

Text: Numbers 20:1-13

Date: July 22, 2018

Focus: God gives grace despite our acts of frustration and anger.

Function: As Christians, we live lives of faith rather than frustration.

One of my very first times in official ministry – one of the first times I served in an official way in a church – was also one of the most frustrating experiences in my life. I had just graduated high school and had started college at Concordia University. I was thinking about working in a church at that point as a youth worker, and my home church asked me if I would teach a pre-confirmation class to 4th and 5th graders. I agreed, mostly because I had no idea what I was getting into. Because what I was getting into was 9 months of pain and suffering. It was like going through a pregnancy, but without the reward.

The problem was that the kids I was teaching could sense, I think, my inexperience. I had no idea how to teach, I didn't even know the Bible stories I was teaching that well, and I definitely didn't know how to control a classroom. And the kids knew it. And so they would talk whenever they wanted, get up whenever they wanted. They called each other names and disregarded my questions. And I was frustrated!

I was frustrated at myself and my inability to control them. I was frustrated at lady who asked me to teach for not preparing me. I was frustrated at the kids and their disobedience. I was frustrated at the whole situation.

One day in class I was *trying* to teach one of the miracle stories of the Bible where Jesus casts out a demon, and I remember one of the kids asking if that still happened today, and if there are still demons in the 21st Century. And I remember WANTING to say that yes, there are, and I'm looking at 15 of them, and if Jesus were here I'd ask him to perform more than a few exorcisms. Now, somehow I restrained myself. But, I knew that eventually my frustration would boil over.

We all have our frustrations. Maybe for you it's your kids. Maybe it's the other drivers on the road that you'll encounter after church. Maybe it's our politicians. Whatever it is these frustrations can cause us to do things that we normally otherwise would never do. These frustrations cause us to say things that we never would otherwise say. All of us, at one time or another, have acted out of anger and frustration.

And, in that way, we are a lot like Moses in our Old Testament story for today. Moses, if you remember, is one of the leading figures in all of the Bible. He is mentioned in the New Testament more than any other OT person. He is considered to be the Father of all the Prophets in the Jewish faith. Moses is the one that God used to powerfully lead the Israelites out of slavery and towards the promised land. Moses, unlike anyone else apart from Jesus, is the only one to be able to see the face of God the Father and not die. There is a lot to admire about Moses.

But, Moses was far from perfect. And today we read about that.

As a little background to our reading, Moses and the Israelites are just outside of the Promised Land. If you remember, the Israelites had been slaves in Egypt for 400 years, but God, through Moses had rescued them. But, as a consequence for their sin and doubt and disobedience, God causes them to wander in the desert for 40 years before they can waltz on in to the Promised Land. And those 40 years were just about up. They were all so close to realizing God's Promise. The good life was right there at their fingertips!

But, the Israelites can't see that. All they see is what they don't have. And what they don't have at that moment is water. And they're thirsty. And so they grumble. They groan. They complain. And because the grass is always greener on the other side, they start to recount the "Good Old Days" back in Egypt, forgetting about the whole slavery part. And they come to Moses and his brother Aaron and they let them know how unhappy they are and how they blame the two of them for all their trouble.

Try to put yourself in Moses' shoes here a little. This wasn't exactly a job he had signed up for. In fact, it was a job Moses tried to get out of more than once. He was simply following God's call. Moses certainly hadn't dreamed as a little boy of wandering around this desert. That was their fault. Moses had just done what the Lord had told him to do. And he had to watch as they doubted God and built a golden calf. He had to listen as they complained. He had to put up with them for 40 plus years. And as a reward for his faithfulness he gets an earful of anger and complaints.

Now, I don't know how I would have reacted in that moment, but Moses actually does something pretty commendable at first. He goes to God. He goes to the tent of meeting, the place where God hung out, and he prays. He tells God the peoples complain and waits for an answer. And, praise be to God, He gives an answer. God tells Moses to take his famed staff, the one that had turned into a snake and the one he had stretched out as the Red Sea split and to speak to a rock which would then turn into a fountain of water. What an amazingly gracious God. An answered prayer.

