

Today we listen again to how the Israelites complained and grumbled. We are very much like the people of Israel in this story who complained to Moses. We hear ourselves in the complaining and grumbling, too. We complain about the weather. "It's too hot. It's too rainy. It's too cold."

We complain about politicians and the economy. We grumble about noise and traffic and growth. We complain about grocery prices. This place in the wilderness is remembered, not as a place where God provided, but where the people complained.

When Moses first led the people out of slavery in Egypt across the Red Sea, their first response was exuberant celebrating, singing, and dancing. But as they journey deep into the wilderness, their celebration turns to grumbling, complaining, and blaming. Last week we heard how the Israelites grumbled and complained because they were hungry, and God gave them manna & quail. This week, we hear how they are getting thirsty with no water in the desert for miles around. They begin to complain again and their complaining becomes accusatory. "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" So of course Moses takes the situation to God saying "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me!"

We could easily label the Hebrew people as just a bunch of whiners. And yet, the Israelites had valid reasons for their complaint. They were in a desert and could not find water. Their lives were being threatened. They weren't being unreasonable. They weren't demanding some kind of frivolous luxury.

How often can we differentiate between a necessity and a luxury. A study was recently conducted asking people, Is it a necessity for your family to have more than one phone? Over 80% of all households said, "YES!". We wouldn't be able to live if we had just one phone that we all had to share." When this question was asked back in 1970 only about 2% of all Americans said yes.

The Hebrew people were dealing with a necessity. If it didn't get resolved quickly, meant that they could very well end up dying. And so the Hebrew people and Moses did what we often do when we face some kind of difficult situation – they complained. The people started it off by complaining about Moses, their leader. And in turn, Moses complained about the people. When we face difficult challenges in our lives, what do we do? Do we complain? Do we look for someone to blame? Or are we willing to entrust ourselves into God's hands, and find grace from unexpected places?

You remember the characters from The Wizard of Oz, don't you. Dorothy and her companions are on their own kind of wilderness journey. While they are not exactly headed to the Promised Land, they are traveling to see the Wizard, who they believe can give them what they desire. Dorothy wants to go home; the scarecrow wants a brain; the tin man wants a heart; and the cowardly lion wants some courage. Somehow, they band together as a community that cares for each other and supports one another along their adventurous journey. By the end of the film, we come to understand that these seekers had the objects of their desires with them all along. The Scarecrow, who thinks he lacks a brain, turns out to be pretty clever. The Tin-Man has always had a heart; the Cowardly Lion has always had courage; and Dorothy always had the means to return home to Kansas.

Similarly, the people of Israel wandering in the wilderness always have God with them. The film ultimately says that what we look for we can find within us: "Believe in yourself, including your own resources." The Exodus text says that what we need for salvation we can find in God, who is with us always. "Believe that God is always with you and will always help you." I believe both are true - that God is with us always, and the God in whom we live and breathe, and have our being helps us summon up the resources within ourselves to come out on the other side.

Fear and grumbling tend to limit resourcefulness and close down creativity. Adaptability and openness to creative solutions can become the most valuable characteristics in unpredictable places.

Wilderness is no place to lose your way, but when we are in the wilderness, we can begin to find our way again. The wilderness is where the people of God have gone to find their way.

Robert Fulghum tells the story of sitting next to a young woman at a Hong Kong airport. She sat there quietly, wearing faded blue jeans and an old T-shirt. Suddenly, she began to cry. He tried to ignore her at first but her crying grew louder. After a few moments he looked at her and asked, "What is wrong?" She tells him the whole story. Through the tears, she said she was returning home sooner than she planned. Her money had run out and she was waiting to fly standby. She had been waiting for two days in the airport and had just received news that a seat was waiting for her. However, the plane was about ready to leave, and realized she had lost her ticket. Robert Fulghum frantically helped her look through her possessions but the ticket couldn't be found. His heart was breaking for her and the only thing he could think of doing was inviting her to get something to eat. After dinner he would talk to the powers that be and try to get her home. She accepted his kind offer. She stood up to collect her

things when she suddenly screamed. There was her ticket on her seat. She had been sitting on it the whole time. A hug, a kiss, a laugh, and a few more tears and then she was gone to catch her plane. She ran toward her gate and he never saw her again. Sometimes we're sitting on our own tickets and don't realize it. Our ticket to life. Our ticket through difficulties.

"Look at what you already have," says God, "and use it." "Look at the staff in your hand, Moses. Strike the rock." And it's not just about finding grace for ourselves; it's about offering a cup a cold water to the people in our lives as well.

Do you remember Jok Nhial who visited with us last year? He was one of the lost boys of Sudan. He immigrated to the U.S., got an education, and then turned toward his people again, raising money to build schools in his homeland of southern Sudan.

***A young girl** Rachel Beckwith from Bellevue had a mission to raise \$300 by her ninth birthday to supply clean water to poor African villagers. When her birthday came, she hadn't quite reached the \$300 mark, and then her life ended in a tragic car accident. But friends, church members and total strangers from around the world picked up where Rachel left off after news of her birthday wish spread after her death. Rachel's fundraising campaign for charity water has now surpassed the \$1 million mark.*

God often uses individuals to provide relief in the wilderness. You or I may be the rock from which God uses to draw forth water.