

Grumblers and a Gracious God

Oh, great! They're out of toilet paper...again! Where are the sanitizer wipes? I miss my friends! It is a bummer that I can't go back to church; give hugs, hand-shakes, and high fives; attend concerts and football games; or even visit loved ones in the hospital; I fear; I want; I hurt. There is much to grumble and complain about in these unprecedented times (or are they uncertain times, difficult times, or trying times? I'm not sure, but I've been told once or twice that whatever this is, we're in it together).

Well, they really are unprecedented times. The pandemic in our midst has shaken us and changed everything. I was reading yesterday about how even our language has been disrupted. Roger J. Kreuz, Prof. of Psychology at University of Memphis, wrote in a blog this week about how the editors of the Oxford English Dictionary are considering adding new several new words to their authoritative collection, including

..."maskne," an acne outbreak caused by facial coverings; "zombombing," which is when strangers intrude on video conferences; and "quarantini," a cocktail consumed in isolation,..."covidiot," for someone who ignores public safety recommendations; [and] "doomscrolling," which happens when you skim anxiety-inducing pandemic-related stories on your smartphone (from <https://theconversation.com/how-covid-19-is-changing-the-english-language-146171>).

We do live in times that are different than any others we've faced, and there is just so much in them that is difficult, uncertain, unsettling, and worthy of complaint. And complain about our uncertain times we do! Like Oscar the Grouch, the griper *par excellence*, we grumble and we complain.

As a people, we follow the grumbling tradition of the people of today's reading from the Book of Exodus, the Israelites as they wandered unhappily through the desert wilderness. In today's reading, the people, in their difficult times, grumbled about not having enough water, so God gave them water. This passage follows a passage where they grumbled about not having enough food. God gave them food, but they grumbled about what they were given.

"What *is* it?" the Israelites asked as they saw the flaky white stuff from heaven lying on the ground before them each morning. Their question, "what is it?", *Man hu* in Hebrew, became the name of this mysterious bread from heaven, *manna*, and God provided this strange, grumble-inducing "what's it" to the people throughout their sojourn in the wilderness.

We are told in Exodus that this original wonder bread tasted like "like wafers made with honey" (16:31); however, in the book of Numbers, it is described as tasting like "cakes baked in oil." The good rabbis of the first couple of centuries after time of Jesus wondered long and hard why the taste of manna is described in such different ways from one account to the other. Their conclusion was that the "what's it" could change in flavor at will to suit each consumer, being what each considers to be a delicacy. With all due respect to good rabbis, the ongoing account of the Israelites continually complaining about the manna and wishing to return to Egypt, where they were slaves, but well-fed ones with plenty of normal bread to eat, leads me to believe that the manna didn't taste like a fine filet mignon, Beluga caviar, foie gras, or whatever flavor the person consuming wanted, but rather it tasted like whatever God the provider wanted, this flavor didn't suit the people, so they grumbled. And they didn't like having to rely upon God for food or water, so they grumbled.

And so Moses grumbled to God: “What shall I do with this people” (Ex. 17:4)? “Why have you treated me so badly” to call me to lead these grumblers (Num. 11:11)?

And even God got in on the grumbling action, complaining to Moses: “This is a stiff-necked people” (Ex. 32:9). “How long will this people despise me? And how long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them” (Num. 14:11)?

There was a whole lot of grumbling going on out the desert plane.

This was one of the problems out in the wilderness as the Israelites wandered there: The Children of Israel wanted things, and things not just as they were provided by God, but as the Israelites wanted them to be. They would have preferred the desert experience to be a bit more like a trip to Burger King, where they say you can “Have It Your Way.” But, as Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones reminds us, “You can’t always get what you want.” Mick’s pearls of wisdom continue as he sings, “but if you try sometime, you find you get what you need. Ahhh, yeah!”

Yes, sometimes you do not get what you want or how you want it, but you do get what you need. This message of Mick echoes that of the apostle Paul, who tells us in his second letter to the Corinthians the words given to him by God, who put it this way, “my grace is sufficient for you.”

God’s grace, that is the gifts of God freely given, is sufficient; God’s grace is all that you need. Just as the divine gift of manna upon the desert floor and water springing forth from its rocks gave the Israelites not what they really wanted, but what they really needed, the grace of God wafts down from heaven and bubbles up and into our lives each day and is completely sufficient to sustain our spirits.

