

Grumbling in the Wilderness – Ex. 16:2-15 – FMC – Sept. 21, 2008

We've had some great music today.

Well, I'm going to put a stop to that right now!
Some of you are old enough to remember the TV show Hee-Haw,
and if you do, you might remember the famous song
"Gloom, despair and agony on me."

On this Sunday with the theme of grumbling, it somehow seems appropriate. It goes like this:

*Gloom, despair, and agony on me.
Deep dark depression, excessive misery.
If it weren't for bad luck, I'd have no luck at all.
Gloom, despair, and agony on me.*

What a wonderfully miserable song!

Just in case you haven't already made his acquaintance,
let me introduce you to Eeyore the donkey,
one of the delightful characters in Winnie the Pooh.

Eeyore represents all those people who walk about with a perpetual rain cloud over their head.
For Eeyore, everything that happens causes him to say, "Oh, bother!"
If he wants something good to happen,
he's convinced it will all go wrong;
the only thing you can count on is disaster.

So Eeyore lives with his head down and his tail bedraggled.
Life is bad, and it can only get worse.

A bit less known is Puddleglum, a character in C.S. Lewis' book
The Silver Chair.

Puddleglum is a marshwiggle,
a slightly human, slightly reptilian creature whose heart is good
but whose hope is nil.
He sets off with two children on a great adventure to rescue a
lost prince, an adventure of faith.

But Puddleglum the marshwiggle says,

“We can count on it. We will get lost.
We will start to attack each other.
We will probably end up killing each other.
There is no way we can succeed in the venture anyway.”

I know a woman in Ohio who spent a lifetime dying,
a lifetime claiming she was at death’s door.
You didn’t dare ask her how she was,
because you’d get this “poor me” litany of all her ailments,
delivered with a weak voice and sorry face.

I didn’t know her when she was young, but I do know that through her
50’s, 60’s, 70’s, 80’s and 90’s, she was always near death,
to hear her tell it. As my mother described her:
“She has enjoyed poor health for many, many years.”
Though she certainly did have some health issues from time to time,
she lived well into her nineties,
combining all the attributes of Eeyore and Puddleglum.

It doesn’t matter how many good things have happened to you,
and it doesn’t matter what your blessings or successes have been.

If you’re in the Eeyore/Puddleglum club, all you can see is the negative.
If there’s not disaster today, there’s sure to be one tomorrow.
Your constant refrain is, “Ain’t it awful; Gloom, despair, and agony on me.”

Those Israelites had no reason to join that club. No reason at all.
They had witnessed the mighty hand of God through 10 plagues
against their captors.
They had seen God triumph over Pharaoh and his gods.
They had walked out of Egypt as free people,
loaded down with the riches of the Egyptians who were desperate
to get rid of them.
They had been saved from the Egyptian army at the Red Sea,
saved without having to fight, saved by the mighty hand of God.
They had seen God destroy the Egyptian army so that they could never
again be a threat.

All that history, all those wondrous miracles, all those reasons to have
faith and trust in God,

but now they're out in the wilderness,
not a McDonalds or Cracker Barrel in sight,
and so they start murmuring, grumbling.

As I said, in the Eeyore/Puddleglum club,
no positives, no miracles, no triumphs, no deliverance in the past
is relevant, for today is bad, tomorrow will be worse,
the future is unknown, and therefore disaster is certain.

We are NOT speaking here of people with clinical depression or people
with a physical problem. This story does not apply to them.

These are healthy people with a bad habit,
with a focus on the negative,
with a basic lack of trust in God.

Fully in the grip of spiritual amnesia,
the Israelites started complaining the minute their stomachs were empty.
In fact the word "complain" occurs 7 times in today's 13 verses.

They directed their complaint toward Moses and Aaron;
problems are always somebody else's fault, of course.

But Moses and Aaron, refusing to get emotionally hooked or to feel guilty,
told the people that they were actually complaining against God,
not them, and that their complaining betrayed a lack of faith in God.

The Israelites' focus on Moses and Aaron as the source of their problems
is what happens to us when we are tempted to say,
"If it weren't for so-and-so, my life would be happy.
If that person weren't in my life, everything would be OK."

To that line of thinking, Moses and Aaron would say:
When you complain about someone else,
you're actually complaining about the God who brought
that person into your life.

ALL grumbling and complaining, at its very root,
is a complaint against the goodness of God.

There's something about grumbling and complaining that pollutes the brain.
Not only can't you remember what God did for you yesterday,
and the day before, and the day before that,
but what you DO remember gets skewed and twisted.
Grumbling infects the brain and distorts the past,
which is why the Israelites started their ridiculous litany about
the joys of slavery and the prime rib they always had for dinner
and the excellent benefits enjoyed by Pharaoh's employees.
Ah, the good old days!

This was not a case of selective memory,
but rather a case of distorted memory,
twisted, turned-upside-down memory.
It's a case of their collective brains infecting their collective memories.

Grumbling falsifies the past.
It leads to scapegoating and blaming and unclear thinking.

In our muddled state of mind, we complain, and we yell.
Perhaps you've read Rober Fulghum's book "All I Really Need to Know
I Learned in Kindergarten."

He has an interesting little section about yelling and complaining:

"In the Solomon Islands in the south Pacific some villagers practice a
unique form of logging.
If a tree is too large to be felled with an ax,
the natives cut it down by yelling at it.
Woodsmen with special powers creep up on a tree just at dawn,
and suddenly scream at it at the top of their lungs.
This they continue for 30 days.
The tree dies and falls over.
The theory is that the hollering kills the spirit of the tree.
According to the villagers, it always works.

