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Complaining...something we've all done from time to time. Maybe it's complaining about our spouses who don't do what we ask. Or our children who seem to ignore us. Maybe you've had an employee who didn't accomplish what you thought he should do, such as the foreman who complained about one of his workers. The employee had the

job painting the yellow line down the center of the highway. This he had to do by hand. After three days the foreman complained. "Your first day out, you did great," he exclaimed. "You painted that line for three miles. Your second day wasn't bad. You painted two miles. But today you painted only one mile, so it looks as though I'll have to fire you."

On his way out of the office the employee looked back and said, "It's not my fault. Every day I got farther from the paint can."¹

You may have seen signs in businesses that suggest how to deal with your complaints, such as the one that says "Complaint Department That Way," and then at the bottom indicates "200 miles." Or the one that says "Complaint Department, press button for service," which has a button attached to a mousetrap.

How about the one for the Complaint Department that suggests taking a number attached to a hand grenade.

Sometimes I wonder if God would like to have a complaint sign posted on the gates to heaven, for can you just imagine the number of complaints God hears every day, as when God helped the slaves escape from the bondage of the Pharaoh. God had led them by a pillar of fire; they had been in the presence of the light of God. But soon they found themselves complaining in the light. They found themselves free in the wilderness. No one to tell them what to do. No rules to follow. But also no food to eat.

With this newfound freedom, the people complained. The Hebrew word תלנות (*tel·oo·naw*) can also mean murmuring or grumbling. You know the sound, when you mumble a few words of complaint, not expecting anyone to hear, and suddenly someone exclaims, "I heard that!"

Imagine someone grumbling to Moses, not expecting God to be listening in: "If we had stayed in Egypt, at least we would have food to eat. You've brought us out here to starve! What do we do out here anyway? Back there we had a routine. It was familiar.

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We complained back there about working for the Pharaoh, but this doesn't seem any better! Do something, Moses!"

The people needed guidance and structure, so God provided the Ten Commandments, rules to help them order their lives. They needed familiarity and a routine, so they wandered in the wilderness for forty years. And when they complained about being hungry, God provided a flaky bread-like substance, and when they saw it they asked "What is it?" which in the Hebrew language is: מַן (man-hu), which is what we now call this bread: *manna*.

God said, "I have heard you complaining, so for six days you will eat meat and bread. Gather only what you need for each day, no more, no less." Quails flew in each evening, which they could capture and eat, along with the flaky bread-like manna that appeared each morning.

Isn't that amazing? Not that bread and meat appeared for them to eat, but that God provided in spite of their complaining! Our Tuesday morning Bible study group at Central has encountered a lot of complaining in the book of Psalms. Everything from complaints about enemies to illness, the Psalms are

filled with laments and complaints to God. We enjoy reading the Psalms of praise and thanksgiving, but many times we complain about all the Psalms of complaint! We've often wondered why the Psalms contain so many complaints, but listen to what one writer has suggested:

Think all prayers should be lofty? Think prayers should be just praise and thanksgiving? Think your prayers should only contain positive thoughts? Think again.

A complaint can be a prayer. Take a look at the Psalms. There are 150 of them in the Bible and they are full of every sort of whining, kvetching, envying, self-justifying imaginable...

The psalms are models for prayer and a perfect reminder that God hears us all the time, not just when we're happy, not just when we're saintly and holy, but when we're angry and peevish.²

The Psalms reflect real life, which is often filled with struggles and complaints. God is always willing to hear our complaints, but that doesn't mean the people around us are as willing to hear our

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complaints, which Maya Angelou's grandmother reminded her when she was young.

Maya Angelou is a famed American poet and author. From the age of three to seven she was raised by her grandmother, a period of calm and stability in what would be a very traumatic childhood. Grandma ran a general store and one thing that riled her was people complaining. They'd complain about the heat, the cold and a myriad of other issues Maya's grandmother thought trivial. Whenever that occurred Maya's grandmother would wait til the complainer left the store, call Maya over to her and say, "Sister, did you hear what Brother So-and-So or Sister Much-to-Do complained about? Sister, there are people who went to sleep all over the world last night, poor and rich and white and black, but they will never wake again. And those dead folks would give anything, anything at all for just five minutes of this weather that person was grumbling about. So you watch yourself about complaining, Sister. What you're supposed to do when you don't like a thing is change it. If you can't change it, change the way you think about it. Don't complain."³

There are some things we often complain about that we can't change, such as the weather, the number of hours in a day, the fact that death occurs, natural disasters such as hurricanes and earthquakes. No amount of complaining will change these events, so take the advice of Maya's grandmother: "If you can't change it, change the way you think about it. Don't complain." Instead, offer prayers and words of hope for those experiencing loss.

But what about those times when we can change something? Maybe it's something in your family, or even here in church. It's tempting to complain, mumbling and thinking no one will hear you, but the negative mumbling energy in a family has a way of filtering into the life of other family members. The church mumbling oozes into the life of a congregation, spreading like an infection. In these times, I think the other advice from Maya's grandmother is helpful: "What you're supposed to do when you don't like a thing is change it." If you can't change it alone, find others to talk with and work through the conflicts. Find creative solutions and make positive changes.

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This week we've faced a situation that falls in between the things we can't change and the things we can, for I've wanted to complain about how one man could purchase so many weapons of violence and kill so many innocent people last Sunday. How could this happen? And what about the other 24 shootings that we didn't hear about that occurred in our nation on the same day?⁴ On the one hand I feel powerless to change the amount of violence that occurs in the world, but on the other hand, we can each make changes in the way we treat one another. Maybe complaining about violence is a good thing, along with our prayers for a peaceful world, and along with our actions that create peace here and now in our community, our families, and the world.

On Friday the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) received the Nobel Peace Prize for complaining—for they have spoken against

the huge stockpile of nuclear weapons on our planet. The executive director stated, "This prize is really a tribute to the to the tireless efforts of many millions...of concerned citizens worldwide who have...loudly protested nuclear weapons, insisting that they can serve no legitimate purpose and must be forever banished from the face of our Earth."⁵

Complaining may do some good when it's time to make changes. Those who complained to Moses discovered quail and manna, for God heard their cries of hunger and despair. God mourns with those who experienced great loss in Las Vegas last Sunday. God feels the pain of their loss and the traumas of our lives. Even in the greatest of loss, God offers a light of hope and invites us to complain and make changes to bring peace to our world.

¹ Hodgkin, Michael. *1001 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, and Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers* (Kindle Locations 2074-2078). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

² Rick Hamlin, "Make Your Complaint a Prayer," www.guideposts.org/faith-and-prayer/prayer-stories/power-of-prayer/make-your-complaint-a-prayer

³ reported in Maya Angelou, *Condensed Chicken Soup for the Soul*, <https://storiesforpreaching.com/category/sermonillustrations/complaining/>

⁴www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2017/10/03/here-are-all-the-other-fatal-shootings-from-sunday-that-you-havent-heard-about-yet

⁵ Jamey Keaton, Mark Lewis, "Group opposing nuclear weapons wins Nobel peace prize, *The Elkhart Truth*, Oct. 7, 2017, A6.