

WHINING AND COMPLAINING

Sermon 882

September 21, 2014

15th Sunday after Pentecost

964th Week as Priest

791st Week at St Dunstan's

56th Week at Epiphany-Tallassee

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our lessons once again follow a common theme, which utterly refutes my irresponsible claim from two Sundays ago—that the readings from Ordinary Time are simply leftovers from the great, seamless lessons and lectionaries of Advent through the Day of Pentecost.

Last week, the lessons demanded our attention to Quarreling and Conflict. Today, the essential theme is Whining and Complaining. I don't make these up, by the way. I don't choose the readings.

The Exodus

The people of Israel have been liberated through the mighty acts of the LORD God, by the hand of his unlikely hero, Moses.

God's Chosen People have followed Moses, and his brother Aaron, and his sister Miriam, into the wilderness—out of 400 years of slavery and oppression—into dangerous freedom and radical obedience to God, whom his servant Moses knows as “I AM,” the LORD God, YHWH, Jealous God of the Desert.

But this desert deity is not to be trifled with, and he countenances no whining or complaining. And as Moses and Aaron and Miriam are beginning to realize—and as the people of Israel will be slow and stiff-necked to recognize, this YHWH is more, infinitely more, than they have imagined.

For YHWH is not some silly household god of the Egyptians. He is not a pathetic Baal, a Canaanite god of fertility and the harvest. By no means! YHWH is the one true God of the Universe. He is not sun and moon (no, he brought them into being). He is not stars and constellations (no, he set them in their courses). He is

not darkness and light, not lord of the seas or god of their promised land. He is the God of all creation, uncreated and existing from before time and eternity. He made all things by calling them into being and naming them. In him, and by him, and through him, all things have their being.

YHWH is I AM, the Holy One, the one and only true God. He is the Ground of Being, the Prime Mover. He is essential reality, the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End, World without End.

And they, this ragtag band of nomadic sheep and goat herders are for some inexplicable reason his Chosen People!

But now, just as they begin to recognize freedom and a future, they have the gall and outrageous pride to whine and complain that they would be better off dead, or still enslaved in Egypt. At least there they had something to eat! At least in captivity, they did not starve or die of thirst.

But the Jealous God of the Desert demands obedience and courage of his Chosen People. He expects their best effort, and nothing less.

In return, YHWH shows steadfast love, the Hebrew word is “hesed,” what the King James Bible calls loving-kindness.

“Search for the LORD,” says the psalmist, “and continually seek his face.”

How could they have forgotten the faith of their Father Abraham? How could they forget the promise of a land of milk and honey?

How could they not remember the covenant made by their God with Abraham and Sarah, and extended through Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, to all of the 12 tribes of Israel?

The answer is both startling and expected. Overwhelmed by their immediate circumstances and their frailty and weakness; focused only on their sad selves, they whine and complain.

But YHWH will deliver them. He gives them bread from heaven, and meat to eat, and water from the rock. Without God, they are nothing—but with God, they can survive and endure, and find hope and a future.

The Philippians

Paul echoes this message of hope in the face of suffering and adversity. He tells the beloved Philippians to stand firm in their faith, to strive side by side for the Gospel—and never, never, to give up.

The Philippians understand and gladly receive his letter. After all, they are warriors. They know obedience and sacrifice. They accept suffering for a greater good. And they are not a people to whine or complain.

They are indeed grateful to know Christ, and to commit themselves to his love and service. They are now *spiritual warriors*, and they accept this calling with joy and gratitude, not whining and complaining.

Above all, says Paul, live your life in a manner that is worthy of the Gospel of Christ. Continue in your progress and joy in faith. Share abundantly in Christ Jesus, and be thankful.

The Vineyard

Jesus tells a parable that tells us something about our selves, and about the Kingdom of God.

Each of us is born into this world with a set of circumstances not of our own making. We do not choose our parents, family, health or wellness, wealth or poverty. But we can choose what to make of our lives. We can whine or complain about all of our suffering, all the injustices and inconveniences that come our way. Or we can become spiritual warriors—men and women and boys and girls who strive to live a life that is worthy of Christ.

We can endure in the face of suffering, and we will become stronger—in character and in faith.

We can overcome adversity with Christ, and in Christ, and through Christ. And we can refuse to whine or complain. We can be thankful.

My father had a favorite saying that my brothers and I heard all our lives. It was “Get in the dern ballgame.” It sounds tough and demanding, but it is actually a euphemism for “I love you, and I want you to live up to

your full potential,” and “You are so dear to me, and I believe in you,” and “Life is hard, and suffering is real, and yet I know that you will endure and do great things and make a real difference in the world.” So with all love and compassion, I say to you, “Get in the dern ballgame.”

AMEN.

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