

Take my lips, O Lord, and speak through them; take our minds and think with them; take our hearts and set them on fire, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Israelites spent forty years in the wilderness, wandering between captivity in Egypt and life in the Promised Land. I have a lot of sympathy for those Israelites.

I can certainly understand – and sympathize – if they did some complaining about what they had to endure. They came by that honestly. In fact, much of what is recorded about that time, so much of what we know about that time is that those Israelites complained – a lot.

First, they complained about not having enough food. So, God gave them manna to eat. Then, as we join their story in today's reading from the Book of Numbers, they're at it again. Only now, they're complaining about the manna. Now they want meat, and fish, and cucumbers, onion, and garlic, and so on and so forth.

And suddenly Egypt, even though they'd been slaves there, and had been horribly mistreated, didn't seem so awful, because at least they had things – like meat and fish and cucumbers.

Even Moses got into the act, moaning at God: 'where am I supposed to get meat for all these people?'. 'Why,' he complained to God, have you laid this burden on me? And then, when God proposed a solution – namely, that 70 others be given some of the Spirit so that Moses wouldn't be so overworked – they found something to complain about there, too – specifically, that Eldad and Medad were prophesying back in the camp, instead of in the tent.

What is that all about?

Not only does complaining seem to be the only game in town, but the complaints seem to grow increasingly frivolous. Complaining about not having enough food is one thing, but the minute they had enough food, the Israelites found something else to lament: that it wasn't the right kind of food.

The Israelites, it seems, were much more ready to murmur about what they didn't have than to remember all that they had been given.

And they had, after all, been given quite a lot: freedom from slavery and oppression, inspired leadership, food, the promise of a land flowing with milk and honey, and the assurance that they were God's chosen and beloved people. They had been given plenty – and then some – but still they complained.

Well, as we heard in today's Gospel reading, the disciples who followed Jesus – and John in particular – were also not above a gripe or two. Like the Israelites who were jealous of Eldad and Medad because they weren't 'properly authorized' to prophesy, John complained about a man casting out demons in the name of Jesus, because that man wasn't part of the inner circle of disciples.

In fact, it would even seem that John wasn't as upset that the stranger wasn't following Jesus, as he was unhappy that he wasn't following the disciples. It sounds as though John thought either that they had some sort of copyright, or that discipleship was some sort of exclusive club.

From our perspective (and with benefit of hindsight) those biblical people – Moses, the Israelites, and Jesus' disciples – not only look like a bunch of jerks, but they also seem to be working against God's purposes.

Well – alas – I wonder if we wouldn't sometimes look a lot like those Biblical folks if we could see ourselves from the same kind of perspective. We land at God's feet our complaints about all that we see as wrong in our lives and in the world.

And perhaps we too work against God's purposes if we are as unwelcoming as the Israelites and the disciples of new people and – especially in this time of transition here at St. Ann's – of new possibilities. It always amazes me that God continues to put up with all our bellyaching. But even though we often behave negatively – and sometimes even destructively – God doesn't respond in kind.

And every time God responds in positive ways to our complaining, God tells us something about God – something very important. For one thing, God tells us that God is patient. When the Israelites complained about Eldad and Medad, or when the disciples moaned about the independent exorcist, it would have been entirely reasonable – and even justified – had God simply quit the whole enterprise.

But God didn't do that with those folks, back then, and God doesn't do that with us, either. God is patient and utterly faithful to the covenant with humanity. It is also with almost unbelievable gentleness that God responds to us. God didn't rant and rave at the Israelites – justified as that might have been. Rather, God suggested that it would be wonderful if 'all the Lord's people were prophets', and not just the seventy others.

And Jesus' response to John was just as gentle: 'don't forbid that person, for whoever is not against us is for us'. The complaining, exclusive, and possessive behavior of the Israelites, the disciples, and us too, from time to time, comes right out of fear.

We're scared that we won't have enough, or that we won't be good enough, or that someone else will be better. But you know what, God's not dumb; God knows all that. And no matter what we lay at God's feet, that's precisely where God meets us, even in the midst of our laundry lists of complaints.

Divine love meets us wherever we are – patiently, and gently, and faithfully. But divine love doesn't leave us there. We give God problems, and God makes opportunities. And divine love is stronger as a positive force than all our negative complaining and jealousy.

The opportunity that God took with the Israelites was to collect a rat-tag bunch of former slaves, forge them into a community on the move, and prepare them for their wonderful destiny in the Promised Land. It didn't happen overnight: with them it took 40 years – and then some. And Jesus took John's complaint about the 'unauthorized healer' and used the occasion to begin molding possessive and jealous disciples into the very people who would spread the Good News of God in Christ to the whole world.

We complain about all that is wrong, or about what we don't have. But divine love focuses on what is right, and what we do have, and builds on that. And we have so much.

We have a covenant from God: God's promise of enduring love, despite all our bellyaching – a covenant sealed with the blood of God's only Son. We have Jesus Christ, the redeemer of the world, sent to use whatever we will offer – including our complaining – and at the cost of his own life – and who will use whatever we offer to mold us into people who spread the Good News.

We also have the Holy Spirit, our guide and comforter, in all circumstances, good and bad. We have so much! Thanks be to God. Amen.