But, Moses decides to do things a little differently. He decides to take matters into his own hands. It's almost like when you were a kid, and your mom would tell you to relay a message to your sibling. Did that ever happen to you? Maybe your mom would call you over and say, "Go tell your brother that dinner is ready". And so you went, and told your brother that dinner is ready, but then you added a little bit of your own flare. You said, "Come and eat, Mom says dinners read! And she also said I'm her favorite child and she doesn't love you and you have to eat in your room". Mom's words just weren't good enough for you. They didn't convey the message YOU wanted to send. And so you added to mom's words.

That's what Moses does. We don't know his exact motivations. But, he does take matters into his own hands. He doesn't seem to trust in God's Words. Or, maybe he wants to add a little of his own flare. Or maybe it's that he thinks the Israelites need a little bit of Law with their Gospel. Maybe he just wants to get their attention. Whatever the exact motivation, instead of speaking to the rock in order to get the water, he bangs on it with his staff a couple times. In his frustration, Moses rejects the way of faith and does his own thing.

Which, I think, is a temptation for all of us when we are frustrated. When we are frustrated we tend to turn away from faith and take matters into our own hands. It happens all the time to churches. When things aren't going well, or when numbers are going down or when finances become a struggle, the temptation is to stop living by faith. Churches can be tempted to give up their praying and turn away from God's Word and try to fix the problems all on their own. They invest in programs rather than people. They worry about dollars rather than souls.

This happens all the time with our unanswered prayers. Maybe it's a prayer for healing. Or for God to provide. And after a few months of no change, we leave the prayer behind. We stop going to church. None of that seemed to get us anywhere anyway, so now we'll do things our way. We'll worry. We'll stress. We'll work. We'll boss people around. We'll lie or sneak or steal to get what we want.

This happens when we see the sin and brokenness around us. When we see people acting in ways we know are wrong sometimes we forget that righteousness and judgment are in the hands of the Lord and we think it's up to us to denounce and belittle and bemoan the sin around us. Instead of trusting that God is in control and that He is the judge, we condemn and we yell and we shout. We've taken matters into our own hands. We gave God a shot, but He didn't seem to be interested, and so now it's our turn.

But, brothers and sisters, there is another way. It's the way of faith. You see, it's faith that trusts in Jesus' Word. It's faith that says, "God's Word to me is enough. I don't need to add to it." Actually, it's faith that says, "I can't add anything to God's Word. There is nothing that I can do, nothing I can say, nothing I can dream that can add anything to what God has promised me." It's faith that trusts that God's promises of grace and goodness are ENOUGH. It's faith that trusts that God works in seemingly impossible small and humble ways. It's faith that trusts that God's promises will come true for us! It's also faith that trusts that justice and righteousness are in God's hands and the any punishment that needs to be given is HIS. It's faith that causes us to fade in the background as Jesus comes to the forefront. It's faith that prays even when all we hear back is silence. It's faith that comes to church even when the good feelings aren't there. It's faith that turns to God's Word and opens up the Bible even when it tells us hard truths we'd rather not hear.

We all have our frustrations. But, God calls us to live not guided by our anger, but by the faith that trusts in the Words of Jesus.

Moses, for all of his accomplishments, messed that one up here. And there would be consequences for him. He would never enter the Promised Land. His dreams would never become reality.

But, the brightest light of our reading today is the one that shines on God's grace. Because despite the Israelites grumbling, despite Moses' frustration, God is good. Despite Moses' disobedience, God makes the rock turn into a fountain of water. I think that's actually the crescendo of the story, and it's almost easy to overlook. God did what He said he was going to do despite the direct disobedience of Moses. Today we are reminded that God so often works for our good despite our sin.

And if you want the ultimate example of that, than look no further than the cross. Because the cross is where the world poured out it's frustration on Jesus. The cross is where sinners took matters into their own hands and did what THEY thought was best. The cross is where humanity rejected God's promises and did what they wanted. And yet despite all that, despite the fact that our sin strung Jesus up on that cross, God poured out a fountain of life and love and forgiveness. Despite the best efforts of a rebellious, angry mob, God kept His Word and promise of love. God proved that He can be trusted.

And so, the next time that in your frustration you are tempted to do your own thing and take matters into your own hands – brothers and sisters, pause. Remember that God is trustworthy. Believe that His Word is enough. And rest in His promise of forgiveness and love.