

Sermon Reading: Numbers 16:23-40

Then the LORD said to Moses,²⁴ “Say to the assembly, ‘Move away from the tents of Korah, Dathan and Abiram.’”

²⁵ Moses got up and went to Dathan and Abiram, and the elders of Israel followed him. ²⁶ He warned the assembly, “Move back from the tents of these wicked men! Do not touch anything belonging to them, or you will be swept away because of all their sins.” ²⁷ So they moved away from the tents of Korah, Dathan and Abiram. Dathan and Abiram had come out and were standing with their wives, children and little ones at the entrances to their tents.

²⁸ Then Moses said, “This is how you will know that the LORD has sent me to do all these things and that it was not my idea: ²⁹ If these men die a natural death and suffer the fate of all mankind, then the LORD has not sent me. ³⁰ But if the LORD brings about something totally new, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them, with everything that belongs to them, and they go down alive into the realm of the dead, then you will know that these men have treated the LORD with contempt.”

³¹ As soon as he finished saying all this, the ground under them split apart ³² and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and their households, and all those associated with Korah, together with their possessions. ³³ They went down alive into the realm of the dead, with everything they owned; the earth closed over them, and they perished and were gone from the community. ³⁴ At their cries, all the Israelites around them fled, shouting, “The earth is going to swallow us too!”

³⁵ And fire came out from the LORD and consumed the 250 men who were offering the incense.

³⁶ The LORD said to Moses, ³⁷ “Tell Eleazar son of Aaron, the priest, to remove the censers from the charred remains and scatter the coals some distance away, for the censers are holy—³⁸ the censers of the men who sinned at the cost of their lives. Hammer the censers into sheets to overlay the altar, for they were presented before the LORD and have become holy. Let them be a sign to the Israelites.”

³⁹ So Eleazar the priest collected the bronze censers brought by those who had been burned to death, and he had them hammered out to overlay the altar, ⁴⁰ as the LORD directed him through Moses. This was to remind the Israelites that no one except a descendant of Aaron should come to burn incense before the LORD, or he would become like Korah and his followers.

Sermon Theme: Grumbling Against the Lord

Again we are faced with another tragic account in the Old Testament. It maybe began with some low frustrated rumblings of how they expected things to be different. Maybe momentum was gained as someone else added thoughts of, “I think *this* is a better way of doing things. They just seem to know what they are doing.” It probably seemed innocent and harmless at first but it grew to outright accusations against Moses and Aaron.

Korah was from the tribe of Levi. So already he had a special position in the community taking care of the Tabernacle—God’s house of worship for the Israelites at the time. But that wasn’t good enough. Korah claimed that Moses had taken it too far with the spiritual leadership. In Korah’s eyes the whole community was holy and the Lord was with them (Numbers 16:1-3) so it didn’t seem right that Aaron and his family should be the only ones able to be priests. How was that fair?

In the eyes of Dathan, Abiram, and those 250 leaders, Moses was failing as the leader. For them, they saw it that Moses had taken them from somewhere they were completely content only to kill them all in the wilderness. (That somewhere they are talking about was Egypt; conveniently forgetting that’s where they had suffered horribly in slavery.) They see Moses as trying to lord it over them—being oppressive—all the while not keeping his promise to take them to the Promised Land. They simply wouldn’t have it anymore! Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and these other 250 leaders seem to think not only did they deserve better but that they could do better.

No one could accuse you of grumbling against Aaron and Moses trying to usurp Aaron’s authority as high priest or attacking Moses’s leadership capabilities. But we face the same temptation and fall into the same sin that lies behind it. We grumble because winter took too long. And when it warms up we grumble how swampy and nasty everything is. We grumble when it doesn’t rain enough, and turn around and grumble when the sun doesn’t shine enough. We grumble and wonder why God seemingly has shown more love, more care and concern toward _____, because they don’t have the money, family, health, life problems that I do. Or it’s, “I didn’t think this is where I would be right now in my life—why is God doing this to me?” Or it’s even thinking, “God must have some great grandiose things in store for my life because of my current suffering. I just need to need suffer a little longer and it will get better. Good things happen for good people, right?”

But then the good doesn’t seem to come. Things don’t go the way we had planned. The suffering doesn’t get any better. Life doesn’t go the way we want and we miss out on some life experience that someone else gets to enjoy. And then I grumble and complain.

No, you don’t grumble against Moses and Aaron, but we grumble against God’s called and appointed servants in the government and lawmakers, “Why should they be able to tell me

how to live my life? Why should I have to pay so much in taxes?” We grumble against our bosses and others who have authority over us because, “They don’t know what they are doing.” At all different stages of our life we grumble against our parents because they still don’t know what’s going on. We grumble against the leaders in the church, the elders, the called workers and pastors because you don’t feel they are doing a good enough job. “Remember when the Sunday school was full and the church was better attended? Why doesn’t this pastor, those elders, those leaders do a better job getting people in church?”

I’ve struggled at times to distinguish the line between getting something off your chest, not bottling it up and the other side of sinful grumbling and complaining? You might have too because the devil wants us to believe that a little grumbling isn’t that bad. He wants us to think that it’s not just harmless but that it’s also good for you.

