

Numbers 11
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Complaining in the Desert

1Now when the people complained in the hearing of the LORD about their misfortunes, the LORD heard it and his anger was kindled. Then the fire of the LORD burned against them, and consumed some outlying parts of the camp. 2But the people cried out to Moses; and Moses prayed to the LORD, and the fire abated. 3So that place was called Taberah because the fire of the LORD burned against them.

4The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again, and said, "If only we had meat to eat! 5We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; 6but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at."

7Now the manna was like coriander seed, and its color was like the color of gum resin. 8The people went around and gathered it, ground it in mills or beat it in mortars, then boiled it in pots and made cakes of it; and the taste of it was like the taste of cakes baked with oil. 9When the dew fell on the camp in the night, the manna would fall with it.

10Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, all at the entrances of their tents. Then the LORD became very angry, and Moses was displeased. So Moses said to the LORD, "Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? 12 16So the LORD said to Moses, "Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tent of meeting, and have them take their place there

with you. 17 I will come down and talk with you there; and I will take some of the spirit that is on you and put it on them; and they shall bear the burden of the people along with you so that you will not bear it all by yourself. 18

Today our passage takes us to the wandering Israelites in the wilderness. We've heard their complaints and whining before. In Exodus 15 they complain about the bitter water, in chapter 16, they complain about the lack of food. By 17 they are complaining about being thirsty.

By the time we arrive at our text for the day they are complaining about manna and wishing they had meat to eat. In a few more chapters they will complain about the prospect of invading Canaan. Coming myself off a few 12 hour road trips with children their complaints and irritation seem to have the same cyclical fashion as the questions and statements you hear when you bring kids on a road trip. "Are we there yet?" "I'm bored" "she's touching me, he touched me first!" But also - their complaints remind me of the one star yelp reviews people have given the national parks. An artist named [Amber Share](#) has a lovely collection in which she has illustrated the best/worst one star review of each national park. I didn't bring the illustrations but you should check them out.

Here's what someone said of Sequoia National Park: **"There are bugs and they will bite you on your face"**. Of Glacier National Park someone said it was **"too cold for me"**. Of Yosemite, they said: **"Trees block the view and there are too many grey rocks."** About the Grand Canyon, someone wrote: **"A hole. A very, very large hole"**. And probably my favorite is someone's review of the Joshua Tree National park, **"the only thing to do here is walk around the desert."**

I think our wandering in the wilderness ancestors would be writing similar one star reviews of their experience of being delivered out of slavery and into the Promised Land. "The holy manna was exciting at first – now its just meh" Their complaining as I mentioned takes us all the way back to exodus. All these years later and they are still asking God, through Moses, *"Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?"*

But here's the thing we need to remember friends. This isn't exodus. God for years now, has been providing for them. Remember waaaay back in chapter 16 of Exodus – when God covered all around them in a fine dust and instructed them to collect it and to eat it. Day by day, the Israelites learned to trust in God's provision. And they learned a system of economics that is far different from that of Pharaoh. They gathered the manna, each as much as they needed, and those who had gathered much had nothing left over and those who gathered little had no shortage.

Day by day, the Israelites learned that true wealth is having what you need. True wealth is having what you can use. This was quite a different message from Pharaoh, who was having his slaves build pyramids so that not only would

Pharaoh have more than his share in this life, but he'd also have a place to store it in the next. It is hard to carry your pyramids around with you in the desert. You have to let go of some things to move into the Promised Land. And anxiety about having enough is one of those things that God has been working to teach them to let go of. God has still been providing that manna. That sweet honey tasting manna.

But, they've grown tired of manna. One can not live on bread alone and all...it's not enough for some of them. Some of them are feeling "hangry" for meat. Also, different than exodus, in numbers we have a rabble complaining and not all the people. Just these – rabble rousers. But as part of their complaints, they start reminiscing about the good old days back in Egypt. But their reminiscing is a romanticizing – their reminiscing is an attempt to escape their perceived present sufferings, they get so carried away that they eventually start questioning God and God's motives, and God's word. And so they create a big stink. They stomp and moan like children because they are upset that God hasn't provided them with the meat they are hangry for.

Eventually Moses finds out. And instead of telling them that they will indeed live on manna alone and that they will be grateful for it, instead of telling them no, to or to cut their shenanigans (as Kelley would have done, I'm sure) Moses turns to God for help. Except – you know its weird it doesn't sound like he's asking for help either. It kind of sounds like he too is just whining. Moses can't believe what is happening. And guess who Moses wants to blame too? That's right...God. God how could you do this? How could you give me these people it is just too much of a burden to bear.

Eventually we start to see why God might be angry. The rabble is upset that there isn't meat – and who is to blame? God. There are too many people and problems to maintain and who does Moses blame? God.

