

Faith or Grumbling?  
Sermon for the 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity  
Sermon Text: Exodus 16:2-3, 11-18

*And the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, <sup>3</sup>and the people of Israel said to them, "Would that we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." <sup>11</sup>And the LORD said to Moses, <sup>12</sup>"I have heard the grumbling of the people of Israel. Say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread. Then you shall know that I am the LORD your God.'" <sup>13</sup>In the evening quail came up and covered the camp, and in the morning dew lay around the camp. <sup>14</sup>And when the dew had gone up, there was on the face of the wilderness a fine, flake-like thing, fine as frost on the ground. <sup>15</sup>When the people of Israel saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat. <sup>16</sup>This is what the LORD has commanded: 'Gather of it, each one of you, as much as he can eat. You shall each take an omer, according to the number of the persons that each of you has in his tent.'" <sup>17</sup>And the people of Israel did so. They gathered, some more, some less. <sup>18</sup>But when they measured it with an omer, whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack. Each of them gathered as much as he could eat.*

Jethro was old and tired. His bones were tired and hurt, and he hadn't been able to go very fast for a long time nor could he work for very long like his younger colleagues. Jethro was the treasurer among the Israelite slaves in Egypt. It was his job to distribute the few scraps that they were given by the Egyptians among the people. Jethro had always strongly believed that with good planning and strong faith in God, one could get by. But when Moses talked about the entire people of Israel packing their belongings to go wander in the desert, Jethro had to tell them of his worries. The little bit that the Israelites packed wouldn't be enough. Even an amateur could figure that out. There wasn't enough there! But Moses had already just swept the other obstacles off the table. That's why Jethro, with his tired bones, set out and followed Moses. Into the desert! Now they were in a mess! Just as Jethro had previously warned them. Day by day, there is less and less food. Jethro was a treasurer for a reason – he could conjure up a meal from almost nothing. If it weren't for the constant complaining and griping of the Israelites. Ungrateful lot! And that's why Jethro no longer bothered with cost cutting measures. He just handed out the food as he pleased – until the last crumbs were gone and the pots remained empty and the children of Israel cried out in hunger. Yes, if your stomach is empty, you can chase a hundred pharaohs into the sea and divide the sea in half as many times as you like, but without food, there is no path forward, and without a path forward, there is no future. Moses' dream was now over. That's why Jethro the treasurer was mad, disappointed, and depressed. He was mad at Moses, at Israel, at the dumb plan to wander in the desert, but most of all, he was mad at God. How could God have allowed him to become treasurer of empty sacks, and in his old age too. God had expected too much from him!

Have you experienced such times of want, like Jethro experienced? We don't have to go hungry, and no one expects us to wander in the desert with empty sacks and no supplies. Yet we can also completely understand what it means to go through times of barren "desert moments." "Desert moments" are times where nothing works anymore. They are times where our hopes and goals come to nothing. For one person, it's a job that leads to nothing, for another it's a relationship where love has died. For others, it's the hopelessness of asylum proceedings and still another suddenly has an incurable disease that wipes out all joy in life! There are many examples. You could also say that life is naturally set up in such a way that at some point it will have to become less and less again. At some point, we all must relinquish all our wealth, all our joy, all our happiness, and all our love, and at some point, we must even give up our life. We can still deal with disappointments and scarcity for a while, but at some point, the sack is truly empty. And then? How do we

deal with the experience of the desert in our life? Maybe we could act exactly like the Israelites. And what did they do? They grumbled! Against Moses, against Aaron, and even against God! In the church, we also experience such “desert moments.” God promised us “an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.” (2 Cor. 4:17) But the path there is and remains an imposition because we give up all security and believe in nothingness and darkness. That’s what happened when Noah, by faith without any evidence, was asked to prepare for a flood by building an ark. That’s what happened when Abraham ventured out into the unknown. That’s also what happened when the Israelites went into the desert following God’s Word. So it is today when God promises us that He gives us a completely new life through Jesus Christ. Sometimes we embrace this faith with joy and look forward to our journey with God. But there are days when our journey with God can be like wandering in a desert! On such days, we feel punished by God and unloved. Our prayers dry up and become empty formulas. If such feelings spread throughout the community, we will be back to what it was like in Israel back then – grumbling and a collective depression that hovers like a dark cloud over everyone’s mind. Such feelings have the strange characteristic that they multiply again and again. Such times sap our strength and we can’t hold out for long. We see in the people of Israel an example of how people become weary in faith. Jethro, who I had as an example, was tired of seeing the empty sacks. He didn’t want to have to believe anymore, and neither did the rest of people of Israel!

How does God react to such unbelief? You could say that God has to punish such unbelieving people – faith is one of the foundations of the children of God. If *they* no longer believe, who will? The amazing thing about this story is that Israel loses its faith in God, but God doesn’t lose His faith in the people. God doesn’t go around measuring the faith of the people so that He can bless them according to the strength of their faith. No, God goes around and finds flawed people. It’s the same in the church. Yet God draws us to Himself and blesses us – not because we deserve this blessing, but just because! For Jethro, the story turned out very differently than any treasurer could imagine. Normally, any financial expert will be able to tell you that nothing comes from nothing: if you don’t invest, you get nothing back! Jethro, the Israelite treasurer, experienced something different. In the evening, he went to sleep with empty sacks and a sad spirit. But in the morning, his bags were filled, and his spirit was happy again! Just because! No, not just because. Jethro was happy and had full sacks again because God is infinitely rich and wants to use His wealth to give us abundant gifts. This is all because of grace! Even when we haven’t deserved any of it at all. For the Israelites, the quail and manna were gifts that God had prepared for them. God thinks of His people and gives them what they need even while they are sleeping! This is what God wants to tell us through this story too. We don’t always need to think about our shortcomings. We have a God who knows no shortcomings and Who wants to give us so much. What a God we have! What a future we have with this God who constantly invites us to share in His wealth! “...you shall be filled with bread. Then you shall know that I am the Lord your God” is what God also promises us. Today we too may taste of God’s riches – Jesus poured out His life abundantly for us. This same Jesus now invites us: Take and eat, this is My body...take and drink, this is My blood!

Back when Jethro went into the desert with his fellow countrymen, his first concern was to get the logistics of the journey organized. Later, like every other Israelite, he had to learn that the time spent wandering through the desert was primarily a journey of faith. Again and again, the Israelites had to experience that they had too little. Again and again, they were able to come to the surprising discovery that God has everything that they didn’t have. The church, as the people of God, has very similar experiences with God. For us, prayers, faith, and good works remain empty, but God has everything that we don’t have. Again and again, we experience God’s amazing care in our lives. God gives us everything so that we can see and recognize that He is God. Amen.