

September 26, 2021
For all who are weary and burdened
Numbers 11:1-17, Matthew 11:28-30, Galatians 6:2-3

The people of Israel were weary and heavy burdened. They were slaves in Egypt. Working at brutal labour making bricks. Toiling LONG days, from before dawn until after dusk. Half-starved. With no hope. No future. No possibilities.

Then, through the Passover, God miraculously sets them free (remember Moses, the ten plagues, crossing the Red Sea). Psalm 81 celebrates God's deliverance: *"Sing for joy to God our strength; shout aloud to the God of Jacob! Begin the music, strike the timbrel, play the melodious harp and lyre. Sound the ram's horn at the New Moon, and when the moon is full ... God says, 'I removed the burden from their shoulders; their hands were set free from the basket. In your distress you called, and I rescued you ...'"* It's all good. Right? Or not ...

Now the Israelites are heading toward the Promised Land of Canaan, through the Sinai desert. They are free. But, *"Soon the people began to complain about their hardship ..."* (Numbers 11:1). With rose-coloured glasses, they seem to remember, *"Oh for some meat. We remember the fish we used to eat for free in Egypt. And we had all the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic we wanted. But now our appetites are gone. All we ever see is this manna!"* (11:4-6). When you read Exodus, life was nothing like the glorious times they remembered. Their memories are not selective – they are downright untrue. Yes, their diet now is a bit bland, but they're free. The yoke of slavery, the burden of captivity is over.

How did Moses respond? *"Moses heard all the families standing in the doorways of their tents whining ... Moses was very aggravated. And Moses said to the Lord, 'Why are you treating me, your servant, so harshly? Have mercy on me! What did I do to deserve the burden of all these people? Did I give birth to them? Did I bring them into the world? Why did you tell me to carry them in my arms like a mother carries a nursing baby? How can I carry them to the land you swore to give their ancestors? Where am I supposed to get meat for all these people? They keep whining to me, saying, 'Give us meat to eat!' I can't carry all these people by myself! The load is far too heavy! If this is how you intend to treat me, just go ahead and kill me. Do me a favor and spare me this misery!"* (11:10-15). The first thing Moses did was REACH OUT TO GOD – yes, he complained, but at least he reached out.

Then, God told Moses to stop taking the world on his shoulders and to REACH OUT TO OTHER PEOPLE: *"Gather before me seventy men who are recognized as elders and leaders of Israel. Bring them to the Tabernacle to stand there with you ... I will take some of the Spirit that is upon you, and I will put the Spirit upon them also. They will bear the burden of the people along with you, so you will not have to carry it alone"* (11:16-17). And, yes, God did miraculously provide quail – more than enough meat for everyone.

So What?

It's an interesting story. What does it say to us, in church, in Lethbridge, in Covid, in 2021?

As Jesus' church, our message is the Good News. Once we were weary and heavy burdened – as burdened as the Israelites in Egypt. Our burden was not that we had to gather straw and make bricks for all eternity. Our burden was that we were (to use the biblical words) burdened by sin. Most of us know the struggle: you want to do the right thing – and you blow it; you want to say the right thing – and you mess up. Most of us wrestle with the guilt of realizing that, while we might want to be perfect people, we are far from perfect people.

The Good News is that Jesus showed us a new, better way to live. A way of life characterized by loving God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, loving our neighbour, and loving one another. He calls us back to the kind of life for which we were created. And, on the cross, Jesus took upon Himself, all our sin, all our failures, all the evil in the world, and destroyed the power of evil – and even death itself – once and for all.

The sins of our past? Forgiven. If we blow it today – the sins of the present? Forgiven. If we make a mistake tomorrow – in the future. It will be forgiven. We can let go of the burden of guilt. We can let go of the shame. Jesus has set us free.

We are restored to a free and open relationship with God, once again. Where once were separated from God, those barriers are gone. We can walk with Him. Talk with Him. And enjoy His presence. His Spirit is within each one of us. We are free.

And now, first, we need to REACH OUT TO GOD. Jesus says, *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light"* (Matthew 11:28-30).

Being human, like the Israelites of old, we can often find ourselves complaining ... With rose-coloured glasses, we can imagine that life, without Jesus, maybe was better. In the same way the Israelites seemed to recall a life of luxury in Egypt (when, in fact, their lives were miserable), we might think ... "You know, life would be so much simpler if I just walked away from God." When I'm tempted to think that way, personally, I recall how empty, bleak, hopeless, and pointless my life actually did seem in my pre-Christian days ...

