

“God Loves Whiners”
Exodus 16:2-15

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This scripture of the Israelites whining in the wilderness is so validating. Who among us hasn't been in our own wilderness, and even though we say we have faith that everything will work out, or we know from past experience we will probably get through it, have a whole lot of complaining to do along the way? If you are having trouble thinking of an example, look no further than the year 2020 which has received more complaints, put downs, protestations, and insults than any year before it! It's been a cascade of events which has led to a cascade of complaining that often comes back to some variation of “This isn't fair!” or “ARE YOU THERE GOD?!”

For anyone who is feeling guilty about how often you've slipped into a pattern of complaining about things that are out of your control this year, know that you are not alone. The Israelites were the original whiners. They had been in the wilderness fewer than three months before they started saying to their leaders, “This is terrible! We're hungry! Why are you feeding us? Why are we going? Why aren't we there yet? Are you sure you know what you're doing? We demand answers!”

How quickly they had forgotten that just three months before they had been in slavery, where the conditions were infinitely worse and the prospects for their future even bleaker. The horrors of forced labor and genocide in Egypt are behind them, but instead of singing Moses' praises for getting them out of that literal hellhole, they have new

complaints. “This isn’t what you promised. The food was better in Egypt. At least we had homes to return to at the end of the day. You brought us out of slavery just to starve us to death in the wilderness!” The complaints are endless.

There are a lot of stories in the Bible when I think the reaction from God is a little overdramatic - destroying cities, sending flooding, banishing people to the ends of the earth - just because people were a little disrespectful. But the Israelites are LOUDLY disrespectful to what God has done for them but there is no punishment this time. Instead of teaching them a lesson by shaming them or sending them back to where they came, God does the opposite. God hears that the Israelites are hungry and gives them meat. Provides them with bread. Offers them manna from heaven. The Israelites are hungry and God feeds them.

It makes me wonder if it is okay to whine sometimes, or to complain when things are truly terrible. There are different ways we whine and I think those differences draw us back to the difference in God’s reaction in this story to other times when people were fed up and God was just as fed up with them.

There is a type of whining that is about self-pity. Brene Brown talks about how the goal of self-pity is to draw in sympathy to yourself to the exclusion of others. Self-pity is when we say, “No one on earth has ever had it as hard as I have it!” When we act or speak from a place of self-pity, we cut ourselves off from others because we have determined that no one can relate to our experience because our suffering is truly unique. It keeps us feeling righteous but it keeps out the opportunity for empathy or to connect across similar experiences. This is the kind of whining that become problematic. It’s hard

for God, or our leaders like Moses and Aaron, to respond if we have set ourselves and our suffering so far apart that no one can relate or reach across to us. We become a bubble of despair unto ourselves.

But self-pity is not the only kind of whining. There is a type of whining or complaining that is about lifting up what we are going through or the injustices we witness in order to draw people in. This is a type of vulnerability. When we are brave enough to name how we are suffering, there is a chance someone might hear us and say, “Hey, me too! I feel the same way!” Or someone who has been there before might be able to offer words of wisdom or support that help ease your suffering. Or someone might here and have a solution that impacts people right now and in the time to come.

That is what happens in this story. The Israelites are hungry. And if they hadn’t spoken up about their hunger, Moses and Aaron would not have known. God would not have known. It is possible that Moses and Aaron were so focused on getting out of the wilderness that they didn’t realize they were neglecting some of the immediate needs of their people. So God hear the complaints and feeds their people.

There is value in whining when we allow it to draw us in to others or form connections. We don’t call that whining - we call that support groups! There is value in whining when we allow it to amplify issues of injustice that we witness in our communities. We don’t call that whining - we call that political advocacy! There is value in whining when we use it to name what needs tending in order to be welcoming and affirming of all people. We don’t call that whining - we call that beloved community or church.

God loves whiners. We know this because all of us, at one point in our life or another, have been the whiner. We've shared when we have been in pain. We've named when our needs haven't been met. We've spoken out against injustice in the world. God listens each time, working within us and among us to reign down manna from heaven, to feed God's people, to bring hope where there is suffering.

Don't be afraid to give voice to your pain. Don't be afraid to say what you need or what you long for. Don't be afraid to take your complaints to prayer. God is listening, and you are not alone. We come together in the body of Christ with our whole selves - our joys and our sorrows, our gratitude and laments. You are not alone. Let your voice be heard. Amen.