Fulghum observes, "Ah, those poor naïve innocents.
Such quaintly charming habits of the jungle.
Screaming at trees, indeed. How primitive.
Too bad they don't have the advantages of modern technology
and the scientific mind."

Then he adds,

“Me? I yell at my wife. And yell at the telephone and the lawn mower.
And yell at the TV and the newspaper and my children.
The man next door yells at his car a lot.
I heard him yell at a stepladder for most of an afternoon.
We modern, urban, educated folks yell at traffic and umpires
and bills and banks and machines—especially machines.
Machines and relatives get most of the yelling.”

Well, that’s what the Israelites were doing—yelling, complaining, grumbling.

In this story, I’m totally amazed at God.

If God were like me, God would give up in despair with these people:

“I saved them. I delivered them. I defeated the greatest army in
the world for them. They didn’t have to lift a finger.
And now, their stomachs are empty, and they don’t trust me.
They don’t think I can do anything about it.
So forget it. I’ve HAD it with these people;
let them rot in the desert!”

That’s what God would have said, if God were like me.

But God’s not like me.

God said, “I’ve heard the people’s grumbling, so I’m going to feed them.

Now, God didn’t really send “manna.”

“Manna” is not a noun. “Manna” is not the name of the stuff they
found on the ground each morning.

I don’t know what God called it, and I’m not sure what the Israelites ended
up calling it, but when they saw it, they didn’t know what it was,
and so they asked a question, “man hu? – What is it?”

And that’s where the word “manna” comes from.

It’s not the name of the stuff, it’s their question about the stuff.

Whatever they called it, it filled their stomachs,

and it came faithfully every morning, 6 days a week.

And the “what is it?” that came on the 6th day was enough for the
7th day as well.

And then, being a divine dietician, God sent some protein in the form of quails.

Quails migrate from northern Europe to Africa and back.

Their path does not normally go through the Sinai desert, but perhaps a wind—God’s wind—blew them off course, into the Sinai, where they finally became exhausted and came to the ground, right at Israel’s feet.

What a wonderful story of grace.

These people who deserved nothing received everything.

These ungrateful, forgetful people who had no trust in God

in spite of all that God had done in the past received yet another reminder of God’s mercy, God’s love, and God’s faithful provision.

That’s a sign of hope for us,

for we too sometimes grumble, complain, and yell.

We too sometimes get so focused on our fears that we forget who God is, and how much God loves us.

We too will be sent manna and quail, not because we deserve it, but because we need it.

God’s grace was surely tested with these people.

After a while they got tired of manna. Bored.

Manna and quail were good, but manna every day?

How many ways can you prepare manna?

I’m sure they tried Manna Soup, Manna and Quail casserole, Manna Burgers, Hot & Spicy Shredded Manna, Fried Manna, Baked Quail with Sour Manna Sauce, Sweet & Sour Manna, Manna Soufflé, Manna Gumbo, Manna Semmel – well, maybe not that last one.

They got tired of it, and they grumbled.

All through this Exodus story the people keep complaining, not trusting, seeing the negative.

And God just keeps providing, and delivering.

Their constant focus was on themselves,

and when they couldn’t figure out how to save themselves, they fell into the despair of Eeyore and Puddleglum and “Gloom, despair, and agony on me.”

It's true: If your eye is only on yourself, there IS some reason for despair,
for we are all flawed and weak and human.

But if your eye is on God, no situation is hopeless,
and what looks like a problem, what looks like a negative,
can turn into a positive.

There's a wonderful prayer written by a woman—I don't know her name—
that illustrates the two ways we can look at life—
Eeyore and Puddleglum's way, or God's way.

It's a fairly long prayer, but I think it's worthwhile from beginning to end.
It goes like this:

*Dear Lord, thank you for this sink of dirty dishes;
we have plenty of food to eat.*

*Thank you for this pile of dirty, stinky laundry;
we have plenty of nice clothes to wear.*

*And I would like to thank you, Lord, for those unmade beds;
they were so warm and comfortable last night.
I know that many have no bed.*

*My thanks to you, Lord, for this bathroom, complete with all the splattered,
messy, soggy, grimy towels and the dirty lavatory;
they are so convenient.*

*Thank you for this finger-smudged refrigerator that needs defrosting so
badly;
It has served us faithfully for many years. It is full of cold drinks
and enough leftovers for two or three meals.*

*Thank you, Lord, for this oven that absolutely must be cleaned today;
it has baked so many good meals over the years.*

*The whole family is grateful for this tall grass that needs mowing and the
lawn that needs raking;
we all enjoy the yard.*

*Thank you, Lord, even for that slamming screen door.
My kids are healthy and able to run and play.*

*Lord, the presence of all these chores awaiting me says that you have
richly blessed my family.
I shall do them cheerfully and gratefully.*

*Even though I clutch my blanket and growl when the alarm rings,
thank you, Lord, that I can hear. There are many who are deaf.*

*Even though I keep my eyes closed against the morning light as long as
possible,
thank you, Lord, that I can see; many are blind.*

*Even though I huddle in my bed and put off rising,
thank you, Lord, that I have the strength to rise;
there are many who are bedridden.*

*Even though the first hour of my day is hectic, when socks are lost,
toast is burned and tempers are short, and my children are so loud,
thank you, Lord, for my family; there are many who are lonely.*

*Even though our breakfast table never looks like the picture in a magazine
and the menu is at times not balanced,
thank you for the food we have;
there are many who are hungry.*

*Even though the routine of my job is often monotonous,
thank you, Lord, for the opportunity to work;
there are many who have no job.*

*Even though I grumble and bemoan my fate from day to day and with my
circumstances were not so modest,
thank you, Lord, for Life. Amen.”*

God is good. God will provide. That's all you need to know.