Give us ears to hear, O God, not only to hear, but to take your word in like the bread of heaven it is. May it nourish our souls and make us strong for service. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

I rarely tell jokes in sermons. Oh, I like jokes; it’s just that I don’t know many that belong in sermons. I imagine some people complain about this, so I’m going to begin this sermon about complaining with a joke about complaining.

This grandmother was watching her little grandson play at the beach, right at the water’s edge. Suddenly a huge rogue wave rolled up the beach and swept the little boy into the sea. The frantic grandmother dropped to her knees in prayer. “Gracious God,” she began, “This is my only daughter’s only child, my only grandchild. Please, God, spare his life.” With that another wave rolled up the beach and deposited the kid at the relieved grandmother’s feet, soggy but alive. She hugged him, looked him over, and turned again to God in prayer. “Dear God,” she prayed, “He had a hat.”

The several passages that Daniel just read from the Old Testament books of Exodus and Numbers tell the story of the famous manna from heaven. The tale unfolds after the Hebrew people had slipped out of Egypt, narrowly escaping pharaoh’s clutches and the horrors of slavery. The way home to the Promised Land leads through the Sinai wilderness, a land as arid as deserts come. Food is running short, and the people are hungry and crabby.

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They do what people often do when they’re hungry and crabby – they complain. They whine to Moses and his assistant Aaron, recalling what are suddenly the “good old days of slavery.” They moan, “If only we had died... in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread.” But you brought us into this wilderness to kill us (as if they had been forced to leave.) God overhears their complaining and promises a solution. He’s going to “rain bread from heaven” and does just that – that mysterious manna, whatever manna was. Actually, there are several explanations. My favorite posits that manna was a carbohydrate-rich excretion of scale-insects common in the Sinai that feed on the twigs of tamarisk trees.

Well, it may have been carbohydrate-rich, but manna was not exactly gourmet, and in no time, as the Book of Numbers tells us, the people are complaining about the manna. “’If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers and the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic, but now... there is nothing but this manna.’”

Today’s New Testament story was also about complaining, one of Jesus’ 39 parables. It’s familiar enough: A landowner, who surely stands for God, needs to hire some workers for his vineyard. He ends up making three trips to the street corner where day laborers looking for work hang out. He goes once at nine in the morning, again at noon, and finally at five, just before quitting time. At the end of the workday, out of nothing but raw generosity, the landowner pays everybody for a full day, even the noon and five o’clock guys get paid as if they’d worked a full shift. Of course, the nine o’clock guys get wind of it and they complain to the landowner. They complain even though they got paid exactly what they’d agreed to. “Can’t I just be generous?” the landowner-slash-God asks them.

Truth be told, the Bible is chock full of complaining. The whole of the Old Testament book of Lamentations is one long and bitter complaint to God about the destruction of Jerusalem after the Babylonian invasion. Fully one-third of the 150 Psalms in that book of the Bible are poems of complaint, prayers really, prayers that bewail all sorts of problems and persecutions, both national and personal. These Psalms of complaint are candid to the edge of caustic, so honest that they jolt pious sensibilities.

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Doubtless the most famous of the Psalms of complaint is Psalm 22. It’s the most famous because Jesus quotes it from the cross. He’s near death and complains—yes, even Jesus complains—complains by speaking aloud the first verse of Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

So it would seem that complaint has its place in God’s economy and our lives. So this sermon cannot be as simple as “STOP YOUR COMPLAINING!” In fact, true and accurate complaint is often refreshing in its candor and honesty. It’s like the rare moment when you casually ask a friend, “How are you?” and they actually have the guts to pull you aside and tell you the “not-so-good” truth about how they are. They could have covered it up like most of us do, smiling our happy face. But when you get the honest, albeit complaining answer, the moment can be intimate, and trusting, and deep. So… complaint has its place, but… But of course, nobody likes a constant complainer. Hard to love are those irksome souls who always preface their every complaint by saying what constant complainers always say, “I don’t mean to complain, but…”

On the other hand, the honest truth it that there really is a lot in this world to complain about: the economy is iffy, my job is vulnerable, Washington is a mess, the subways do stink, and sometimes the pizza actually is stale. Life can be rock hard, illness is a fact, people can be impossible, and it really isn’t fair. So if you’re honest, you’ll doubtless lodge the occasional complaint or two, but...

