my hands and fingers – all of which have been broken – don't handle the cold well any more. I lose feeling in them and can barely hold my pen or my fork. Speaking of forks, ours are old now – a gift from our wedding 18 years ago. Many of them have been chewed up by going down handle first into the garbage disposal. Now they feel jagged when you hold them. It ruins the whole eating experience.

And, I haven't been sleeping well. I'm either too hot at night or too cold (because of the aforementioned snow). But even when I am comfortable, my sleep has been fitful at best. I've been having these terrible dreams – always different variations of the same theme: I'm all alone in a terrifyingly dangerous situation.

Sometimes I'm sailing all alone in the middle of the ocean when a horrific storm rolls in on me. Sometimes I'm trapped underground, stuck in a crevice I never should have tried to crawl through while cave diving. Sometimes I'm scuba diving deep in an ocean ravine when my oxygen tank malfunctions and I can't breathe. And the funny thing is – I have never been sailing or spelunking or scuba diving! Experts are calling them "COVID-19 Dreams" – but whatever the case they have been absolutely devastating to my much-needed beauty sleep...

See what I mean? I feel like I've let this pity party go on for too long now, but I'm not sure how to stop it either. Maybe you've been experiencing something similar.

So – no – I don't like that this story starts with *complaining*, because it's hitting a little too close to home lately.

God had been with the Israelites in such incredibly miraculous ways! Why couldn't they trust that God would see them through the wilderness, too?

But then again, do we really trust God to see us through the wilderness? Or do we start to doubt the moment we feel a drop in our blood sugar? Do we start to long for the fleshpots of our former bondages?

Do we just want things to go back to the way they were?

The challenge that the Israelites faced was that their *food* crisis was actually a *faith* crisis.

They started longing for the way things were — back when they knew that there would be some food in those stewpots — even if it meant living in slavery. Stomachs grumbling with hunger, they ask, “*Have you brought us out here to kill us?!*”

Jason Micheli suggests that the Israelite complaint *is* accurate. He says that God had, indeed, brought them out there to kill them — at least in a manner of speaking. He says, “God has brought them to the desert for the desert to be the death of them; for their hunger to be the hospice through which God kills off their old selves. That they recall their bondage to pharaoh fondly is proof that *they're not yet free*. So God brings them to the desert for a different kind of deliverance” (*A Sermon for Every Sunday*, Aug. 5, 2018).

It's the kind of deliverance that looks like death — at least the death of the way things were. It sounds painful, but we might consider also calling it *grace*.

They longed for the stewpots of Egypt, and instead of stew God provided them quails in the evening. And in the morning, God met them in manna — which they used to make bread.

What God tells the Israelites in this simple daily deliverance of meat and bread is that God will not only meet them in the extraordinary, like pillars of fire and powerful plagues — but also in the *ordinary*, like daily bread.

“What is it?” they asked when the bread first appeared. What it was, was nothing short of the presence of God meeting them in the everyday and ordinary need for food.

You know, I honestly don't know whether to be infuriated by this story or bent low with gratitude.

One of our own, Carol Overman, has recently begun writing and sharing devotionals with a number of us in the church. They're based on her understanding of scripture and her observations of her little dog, Charley. In one, she writes:

“For a happy dog, Charley can be pretty grumpy. Occasionally he will just wander through the house all day just going, ‘Grrrr.’ I don’t know whether he hears something outside that I can’t hear or see, or whether he is just having a bad day.

Charley has no reason to be grumpy. He is healthy, well-fed, has plenty of fresh water, gets lots of love and attention. All-in-all, he is a blessed little dog.

But still he grumbles.

I grumble sometimes, too. And I have no reason, either.

I have all the material things I could wish for in abundance. I have a comfortable home. My cupboards, refrigerator, and freezer are full of nutritious food. I have adequate clothing for every season. Excellent medical, dental, and vision care are readily available to me, both on routine and emergency bases.

I have other things, too. I have a family who loves me, and who are available when I need help in the various ways elderly people need assistance. I have friends who brighten my life and mentors who help me grow in my walk with Christ. And I have neighbors who help me in various ways.

And I have the spiritual advantages and privileges that Charley can never know. I am in-dwelt by the Holy Spirit of God who pours out the love of God in my heart (Rom. 5:5). I live surrounded by that immeasurable, unsurpassable, eternal, unconditional, *agape* love that God has for me as an adopted child.”

You see, *that* is the death that the Israelites needed. Whether they knew it or not, God had brought them there to the wilderness to kill them — or at least the old version of them: no longer a slave of pharaoh, now *a child of God*.

God had gotten them out of Egypt. Now God needed to get the Egypt out of them. No longer a slave of pharaoh, now *a child of God*. And, as Carol so eloquently writes, children of God are surrounded by the immeasurable, unsurpassable, eternal, unconditional, *agape* love of God — which will never leave us, nor forsake us.

And that is the grace of the story: we don’t get what we deserve for our grumbling. We get precisely what we don’t deserve; we get God’s very presence with us in the ordinary and everyday.

I love that *manna* means, “What is it?” — because that means it’s only one *very* small step to ask you what it is that reminds you of God’s everyday presence in your life?

Is it the warm Colorado sun shining on your face? Is it the hand of your beloved resting gently in your own? Is it the smell of a fresh-made biscuit? Is it a good night’s sleep? Is it the presence of your grumpy, little dog?

Is it the grace of knowing that you are an adopted child of God? I hope so.

What is it?

What is it in which you find the presence of God nearly every single day?

Maybe it's *manna*. Maybe it's *bread*. Maybe it's *the Bread of Life*.

Maybe it's the very reason why Jesus taught us to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread."

Amen.