And this right here is the crux of our problems in Numbers. Let's be clear. The error of the rabble, the people, and Moses is not that they lifted up their disappointments to God. It's that they got so worked up – that they stopped trusting God. They started to believe what was in front of them. They started to believe the story they were telling themselves no matter how factual it was. And more over they forgot what God had promised them. Now they understand abundance – but now they want to control the gifts of God. Now they want more. And I can't really blame them. If manna is good then surely bacon – well quail would be better. But, in dreaming about meat they have allowed themselves to forget about the promise.

They stopped believing in God's promises of LIFE. They quit listening to the small still voice and instead chose to hear only their own sufferings. The whole wilderness experience for the Hebrew people wasn't about getting the people to believe certain beliefs or doctrines about God. It was about getting them to trust that God would lead them to life in a new land, as God had promised. It was dare I say learning to trust that what they NEEDED they already had. Trusting in the promises of God.

It seems like that should be so easy, doesn't it?

Yet, we live our lives as if we trust in anything but God.

We trust in ourselves

We trust in money.

We trust in country—even though our country's motto, written on our money, is "In God we Trust".

Where do you place your trust instead of in God?

It's not hard to do. We too, can be a little like the Israelites. For today's illustrations I am going to focus on how we are like them as it plays out to being church. But there are all sorts of ways in which we don't rely on an abundance model of living in our personal and professional lives. On our worst days we have a tendency to get a little hangry. Perhaps not for meat, but even us good church people we get hangry. We get hangry for how we perceive church used to be. We too inflate our stories about years gone by – there was always more money and more people in the pews then. There was always less conflict. There were more children and more activities. Church was sacred on Sunday and Wednesday. Yes, we too can re imagine the way things used to be. We tend too forget that some and probably lots of the way things were weren't actually as wonderful as we remember them to be. For instance – those old lofty church buildings didn't allow us to welcome our neighbors with disabilities. Those church buildings built across town didn't allow us to give access to community to our neighbors who struggle with transportation. Those old churches, the way it used to be, they had their shining moments but they also had their limitations.

But I get it. I feel for those rabble rousers a bit. It's hard to believe the story that God is calling us to live into. The work God is calling them to, and the work God is calling us into is hard work. The work of imagination – the work of dreaming – the work of trust, none of that is easy work. What's easier is trying to make the way we've always done it fit, because even if it wasn't working for them or for us it is known. And there is comfort in what is known.

But that's not where God is calling God's people. Then or now. God is calling

them to live into a different story. The story in which even now God delivers us. The story in which God continues to make things new. The story where God uses us to continue to build the kingdom of God in which all people have what they need, according to their need. In which all people have access to the Holy. In which all people have worth and a place in the community. When the wind brings just what we need – sometimes we are a little like the Israelites. We don't really want it. Or we expected something better than just more manna. Couldn't we just have some meat? Couldn't we just have big budgets and butts in the seats? Or we are like Moses. And we didn't even realize that all we needed to do was look around to see that within the community – a broken community full of whiners, even within that community everything he needed was right there. People gifted with the talent and resources to help labor the burden of leadership.

We know from hearing this story of the 40 years in the desert that this is something that the people had to learn again and again. They had to learn to trust that God would provide. And it seems in this lesson they had to learn to trust that what was given was sufficient not just for their survival but for their flourishing.

I want you to hear that again. What they had was enough not just for their survival but for their flourishing. What we have is enough for our FLOURISHING. Because even now the promises of God stand true. Even right here at DCC God is inviting us to live into a model of abundance. Even right now we are being invited to trust in the God of abundance.

The implications of this are huge for us as people and for us as a community. If we can trust that what we have right here in the seats and right here in this room. If we can trust that the gifts that we possess together, that the brainpower, and the grit, and the grace, and the giving is enough right here and right now – what might be possible? If we can look around and find like Moses that we have just what we need for the new day God is creating what could we be capable of? The God who created us and loves us, is providing for us abundantly. And when we believe that and live into that it changes not only what we believe we are capable of, but it impacts the ways we are willing to dream and imagine, it impacts the way we welcome, it impacts the lengths we are willing to grow, and it impacts the way we serve. It impacts all facets of our lives. And I see some of you, eyes glazing over. Oh Anna is onto this woo woo stuff now. Trust in God – God will provide. I'm not up here preaching a prosperity gospel friends. If you want a private jet I don't know what to tell you. And I am not talking about blind faith – or should I say lazy faith where we wait for the manna to rain. What I am

suggesting is that we partner with God. That we put as much faith as we can that God is still an abundant God. That God still wants all of God's children to flourish. What I am suggesting is that we partner with God in creating and seeing the world from a place of abundance. I believe that this kind of partnership will help us to look at the world differently. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt is attributed for asking this question, "What would you do if you knew you could not fail?" But I wonder what could we do if we knew that we have and are enough? In our lives, in the church, and in the world?

I look forward to seeing how God is calling us to live into these questions. And I am so thankful to have each of you as a companion on the journey. Amen.