But from Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and the 250 leaders we see that grumbling and complaining is anything but harmless. It grows so that this discontent spreads throughout the whole assembly of the Israelites. It gets to the point where the Lord threatens to destroy the whole nation of Israel because of what is going on. But for these people who are rebelling against him, Moses pleads and the Lord relents. But there would be severe consequences for those ringleaders. The Lord, speaking through Moses, tells the rest of the Israelites to get away from the tents of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. It’s going to be quite clear who God’s appointed leaders were. God would send something entirely new that they hadn’t seen before so that, **“You will know that these men have treated the Lord with contempt.”** They thought they were just going against Moses and Aaron. What they failed to recognize was that their grumbling and complaining was an act of open rebellion, showing disapproval and hatred for the Lord.

Think of how brave those men and families looked when they were standing in front of their tents. Think of how vindicated those 250 men felt going to the tabernacle offering incense. How proud they must have felt thinking their grumbling and complaining was well worth it and had actually done something. But Moses’s words were still echoing in the air when **the ground under them split apart³² and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and their households, and all those associated with Korah, together with their possessions.³³ They went down alive into the realm of the dead, with everything they owned; the earth closed over them, and they perished and were gone from the community.** Just as Moses had warned: it was something never seen before. You know it was a terrifying experience as we hear their screams through Scripture when they are swallowed alive and wiped from the face of this earth. So horrifying were the screams and cries that it sent the rest of the Israelites running further away scared that they too would be swallowed up. Then fire from the Lord goes out and consumes the other 250 men who had the audacity to think they could stand before the Lord and defy his

commands. All that was left of them was the censers they had been holding lying there in the burning ashes and coals.

On the surface, grumbling and complaining seems harmless often pushed off as merely voicing frustrations. What we might fail to see is the very same temptation the devil used in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve. Instead of trusting God with your heart, soul, and mind the devil wants you to believe that God is holding out on you. Yes, the grumbling feels good for a while. Quite often other people will join in and fire us up that you should feel this way. But grumbling and complaining doesn't help. And even worse is that we tend to downplay or conveniently forget who we are grumbling and complaining against. It's not just the situation you are facing. It's not just other people involved. It is showing contempt for the Lord. This grumbling comes from a heart that does not trust God's plan. It shows a sinful mind that thinks that we know better than the all-knowing Lord. It reveals a soul that is stained with sin rebelling against God's will. And when God's Law is shared and we are shown our sin, we might be like Dathan, Abiram, and their families standing defiant outside their tents daring God to do his worst. We double down on our sins, refusing to change, refusing to admit and confess about that grumbling and complaining: "I have sinned against the Lord." Or, it's like the rest of the Israelites: we run in fear because we recognize what our sins deserve; that is, to be sent to the realm of the dead, hell for our sin of grumbling and complaining against the Lord.

Confess your sin. Turn from it and turn to the Lord because thanks be to God he does not open the earth to swallow us whole or send holy fire to consume us. Instead he sends his Son Jesus who lived among grumbling, complaining sinners who are discontent with God's plan. Instead he sent His Son who endured hell on the cross, was swallowed by the grave where he was buried, and rose again victorious for us.

You know how tempting it is to jump on board that complain train when it leaves the station. Jesus did too. He was tempted, just as we are, yet he was without sin. Uncomplaining Jesus, true God, chose to live in weakness to sympathize with us and our weaknesses. Uncomplaining Jesus goes forth when he who was sinless is sentenced to death. Uncomplaining Jesus carries the weight of your sin to die on the cross. And instead of complaining when he is nailed to that cross, he asks his Father to forgive them. Even when asking God, "Why have you forsaken me?" it's not a question of complaint or grumbling. It's a statement that because of your sin that was dumped on him, he was being crushed under God's just judgment and completely cut off from God. Why? So that you would not be forsaken but have God's love. So that the debt your grumbling and complaining owed would be forgiven. So that the weight of your sin would be taken from you and before God's throne you would stand declared not guilty—justified.

But don't feel sorry for Jesus. Jesus doesn't go to that cross forced against his will, complaining, or grumbling along the way. No, for the joy set before him he suffered, died, and was buried trusting his Father's promise and plan that in three days he would be raised to life again. All this he does, so that you would be his own. And that is what happened in your baptism. You were buried with Jesus in that tomb. And from those waters of baptism you were raised with Jesus to a new life as God's own child on whom he has placed name and claimed as his own.

God gives us this tragic account of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram to teach us. St. Paul wrote, **"These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come. ¹² So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!"** (1 Corinthians 10:11-12). And that's what happened for the Israelites. Every time they saw that altar with those hammered out sheets from the censers, they were reminded of how serious that sin of grumbling and complaining is. At the same time, that altar was a reminder of the promised sacrifice to come. So we too are reminded today and shown the seriousness of our sin. Paul warns that if you think you are fine—you are standing firm—be careful that you do not fall. Be honest with yourself, your soul-searching, and heart examination. At the same time, look to the altar of the cross where that promised sacrifice was fulfilled. There the Lamb of God, Jesus, was sacrificed once and for all for the sins of the world. That means for your sins and for mine.

God's people aren't expected to go through life with a fake smile on their lips acting as if nothing ever affects them. God doesn't call you to keep things bottled up and buried deep; that's neither healthy physically or spiritually. But where is your heart? Be reassured that whatever you face, you aren't in it alone. God promises, **"No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it"** (1 Corinthians 10:13). Instead of grumbling and complaining thinking it's going to make you feel better, take it to the Lord in prayer. Seek strength, patience and perseverance from him as you fight against temptation. Look to the one who, through Jesus, gives you the way out. Amen.