I don't know about you, but I could use some of that divine sustenance this morning. The world, it seems, is on fire, and getting warmer, literally and figuratively, each day: gargantuan fires in the west and horrific hurricanes in the south have been causing terrible destruction, and we are increasingly threatened by our rapidly changing climate with even greater devastation.

A pandemic burns through our midst, causing illness and death to those we love, separating us from one another, making the lonely lonelier and those living in fear even more afraid.

Our fiery political discourse, which is already red hot, is about to burn a whole lot hotter in this election season, especially with an upcoming battle to fill a vacant supreme court seat.

And the necessary struggle to reduce the inequities between people, inequities that have sadly always existed in our society, is becoming more heated as those who sense their privilege and power being threatened or eroded push back against movements towards justice. I hope that the broad majority of people in our nation who care deeply about creating a more just society, especially those of us who are committed to following the path of Jesus Christ, would continue to push back on the push back and that the broad arc of our history, as Martin Luther King said, would slowly but surely bend towards justice.

I certainly did not wake up this morning thinking that the world is the way I had always hoped it would be. If I could have it my way, the world and its people would be healthy, whole, and at peace. But that's not the world as it is right now. Yes, it is a world on fire, and this blaze did not ignite by spontaneous combustion. We the people of God's creation have caused the fires to burn, and in some cases, such as our changing climate, we continue to add fuel to the fire.

This evening at sunset, begins the holy day of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, on which our Jewish sisters and brothers recognize the brokenness and waywardness of people, ask for God's mercy, and celebrate that in our God's limitless lovingkindness, we are forgiven. We need God's mercy today, and, thanks be to God, we receive God's mercy today. And we receive not only mercy, but grace, the undeserved gifts of God. And so I pray for God's mercy and God' grace to be with me, to be with you, to be with the world to sustain us, to give us water and bread, as together we wander through the wilderness of "these uncertain times" and the fiery trials of our own making.

And I pray that should we find ourselves, God willing, living in times that are less uncertain and grumbleworthy (my new word for the Oxford dictionary people), we would still turn to God and rely upon God's grace to sustain us. For really, all times are uncertain, and we will always need the gifts of God to strengthen us for life's journey, wherever it may take us.

This morning, my life's journey has brought me here, to travel with you as your new pastor! I am grateful to God for God's leading, and thankful to the congregation for calling me to serve as your minister. I look forward to the journey that lies ahead, wherever it may take us, but surely, as it will, not only to the quiet, peaceful places beside still waters, but the dry, barren wilderness places as well. Wherever our journey takes us, however, I know that it will be a journey marked by God's blessing.

I've been told that the word "blessing" it is one of my go to words, that I tend to use it too much, almost as a sentence filler like um or uh. This morning, I think I'm OK with that, more than that, I'm owning it and leaning into it. I think it would be great if after my first Sunday here

you came away with the impression that I was the guy who will be talking too much about God's blessings. I will, and I do today so because I have seen throughout my life of so many signs of God's blessings, God's grace.

This morning, I see the beautiful blessing of new life in our new partnership in ministry. I have been blessed by the generous welcome I've experienced thus far in meeting many of you in our online fellowship gatherings. I have been blessed this week by witnessing the blessings that you bestow upon others by providing them with food for their bodies through your pantry, and the blessings of food for the soul that you offer to the wee, little preschoolers who gather here at the Purpose School as well as to their families, who are greatly blessed to have a loving community to help care for and raise up their children.

I look forward to participating with you in receiving the blessings that come through times of worship, as whether we are together in body or just gathering online, we praise God and give God thanks for the abundant gifts of life and love that we enjoy.

I look forward to witnessing the beauty of your love for one another and care for the world around you, and I consider myself blessed to be leading you as pastor and joining you as a member of your genuinely loving family.

What manna will fall for us in these new times that we now share, these uncertain times? What new, sustaining, refreshing water will spring forth in our midst on this 292nd year of this church's journey? We do not know. But we do know that it will be good, blessed, and it will be more than sufficient to fill us with God's life and love. Amen.