

Sunday October 8, 2023
Lesson 6: How Many Miracles?
Scripture: Exodus 17: 1-7

Context:

Today we continue our fall curriculum, “God Provides.” The second unit is titled “Living Water,” with several lessons of how God’s providence comes in the form of water, a simultaneous chaotic and replenishing element. Today’s lesson comes from the book of Exodus, the book famous for chronicling the journey of the Hebrew people (Israelites) out of the land of Egypt. The focus of today’s lesson is to discern how much we trust God’s continuing presence and provision.

Our lesson begins in the Desert of Sin, a place we will see appropriately deserves its name. After the Lord has sent both manna and quail to nourish the Israelites, they continue to move through the wilderness going where God directs them. When they arrive at Rephidim, there is no water for the people to drink. This brief yet composite story highlights the character of divine leading, the continuing human complaint, and the unsurpassable graciousness of God, who opens up the sustaining powers of creation for Israel.¹ God will use this as an example and make a point.

What is interesting here is God leading the people does not always lead to oases where they have all their needs provided directly in front of them. The people once again complain just as they did with the food. They put the blame on Moses. How could he have led them out of the lush land of Egypt to go on what feels like a goose chase?

When Moses pushes back, they decide to put God to the test. They ask, “Is the Lord among us or not?” Testing has to do with “putting God to the proof,” that is, seeking a way in which God can be coerced to act or show himself.² They want to make a belief in God contingent on what God will do for them.

This is a theme throughout scripture: human beings trying to turn faith into sight. We see this behavior again when Jesus is tempted by the devil: throw yourself off the pinnacle of Temple and God will not allow him to be dashed to pieces.³ It sets up an attitude of God as some kind of insurance policy or talisman and turns faith into a trinket.

In this case, Moses turns to God as the people are ready to stone him. God takes the creativity with his staff and invites him to strike at a rock, reminiscent of what God had Moses do to the Nile River with the plague and the river of blood. Moses strikes the rock for water to flow out. The place is renamed *Massah* and *Meribah* which translate to *testing* and *quarreling*.

¹ Fretheim, Terence E. “Exodus,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2010), 187.

² *Ibid.*, 189.

³ *Ibid.*, See Matthew 4:5-7 for reference.)

God will provide for the people and yet we will see the easy nature of forgetting of God's provision.

Application

Grumble. Grumble. Grumble. Have you heard these sounds before? Perhaps you have been the one to make them yourself. All of us are acquainted with receiving a case of the grumbles. We do it when the line is too long at the grocery store. Our supervisor gives us a task or a deadline and we know it's going to be a chore. A family member goes and does something and we get irritated. Thus, we begin. Grumble. Grumble. Grumble.

I am not at a point where I think grumbling is necessarily a bad thing. Sometimes it can ignite within us a desire to change or reform things. Or perhaps it can tell us more about what is going on within us. Why am I so impatient at the grocery store? Maybe I need to be a better steward of my time. How am I irritated with my supervisor? Perhaps I need to actually listen to them and take off a little more time for myself. Grumbling can teach us things about ourselves as perhaps we've closed our eyes to other things going on in and around us.

Then we meet our friends and relatives, the Israelites. Wouldn't you know they have a case of grumbles against God! At this point in the Exodus narrative, we shouldn't be surprised. They got out of Egypt to see the Egyptian army behind them, and they complained. They didn't like the food or lack thereof, and they complained. Each time God provided and yet the first thing they do is complain when there aren't water fountains galore at Rephidim.

What does God do? Once again, God provided by having Moses strike the rock to have water flow out. Even though the Israelites complained and did not trust the Lord, God still showed up. Because this is what God always does for humanity; shows up even when we complain or do not trust the Lord.

In recent years, I have seen a lack of gratitude consume both the secular world, and even sadly moreso, the church. I hear of retired clergy complaining about the denominational structures which helped to provide homes for their families and give them a pension who now complain constantly about current church leaders and their denomination. I have seen laity so focused on the actions of others, all they do is complain and grumble about what is wrong with the church and "*those* people." Everywhere I turn, there is grumble, grumble, and more grumble.

What is sad when all we do is grumble is we miss out on what the Lord is doing in front of us, or perhaps is even inviting us to do. We miss out on how God has always and will always provide for God's people in various ways. We get so caught up in the complaining we cannot name the thanksgiving which should be flowing from our lips about all God has done for us and continues to do.

I have had the privilege for the past two years to be an adjunct professor at a local college where I teach introduction survey courses. Often, I have students who might have grown up in church culture and yet they know so little about the actual Bible. They have all these questions and at times doubts about who God is and what this God of the Bible is all about. They wrestle with questions and I love watching them learn, and perhaps even be challenged in what they believe.

Could we lament how they're not in churches more, or how their clothes are not what we would approve of wearing? Perhaps we could get upset about how they seem to be okay with

things or politics we don't like. We could grumble about all those things and sit down in despair about the state of the world.

Or we could trust God is going before us and doing a new work in them. Maybe church will look different in five years. Perhaps there may be some things different than when we were growing up. Yet as we are a people of faith, are we not to trust God will do something new and provide for us in ways we could not imagine?

Trusting in God's presence and provision is often difficult for us as humans because we love control. We like thinking we can control God, the church, ourselves, and one another. Yet God often has a knack for reminding us we are not in charge and God will intervene in some way or another. What God also invites us to do is to consider how God will go before us and God will provide. Instead of joining the mighty chorus of grumblers all around, God is inviting us to trust how the Lord of deliverance will always be at work all around us.

What do you do when you find yourself with a bad case of the grumbles? What are spiritual disciplines to help you when you find yourself in a constant state of complaining or ingratitude? How has God reminded you of God's providence and provision? Who are people who radiate thanksgiving for all God has done for them? Where are places you can see God continuing to show up despite the odds?

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