

## A Murmuring in the Desert

Father Larry

*“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyards. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the market place; and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ They said to him ‘Because, no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and going to the first.’ When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ So the last shall be first, and the first will be last” (Matthew 20:1-16).*

*The whole congregation of the Israelites set out from Elim; and came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sanai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat beside the flesh pots and ate our fill of bread, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill the whole assembly with hunger.” Then the Lord said to Moses, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instructions or not. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.” So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, “In the evening you shall know that it was the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord, because he has heard your complaining against the Lord. For what are we, that you complain against us?” And Moses said, “When the Lord gives you meat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the Lord has heard the complaints you utter against him – what are we? Your complaint is not against us but against the Lord” (Exodus 16:1-8).*

It didn't start with a loud shout of complaint, but with a low murmur, barely audible, like the babbling of a water brook before we are fully conscious of its soft whisper. But this is not a soft sacred whisper, a gentle murmuring, it has an edge to it – an almost indiscernible sound of disbelief, discontent, displeasure. “What is this? They keep on asking one another with rising indignation. “We have worked since early morning through the heat of the day; and, yet, he has the audacity to pay us the same as these guys, who didn't even get here until the work was nearly done. Unbelievable!” The worst thing of course, is not the rudeness of the murmuring, but its failure of joy and trust so that we don't see the wonder and the goodness of God.

The denarius was a small silver coin. It was the minimum amount needed by a laborer in the first century to sustain his or her family for one day. That's why the Revised Standard Version we are reading from refers to it as “the daily wage.” These people, like a lot of people today in this country, constantly lived on the financial edge. Several years ago I did some work with the Justice for Janitors Movement. I talked to lots of men and women who told me how they were confined to part-time work with no benefits, so that if their child was sick or injured they had to choose whether they would go to the doctor and not pay rent or buy food, or whether to take the chance that their little boy or their little girl would get well or heal on their own. The workers in this parable are people who lived on the edge of this sort of frightening crevice. So wouldn't you think that at the end of the day when they each received that small silver coin, that life sustaining denarius they would say: “I am blown away! I feel so much gratitude. Today we all got work, and this evening everyone of us will go home with exactly what is needed. This farmer is so generous! God is so good!” But their thoughts quickly begin to run down a more jealous and selfish path, and they begin to murmur – or to complain if you prefer the Revised Standard translation. Whatever word or phrase you use – murmuring against, complaining, or quarreling – it is symptomatic of an attitude or disposition towards life that prevents us from seeing the shining wonder of God.

For the Hebrews far out in the sand and heat of the desert waste, running out of anything to eat or drink, it is a feeling of panic. We can see them milling about murmuring, “We made the wrong decision.” Complaining to Moses and Aaron, “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in Egypt. If only God had killed us in one of the plagues, while we were sitting by dishes of meat and eating our fill of bread. But you have brought us into this awful place where none of us will survive.” They just don't see how God has been right there all along, present to them, helping them, liberating them. When we can look back over our own personal life history and see how God has always been there, even in our darkest nights, loving and sustaining us, we will have taken a quantum leap forward in the spiritual life.

“If only we had,” they murmur, “if only we had.” Words of regret for what is in the present moment, words of fear for what may be in the future. The truth is they really don't know what would have happened “if they had only” stayed in Egypt. None of us do. None of us know for sure what might have been if our choices had been different. I like Eleanor Wilner's poem, “It's Not Cold in Here:” There's not time for us to explore it's allusions to a journey, to the Exodus, or the themes of bread or manna, or the symbol

of the wind for the Spirit, Just listen to how it answers the illness of nostalgia as well as regret:

Too much is made of choice:  
we merely came the way we could  
being what we were, and we were changed  
by the terrain we came by. Nor could we  
see around a single bend  
until we'd turned it. And it was wind  
and not a course we'd charted  
that brought us to a pebbled shore  
whose stones the sea had shaped and  
polished, and gave us food we'd never  
tasted. Of this we had no premonition  
nor even, quite, desire.

