

ST. JOHN'S AT DIOCESAN CENTER IGLESIA EPISCOPAL DE SAN JUAN

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COMPLAINTS? ON YOUR KNEES!

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Text of a Sermon preached the 18th Sunday after Pentecost

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NUMBERS 11:4-6,10-16,24-29 | PSALM 19:7-14

JAMES 5:13-20 | MARK 9:38-50

Moses' original request to Pharaoh was short and sweet: "Let my people go, so that we may go worship him on the mountain." Pharaoh may have had a few questions: How long will you be gone? Which mountain? Never mind, he must have thought to himself, they will die in the wilderness. This fellow Moses will not be able to put up with their complaining. You might as well stay here.

And so did many of the people of Israel when they found themselves going to and from that mountain. The book of Exodus recounts the journey to that mountain. The book of Numbers recounts the journey away from that mountain. That journey away from slavery, toward the promise of blessing, was the whole way Israel had to travel to become a nation, God's people, a light to the nations around them.

Today we shall consider the fact that the people of God complained in both directions. Their shock and discomfort at being in a vast wilderness was quite understandable as they headed toward the mountain where God would meet them. God told Moses to strike the rock for water. God reassured them with the miracle of the manna, that they would have enough calories, enough energy for each day. All in all, there seemed like a plan.

But on their way from the mountain, as they headed on the more arduous an uncertain journey toward a dangerous and seemingly unattainable promised land, the murmurings became straight up complaining. And the ones doing the complaining, the "rabble", should have known better. They were the leaders of their clans, the ones with responsibility, the priests and the elders. Moses had to deal with being second guessed and ultimately outright rebellion.

Children complain and we try to console them. When the customer complains, we remember the exact nature of our relationship. The customer is always right. But when those who are in charge, those who have the most and know the most, those who can do something about it, those who should be doing something about it – as we say – when the adults in the room start complaining, well then, we are in deep trouble.

God tells Moses to gather the elders, seventy-two in all, at the Tent of Meeting. Two things will happen. First, the complainers who are leaders will be given a portion of the Spirit that rests on Moses. But also, they will learn that no place, or even position, can contain God's Spirit. Two elders who did not make the meeting, end up prophesying. And Moses speaks God's mind when he says, "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!"

And down through the generations, the only thing that keeps that from happening is the simple fact that those who have a complaint, those who see things differently, those who are in a position to respond to suffering and injustice, do nothing, learn nothing. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. The gift of the Spirit comes to those who take responsibility for what God cares about.

We are in trouble when the adults in the room start complaining. The Holy Spirit is grieved, frustrated, forgotten. To be a disciple of Jesus is to listen to Jesus explain what he must go through to reveal God's justice, and be determined to walk with him, to suffer with him, to care what he cares about.

Today's gospel is not the first time the senseless jealousies and competitive spirit of the disciples will get in their way. It will not be the last. It is easier to keep power and privilege for ourselves, and to put others down and insist on our rights, than it is to look around and see who is suffering, who needs mercy, who needs us to come alongside and lift up.

Jesus uses some very hyperbolic language to shock his disciples to attention. He says to them in effect, you will not make it to the end of this journey whole, with all the faculties and capacities that you need, unless you put them in the service of the "least who believe in me." Whatever you do, do not get in the way of God and God's Spirit. If you see something that's wrong, don't just complain, but discern, then respond.

James puts all this in language we can readily respond to, that is inspiring. If someone is sick, gather the elders and pray. If someone is cheerful, lean into that, and share your blessing with others. If you have sinned – it is not a question of whether you have sinned – when you sin, confess your sin to one another and forgive each other. If you have hurt someone, guess what. You can do something about it. Stop complaining and go to where you need to go, do what you need to do. And yes. Remember Elijah.

Finally, and quite appropriately, James remind us that it is all about the journey. He is a little worried that we might wander off and forget where we are going.

So, he says, if someone has wandered from the faith, go get them and see what is going on, intercede. Bring them back. Keeping one person from walking off the cliff will save many many more.

It may just be true, as I have heard and come to believe, the world is upheld by the intercessions of the saints. The reason we are still here is because those who saw and heard and felt the world's need got down on their knees. We do not know their names. As we say our prayers today we should thank God for them.

The Spirit of God will not be frustrated forever. In fact, God has shown you a few things that need responding to. Let each one of us resolve today to do something about it. To get on our knees. And add our name to the saints who hold up the world, interceding, pleading, rejoicing, believing that we remain in God's hand.