

Into the Mystery - LOST - 3-7-10

By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

Complaining in the Wilderness

(Excerpts from Exodus 15, 16, 17, 32)

Israel set out from the Red Sea and went into the wilderness of Shur. There they found no water. When they came to Marah they could not drink the water because it was bitter. And the people complained against Moses saying, "What shall we drink?"

Israel set out from Elim and came to the wilderness of Sin. The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness saying, "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill us with hunger."

Israel journeyed in stages. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?"

When Israel saw that Moses delayed coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said to him, "Come, make gods for us for we do not know what has happened to the one who brought us out of Egypt." Aaron said to them, "Take off your gold rings and bring them to me." So they did. Aaron took the gold, formed it in a mold and cast an image of a calf. They said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!"

A few years ago, a pastor of a congregation in Kansas City grew weary of what he felt were trivial complaints. So rather than complaining about the complaining, he devised a plan. He asked his congregation to swear off complaining, criticizing, gossiping or using sarcasm for 21 days. That is, 21 days in a row. People who took the No-Complaints pledge received a purple bracelet to put on as a reminder of their commitment. If they catch themselves complaining, they're supposed to take off the bracelet, switch it to the opposite wrist and start counting the days from scratch. It took the pastor 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ months to complete the 21 days complaint-free! Apparently, it took twice that for some. But this phenomenon really caught on and there were people world-wide ordering these little purple bracelets trying to be complaint-free for 21 days. One Sunday School teacher said she thought it was actually easier for the children. They all seemed to accomplish the 21 days before she did. It took her 4 months to succeed.

I don't know if complaining has increased in recent years or not. But I do know that people complaining has been around a VERY long time as is evidenced by our story of the Israelites I read today. Here we have this group of people who had lived in bondage in Egypt. Finally, they were set free, and now, it seems, all they can do is complain. It would be easy to come down hard on those Israelites. No sooner had they been given a tremendous gift than they expressed the depth of their ingratitude by complaining. But the truth is, if it is a stage, and not a way of life, complaining can be a coping mechanism when we face transitions and uncertainty. The problem comes when complaining becomes chronic, and rather than being therapeutic, serves to keep us from moving forward in our lives. When we face loss or change or find ourselves in unfamiliar territory, complaints become a way for us to release our fears and our anxieties.

Five months into a new mentoring program for foster youth, the program administrator started receiving frantic calls from worried

mentors all in the same week. After five months of relative quiet, all of the youth were acting out. She wondered what was going on? Suddenly, mentors were reporting that youth who had been sober for the last five months, were drinking again and generally behaving badly. Everyone flew into a panic until it dawned on the director that this sudden change in behavior was occurring in the month of June: school holiday season. During this period, **all youth** — not only those in foster care — undergo a change from the structured setting of school to the loose schedule of summer. The youth in foster care were struggling as they tried to adjust to life in this new environment.

Transitions can be tricky times. When we go from known to unknown, or when changes happen and we are trying to adjust to new ways of being. Those Israelites really acted out, didn't they? It wasn't enough that they complained against God and against the leaders - especially Moses. They, in their anxiety and discomfort; in their disorientation and feelings of being lost, went to Aaron and basically asked for a new God... the old one just doesn't seem to be working. And

so Aaron asked that everyone pitch in their gold earrings (which, by the way, were remnants of Egypt) so they could be melted down and turned into the Golden Calf, an object of worship to sooth their anxious souls. "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!" How quickly they forgot the one true God and all that God had done.

The wilderness represents those times when we are cast (or flung) out into territory that is unfamiliar. It happens for different reasons. We find ourselves in the wilderness when we go through a major change in our lives, like the death of a loved one, or a divorce, losing or changing jobs or moving. We live in times of exponential change. It may seem that we are always in transition no matter where we turn. Things that used to be sure and steadfast no longer hold. And on top of the economic climate and the political climate (both of which seem uncertain; both of which are sources of complaint) - on top of all that, there is the fact that we are on the forth month of a long, cold and snowy winter, and it's easy to relate to the Israelites and

their complaints and their desire for a more concrete manifestation of God. In the depth of our wilderness, there is much temptation to seek our comfort in things more tangible; to put our faith in what we can see in front of our faces. In the wilderness, we get lost and grasp for anything to relieve our disorientation even if it is an illusion; even if it is temporary.

In the depth of the wilderness, we face temptation. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, "At this moment God is quite unreal to us, [God] loses all reality, and only desire for the creature is real; the only reality is the devil. Satan does not here fill us with hatred of God, but with forgetfulness of God" ... We probably think of temptation as something that causes us to do things like overeat or speak in mean ways, or smoke or drink or some other device like that. But in scripture, temptation is forgetting God, or substituting other things for God; devoting ourselves to purposes other than God's. In the wilderness, Jesus takes strength from remembering that "One does

not live by bread alone"; "Worship God Only"; and "Do not put God to the test."

In this season of Lent, as we journey through the wilderness with Jesus and the Israelites, we may find ourselves lost, disoriented; looking for something to comfort us; searching for something to relieve our fears and anxieties, something on which we can depend. It is so tempting to put our faith and focus on the wrong thing - on that which may provide comfort in a moment, but will not last. It's like addictions. The thing to which a person is addicted does provide some comfort - some relief - that cigarette or drink or computer game or never-ending work. Those things can help us forget, for a moment, the challenges of life, but they will never be life-giving. They will never satisfy a hungry heart and soul. For we cannot live by bread alone; our loneliness and lostness; our struggles and our need will not give in to a quick-fix. In our moments of being lost, may we look for the light of God to guide us home. Amen.

Fix You by ColdPlay <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pY9b6jgbNyc>

When you try your best but you don't succeed
When you get what you want but not what you need
When you feel so tired but you can't sleep
Stuck in reverse

And the tears come streaming down your face
When you lose something you cannot replace
When you love someone but it goes to waste
COULD IT BE WORSE?

Lights will guide you home
And ignite your bones
And I will try to fix you

And high up above or down below
When you're too in love to let it go
But if you never try you'll never know
Just what you're worth

Lights will guide you home
And ignite your bones
And I will try to fix you

Tears stream down your face
When you lose something you cannot replace
Tears stream down your face
And I

Tears stream down your face
I promise you I will learn from my mistakes
Tears stream down your face
And I

Lights will guide you home
And ignite your bones
And I will try to fix you.