But, even though complaint is a place we all end up visiting once in a while, if you visit complaint too often, or worse yet if you choose to live in the land of complaint, you’ll find that life there as arid and lifeless and hungry as that Sinai desert ever was.

I often say much the same thing about guilt. What I mean is this: guilt is a land every honest soul must visit now and then. We all mess up; more candidly we all do things that are simply wrong, ethically wrong, and the fit emotional response of the honest person who has done something wrong is to feel guilty. Only the morally numb, only ethical shrimps never feel guilty. So pass through guilt you must, but you cannot live in the land of guilt. We are called to take hold of God’s

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grace, to receive the forgiveness of others, and to move beyond guilt into a life of refreshed, forward-looking integrity.

This very same dynamic is true of complaint. Honesty about life and its blows leads to visits to the land of complaint. Few are those who never complain about anything. But to live in the land of complaint, to become the storied “chronic complainer” is to dwell in a desert as arid as Sinai.

This last May, I was invited to preach the baccalaureate sermon at High Point University in North Carolina. This was an academic context with a big crowd of students, parents and faculty, so I figured I would quote a couple of intellectual types. I included a quotation from George Bernard Shaw, not somebody I much quote, indeed not somebody I much revere, but I really like this particular Shaw quote. It fit that sermon and fits this one too. Shaw said this, "This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one.... instead of a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy."

Someone at that baccalaureate service wrote me a long, anonymous letter of complaint, a letter of complaint about that Shaw quote about complaining. The writer didn’t object to my sermon. He didn’t even say he disagreed with what Shaw said about being a “feverish, selfish, little clod of ailments and grievances.” What he complained about was that I would quote Shaw in a sermon at all. “Didn’t I know that Shaw was a Fabian socialist and that Fabian socialism was a really bad idea?” Actually, I did know. And I agree that Fabian socialism was a bad idea. But Shaw, Fabian socialist or no, was quite right about complaining. Who can abide, who would want to be, his “a selfish little clod of grievances and ailments, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.”

To visit complaint now and then is one thing, but to live there is another. Veritably none those many Psalms of complaint I mentioned earlier end in complaint. This is crucially important. They visit complaint (do they ever!), but almost without exception, they do not stay there. Even if only in the very last verse, they finally turn – even if reluctantly – from lament and complaint to praise and thankfulness.
That 22nd Psalm that Jesus quoted from the cross, for instance. Jesus referenced only the first verse, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me.” That Psalm’s complaint grows even headier. Listen to this: “I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night but find no answer.” And later, “I am poured out like water, all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax…, you lay me in the dust of the earth.” Bitterest complaint this is – honest, brutally honest, to God.

But finally, the Psalmist’s complaint exhausts itself and veers to praise: Here’s the end of the Psalm: “All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord…. “and I shall live for him. Posterity will serve him and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it.”

Of course Jesus knew how the Psalm ended. His followers who heard it (those who had not yet run away) knew how the Psalm ended. When he uttered that first verse, he and all who heard it knew where it ended: “Posterity shall serve him and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it.”

For all of us who dare to wear the name of Jesus Christ, it finally comes down to this towering dichotomy, a choice planted at the center of our faith. Which is truer?

- Cross or resurrection,
- Good Friday or Easter…
- death or life…
- Evil or good…
- Complaint or thankfulness…?

Both are true…sometimes. The cross is true, death is true, evil is true. Complaint simply names them. But here is the towering decision before each of us, a decision that shapes our lives: “Are they the final truth?

Which world do you choose to live in? Good Friday or Easter? Death or Life? Evil or Good?
Every one of us will doubtless visit both in the course of our days, but in which world shall we choose live?
My wife has a T-shirt she wears in the summer. It has a simple, but existentially radical statement on the front, small letters that declare “Life is good.” The question those three words pose to all who see them is simple enough: Do I believe it?

Well, if the Christian faith insists on anything one thing, it declares stubbornly and against all complaints that
  the final reality,
  the truest truth,
  the last word about life is that it really is good.

The manna eaters finally do arrive in the Promised Land and blush at their erstwhile complaining.

The bitter complaints of the Psalmists do wend their way to praise.

The cross is penultimate reality, but not ultimate reality.

Good Friday isn’t the big day; Easter is.

Life wins, in the end.

So complain if you must, now and then. But you don’t need to live there.

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*