We can think that our lives with God are bland. The Israelites were bored with manna every day. They wanted meat. Think about it. Thanks to God, thousands of them miraculously escaped Egypt, taking all sorts of gold, silver, and jewels with them. Thanks to God, they miraculously crossed the Red Sea. Thanks to God, in a desert, every day they had water to drink and food to eat. Sure, it wasn't The Keg, but it was food. And they grumbled. And God actually gets rather annoyed at all their bellyaching (read on in Numbers 11).

Thanks to God – Jesus, His Son, came, taught, lived, and died on the cross for us. Thanks to God, our sins are forgiven – we are set free from the guilt, shame, and power of sin, and from death. Thanks to God, our relationship with God is restored so we can walk with and talk with Him all the time. Thanks to God, His Holy Spirit is in us, leading us, guiding us every day. Yet we can still grumble. "I want more ..." some people still say.

Of course, there is always more we can learn about God, about life, faith, and following Jesus. But it takes work. It takes study. It takes discernment to find good resources. And it takes deep thinking. Sometimes we're not too keen on all that ... we want meat – right here, right now, on a platter. I wonder if God gets a tad annoyed with us sometimes, too ...?

If we reach out to God, what might God say to us?

He might say what He says to Moses: **REACH OUT TO OTHER PEOPLE.** Don't take all the burdens in the world on your own shoulders. Be part of a community. He urges Moses to find seventy people to help deal with all these grumps (in a similar situation, Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, gives him the same advice – clearly Moses is struggling to learn this lesson (Exodus 18)).

We need one another. One of the hallmarks of God's people – from the earliest days of the Old Testament people of God, through the glory day of Israel, to the beginnings and growth of Jesus' church, is that God's people gather together. They encourage one another. Help one another. Care for one another. Learn from one another. When people try to be "Lone Rangers" (think of Jacob, Elijah, or Jonah) it often doesn't go well.

The church is still at its best, when we stay connected to one another. That IS different during a pandemic than at another time. It is not always safe or appropriate for us all to be physically in the same space. But we can find other ways to keep in community with one another. We can phone. Skype. Zoom. Visit outside. Gather in small groups. Write notes.

Then, as the people of God, in community, we are called to live the kind of life for which we were created – a life where, together with other people – we love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, to love our neighbour, and to love one another.

Throughout the New Testament, Jesus and the various authors flesh this out in more practical, tangible terms. Last week, Mark reminded that one of the ways we are called to "love one another," in the church is to forgive one another.

Today, Paul is giving us another specific example of a way in which we can love one another. He writes, *"Share each other's burdens, and in this way obey the law of Christ"* (Galatians 6:2). He goes on to say (rather bluntly), *"If you think you are too important to help someone, you are only fooling yourself. You are not that important"* (6:3).

So ... if you are carrying a burden, reach out to God and reach out to others: you need community. It probably won't be seventy elders. It might be family, close friends, a small group. Some of our small groups and Bible studies have actually grown closer together through Covid as people have found great value in staying connected and have been able to be more consistent in attendance. If you need a group to connect with, speak with Mark.

And ... if you know someone who needs a friend, be a friend. You don't need to have answers. The best "burden bearers" are those who are simply really good listeners. They

don't give advice at all. They don't try to solve problems. They just listen.

Why do some of us find this SO hard to do??? For instance, this week we have the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation. It is time to reflect upon a variety of issues around our relationships with Indigenous peoples, including the legacy of residential schools. One person I have been privileged to count as a friend is a local Blackfoot elder. As he and I talked about First Nations' issues, I know I cannot begin to understand his experiences as a student at a residential school, as an Indigenous person, or as an elder. I'm not going to say, "I understand ..." because I don't. I can't. I'm not going to say, "Well, at least the schools are gone." I'm not going to say, "My school experience was pretty bad, too. I had to walk uphill both ways ..." I certainly would never dare to offer advice or propose solutions to the challenges he and his people are facing. But I can listen. I can learn. I can hear his story. In that way, I can "share his burden."

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I can listen. I can learn. I can be that shoulder of support. I can just be there. Because it's that connection that makes all the difference.

And that's who the church is called to be. That's who we are called to be. We are called to "love one another": to share one another's burdens, to empathy, to listen. To pray for one another. To care for one another. To simply be there for one another.

Don't forget, however, **FIRST, TO REACH OUT TO GOD.** But ultimately, the only way to make it through is to come to Jesus. He is the perfect comforter: Jesus says, *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."*

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