I am the only one in my family of origin to get a college degree. My mother was a widow who by working hard in a hospital kitchen provided for our basic needs. She hoped that I could go to college, but we didn't really know much about how to go about that, or whether financially it would even be possible. So, when she talked about it she always tempered her hope by saying, "IF, you can go to college." I began Bakersfield Community College, with the intention of transferring in two years to West Texas State University – a decision dictated by the concerns of our ultra conservative denomination. At Bakersfield College I was captain of the debate team. We were competing in a tournament at the University of the Pacific. In those days UOP recruited debaters like other schools recruited football players. The debate coach, Dr. Phyllis Dabbs, who was an Episcopalian, told me that she had arranged a meeting for me early on Saturday morning with UOP's Dean of Students. She said it could be a wonderful opportunity. In that meeting the Dean offered me a scholarship that would have covered room and board and tuition, as well as a job. But I had no idea of what he was offering, and never gave it serious consideration. I only knew what my denomination expected of me. Ahhh, what might have been if I had only gone to the University of the Pacific. Well that's my point. I don't know what might have been. "I only came by the way I could, and was changed by the terrain I came by." And, although it may sometimes bother others, basically I like the way I have been shaped, and am profoundly grateful for all the experiences both good and bad that continue even now to form who I am becoming. "Too much is made of choice," too much time is spent in regret. Murmuring, complaining, only fosters an attitude of regret, blinds us to the mysterious wonder of life and prevents the deep listening Scripture calls "obedience."

And yet, even our murmuring against God may be transforming. "I will test them in this," God says to Moses and Aaron. In Scripture the word "testing," if it is a divine testing, is used not in the sense of diminishing, destroying or tearing something down, but rather in the sense of refining, strengthening, or improving its value – like gold tried in fire or the tempered blade of a fine sword. Here in the desert the Hebrew are vulnerable

to thirst, and hunger, and loneliness and fierce enemies. But God will use it all to help them move past their fear and murmuring to a place of trust in God's love and generosity a day at a time. "I will send bread down from heaven like rain. Each day the people can go out and gather only enough for that day. That's how I will see if they obey -- trust, listen, love me." Watchman Nee said, "It is at the point of desperation that God meets us." I wonder if it might be better said that it's often at the point of desperation that we meet God?

If our complaint includes a willingness to listen, no matter how unconscious that willingness is, as well as a need for our frustration, fear, and anger to be heard, then there is the possibility of our seeing God, feeling God, knowing God in our very being.

*Moses and Aaron told the people, "This evening you will know that the Lord is the one who rescued you from Egypt. And in the morning you will see God's glorious power, because God has heard your complaints."*

There is a certain legitimacy to this murmuring in the desert to which God is not oblivious. It reminds me of what one woman wrote to William Barry, the Jesuit writer and spiritual director:

My closest friend, Mary, was dying a long painful wasting death. I was distraught and had nowhere to turn. I tried to pray asking God to relieve Mary of her pain, but I felt that God was a million miles away. One night the dam burst. I told God off in no uncertain terms, even cursed him for what was happening to Mary. Then I cried until I thought no tears could be left. The strange thing was that God seemed very close and comforting. The pain was still there; in fact, it seemed even more intense. Yet at the same time there was an intense feeling almost of joy. It was as if in spite of the pain Mary and I were wrapped in love.

If our murmuring is a kind of naked honesty with God, then it is not an obstacle to a deeper and more powerful and liberating spirituality.

With Paul there is no murmuring, no complaining, only a deep attentive listening, a complete openness to whatever God asks, absolute trust that it can only be good to follow wherever Christ leads. "To live is Christ," says Paul, "to die is gain." Yet Paul goes on to say something rather strange and somewhat disconcerting. Listen to this – I'm reading from Eugene Peterson's translation, "There is more to this life (meaning to the Christian life), there is more to this life than trusting in Christ. There is also suffering for him. And the suffering is as much a gift as the trusting." My good friend Werner Kroeker broke his neck in a car accident. For a long time he had to wear a stainless steel apparatus, a halo, with bolts screwed into his skull. Every day, racked by pain, he

murmured, “Why me God?” At one point in his treatment the doctors told him he needed to be exercising – that he needed to walk as much as he could. But, they said, any time he felt at all faint or dizzy he should lie down immediately – wherever he was. One day while crossing a busy intersection in downtown Fresno he felt woozy and so he laid down right there in the middle of the intersection – flat on his back. Drivers honked their horns and shouted at him: “Get out of the way you crazy drunk! I ought to run over you! Move you idiot! As he lay there vulnerable and humiliated, Werner quit murmuring. He said, “Lord I don’t know why this is happening, but I don’t want the experience to be lost on me. Werner Kroeker is wise and kind and strong. He is one of the best human beings on this planet. It is a joy to know him and to be his friend. The suffering is as much a gift as the trusting.

I know this is a difficult sermon, Brenda has been telling me that all week long, but its difficulty will disappear as soon as we decide what gift we want, the kind of reward we are seeking.

*In you is hell’s abyss, heaven’s grace,  
What you elect and want you have in any place.*

*Amen.*