

Go to the Rock
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It was a pretty typical week. Most of us were there this time—which doesn't always happen—but it was otherwise business as usual. We engaged in some serious contemplation. We struggled with unclear meanings. We nuanced subtle points and found our ways to shared views as well as good-natured disagreements. And along the way, we checked in about our shared work, split a pot of coffee, and occasionally laughed like teenage kids up way too late at a slumber party.

Which is pretty much Tuesday morning Clergy Bible Study in a nutshell... We gather, catch up, read scripture, drink coffee and laugh about something or other that comes up in the readings. Sometimes it is ironic laughter, or laughter that comes from frustration, but last Tuesday it was deep belly laughter. And it was this morning's passage in particular that started the guffaws.

When we read about the Hebrew people who were freed from slavery and on their way to the Holy Land forgetting all their blessings *yet again*, we just had to laugh. Do you remember their story? Not too long after the Hebrews had begun their journey away from slavery and into a new land as a holy people—and led directly by God as a pillar, no less—they started *complaining*. They complained about how even though they had been *slaves* in Egypt, at least they had plenty to eat back then. Things were a little rougher out on the road. Food was a little scarcer than it had been in an established and wealthy nation. (Go figure.)

Did they celebrate the fact that they were free people and give thanks for the living God who had led them out of bondage? No. They poured it on pretty thick. They didn't just murmur and grumble among themselves, although they did plenty of that. They didn't just register their complaints with Moses, although that did happen, too. They were even bold and snarky enough to ask Moses whether he and God had led them into the wilderness *to die*. So, what is God's reaction to their dramatically phrased complaints? God sends Manna to feed them. Manna—a bread-like food—simply showed up every morning after the dew had passed. And there was plenty of it to feed everyone well. But even though God is thoughtful enough to even provide a double portion of Manna on the day before the Sabbath so they could all get their Sabbath rest, what do they do in the face of *that* miracle? They complain *again!*

“Boy, it's great that God freed us all from Egypt and provides us directly with food *every day*...but did you notice that this Manna stuff tastes kind of strange? I'm not sure I like it...Hey Moses, you know what we really miss? It's meat! Do you remember how there *was always* enough meat back in Egypt? Hey Moses...Moses...Moses...could you talk to God and see if we

could get some delicious meat *now, too?*” And Moses did just that. So, what is God’s reaction to the latest round of complaints? *Again*, God provides! Again the people receive what they ask for—quail come some times and Manna comes other times, and the people receive not just enough, but *choice*; not just sufficiency, but variety! And this latest acquiescence from God on the part of the wandering Hebrews seems to calm them down. At least for half a chapter or so...because *now* we come to this morning’s reading. And here we go again!

The Hebrews are proceeding from the wilderness of Sin—which is an actual place and not a moral lapse in this context—and now the people are thirsty. There isn’t enough water to go around. The journey is wearing on them. The sun is hot. So, yet again, the people approach Moses with their demands—“Give us water to drink,” they say. So again, Moses fulfills his role as human-divine *go-fer*, and he brings the request to God, but not until after the people really turn the guilt screws one more time with that thematic refrain of theirs—“*Why did you* bring us out of Egypt, to *kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?*”¹

And this is what got us all laughing in Tuesday morning Clergy Bible group. Here were these people, *complaining again*. After being freed from Egypt they complained that there wasn’t enough food. After they were fed directly by God, they complained there wasn’t enough variety in their diet. After that need was addressed they complained there wasn’t enough water. They are blessed, and then they complain and then they are blessed again, and then they complain and then the cycle goes around again and again and again! So, what got us laughing deep belly laughs like we were teens up too late was that these people sounded *exactly like us!*

We could each recall moments in our lives when we looked a blessing square in the face and *complained*. Have you been there, friends? Perhaps there was a Christmas morning or birthday party when you were surrounded by piles of wrapping paper and spent bows and you felt totally heartbroken because that *one particular present* you really hoped for wasn’t in the mix. Never mind the fact that you were given enough spending money to get it yourself; or the fact that you really didn’t need it at all; or the fact that you had a roof over your head in winter, plenty to eat, and a supportive and loving family...It can be easy to forget blessings.

Perhaps there was a day when all the local stores were out of that special snack you had been enjoying lately. You had to drive around for half an hour, and still no luck. Never mind that you *own* your car; or that you already had plenty to eat; or that you passed by three people with “Will work for food” signs on the way...It can be easy to forget blessings.

¹ Exodus 17:3c.

These are just two examples. We know that there are many indeed. It can be so easy to forget your blessings. So we laughed deep belly laughs because we saw that we are so very much like the Hebrews who are *saved* and complain; who are *led by God* and complain; who are *fed* and *fed well* and complain...And we can't really blame them for wondering "Is the Lord among us or not?"² Because it is a question we ask, too.

And it has to be noted that the concerns of the Hebrews are real and important concerns. With the possible exception of ordering quail in addition to the daily gift of Manna, being concerned with having enough food and water is undeniably important. Those are life and death concerns indeed. Yet the challenge in the behavior of the people with Moses lies not just in what they do, but also in what they *don't do*.

They do discuss their concerns with one another. They do let their leader know their concerns; if perhaps a bit rudely. Yet they *do not* bring their concerns directly to God—*none* of them *prays*. None of them goes to the rock of their salvation when they need help. And yet, it is through prayer that the concerns of the people are ultimately met. It is after the people complain to Moses that he carries their needs to God. He prays for them. And not in some neat, tidy and calm liturgical prayer in the context of worship either. The Bible says that Moses *cries out* to God. He even expresses some frustrations along the way "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me," Moses cries.³ And it is this impassioned cry to God that brings about the needed change. After Moses expresses a genuine need in genuine anguish, God provides yet again for the needs of this rag tag group of people. And friends, that is good news...because the Hebrews are just like us...we *are* the Hebrews spiritually speaking. Everyone is—all human beings are prone to forget their blessings when faced with emerging and real needs. And God will reach out to us in our need, when we lift our concerns up.

Now, we have to admit that not all stories end as well as this one does. God's response to us is not always automatic; or what we expect; or what we think we need. I think that is why religious people travel in groups; so that we can reveal to each other the blessings that we receive but may not see; and so we can be blessings to one another in times of need. Not even Moses went to the rock alone. He had company, too. And the blessings they received from God were for all the people, not just their smaller group.

And even though our shared stories may not resolve themselves as neatly as this one, the message of this story is clear. God calls us to come to the rock of our salvation, and to keep knocking until our needs are met...God ...God...God ...in anguished cries born from the places of our real need. And God gives us one another to journey with in times of plenty and famine,

² Exodus 17:7.

³ Ibid, verse 4.

satiety and hunger, blessings and fasting. As we continue our journey into the season of Lent, let us help one another remember to go to the rock who is the Lord. May we remember to open ourselves up to God as we are, not as we think we ought to be. May we laugh at ourselves when it is right to do so. May we reach out to others when they need us. And may we go to the rock of our salvation with our whole selves.

Amen.

Exodus 17:1-7

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. 2The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?" 3But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" 4So Moses cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." 5The Lord said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. 6I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. 7He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"