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## Moses & His People & Their God VI. The No Good, Very Bad Day: Grace, Karma, and Somebody to Lean On

(Numbers 11:4-17 NRSV) The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again, and said, "If only we had meat to eat! 5 We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; 6 but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at." 7 Now the manna was like coriander seed, and its color was like the color of gum resin. 8 The people went around and gathered it, ground it in mills or beat it in mortars, then boiled it in pots and made cakes of it; and the taste of it was like the taste of cakes baked with oil. 9 When the dew fell on the camp in the night, the manna would fall with it. 10 Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, all at the entrances of their tents. Then the LORD became very angry, and Moses was displeased. 11 So Moses said to the LORD, "Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? 12 Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child,' to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors? 13 Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say, 'Give us meat to eat!' 14 I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. 15 If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once--if I have found favor in your sight--and do not let me see my misery." 16 So the LORD said to Moses, "Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tent of meeting, and have them take their place there with you. 17 I will come down and talk with you there; and I will take some of the spirit that is on you and put it on them; and they shall bear the burden of the people along with you so that you will not bear it all by yourself."

One day, when she was about four years old, our youngest daughter Katie, usually so sunny in her disposition and so laid back, was not having a good day. In fact, even though I don't recall the reasons now so many years later for her bad day, I do remember thinking at the time that she was having the same sort of day as the title of one of the books that our children loved to have read to them, Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day. I'll bet some of you know that little book; it has become a modern childhood classic and the phrase "no good, very bad day" has even become something of a cliché. And that day, the phrase fit for Katie, and she

finally wore my patience out, and I said to her in some exasperation, "*What is the matter????*" And Katie, always precocious, struggled to express what she was feeling and finally said, "I don't know, I just feel so, so, so **exaggerated**." Well, that word may never have been used in quite that way before, but it does seem to fit doesn't it? One of those days when the little stuff gets exaggerated indeed into big stuff, when the stuff that you could normally let roll off is now no longer rolling off but has become a flood tide of annoyance and upset.

I feel so **exaggerated**: it would have been a good description of Moses' day from our scripture this morning, wouldn't it? For the Hebrew people are at it again: they are grumbling and complaining. God had fed them when they were starving and had fed them every single day since in their wilderness wanderings, but now they were taking that miracle for granted and wanting God to do better in their opinion. And they were homesick; even though their lives in Egypt had been literally a living hell, they also missed the tastes and the smells of what they had known. And so, to make a long story short, once again in today's scripture we find the Hebrew people grumbling and grouching.

And Moses has had it. He's exaggerated! Did you hear his words? As I did last week, let me share Eugene Peterson's translation here, for he captures Moses' frustration and stress and exaggeration in very modern language:

Moses said to God, "Why are you treating me this way? What did I ever do to you to deserve this? Did I conceive them? Was I their mother? So why dump the responsibility of this people on me? 12 Why tell me to carry them around like a nursing mother, carry them all the way to the land you promised to their ancestors? 13 Where am I supposed to get meat for all these people who are whining to me, 'Give us meat; we want meat.' 14 I can't do this by myself - it's too much, all these people. 15 If this is how you intend to treat me, do me a favor

and kill me. I've seen enough; I've had enough. Let me out of here."

A no good, very bad, rotten day indeed. Moses is both very angry and deeply depressed.

Now, sometimes people have good reason for their depression. Life sometimes is indeed no good and rotten, and being brought low and feeling low in the face of some of life's challenges and pains is absolutely to be expected. In fact, I worry about folks who seem to be able to be relentlessly and determinedly cheerful no matter what awfulness life throws their way. After all, you can trust in God's care and providence and still be depressed and low; the two are not mutually exclusive. It is hard not to be brought a little low, to find yourselves maybe even more than a little depressed in the face of economic worries that may be hitting far to close to home, or in the face of a situation with a child or a parent or a friend that just weighs on you. There are indeed sometimes very good reasons for our exaggeration, our lowness, our depression. And it's a problem culture wide. Dr. Bertram Brown, former director of the National Institute of Mental Health, [says] depression is our nation's most costly emotional problem. The cost to taxpayers is over \$5 billion a year in medical expenses. The cost to businesses - in lowered productivity, reduced morale, and lost jobs - is many times greater. Studies have discovered that nearly 80% of Americans will struggle with some form of depression on an annual basis<sup>1</sup>

Now, let's be very, very clear. Such depression is not a moral failing. People don't choose to have those feelings of anger turned inward, those depths of sadness, those times when you feel simply energy-less and immobilized. But here's the thing: Sometimes – *sometimes* – our exaggeration, our lowness, our depression can be **made worse** by mistakes in our own thinking. Sometimes we make our depression worse than it needed to be because of wrong assumptions in the way we are thinking about

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<sup>1</sup>From [http://my.execpc.com/~crnrstn/sermons/numbers11\\_10-17.html](http://my.execpc.com/~crnrstn/sermons/numbers11_10-17.html)

our lives and our world and even our God. *This was one of those times for Moses.*

How so? Well, notice something in this passage: Moses is absolutely sure all this mess and muddle, all this griping and groaning by the people, is happening because God is angry with *him*. You can hear this assumption in his second question, when he says to God: **“What did I ever do to you to deserve this?”** What did *I* do? Moses is here making the mistake that many, many good and successful and otherwise thoughtful people sometimes make: assuming that when bad happens, *it’s about them*. And, even more importantly – and more terribly – Moses here makes the mistake that will keep him and us from having a relationship with God that is what it could and should be: he seems to be assuming that all of these problems are the result of his sins and shortcomings, that God is punishing him by sending him problems and hurt and evil, that God is somehow the source of the Hebrew people’s complaining and ungrateful behavior and that behavior is meant as a punishment for Moses.

**No.** No. God doesn’t work like that. One preacher named Chris Vogel puts it this way:

[Moses’] question betrays a misguided idea of how God deals with our sin. Moses reasons that the troubles he is facing [are] a direct result of something he’s done to offend God. Moses pictures God as the cosmic disciplinarian who doles out evil in our lives whenever we slip up.<sup>2</sup>

But, my friends, that’s not the way it works. For, as Rev. Vogel goes on to say, “When we adopt this outlook on God... we will live in constant speculation as to our standing before God.... [and we will] interpret our daily circumstances in a twisted formula. When

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<sup>2</sup>**ibid.** A sermon by Rev. Chris Vogel entitled “When God Gives You More than You Can Handle.” I have gratefully taken this and several of the thoughts that follow from this sermon. (All quotes herein, unless otherwise cited, are from this sermon). And while I’ve found some of Rev. Vogel’s insights very helpful, where he and I would part company are a) in his assumption that it is God who sends stress to us to help make us better Christians (viz. the title of his sermon!); b) in the substitutionary atonement theology that is finally the “answer” given in that sermon, and c) in his assertion that Moses’ problem finally was that he didn’t “believe enough.” It seems to me that that actually undercuts the point about God’s grace Rev. Vogel wants to make early in his sermon!

life is good, we'll think it is obviously due to our goodness. Likewise, when life is bad, it must be bad karma, some cosmic pay back for sin."

But that's just not true. And, as I said, there are two problems with this point of view. First, it simply denies the nature of the God that we know through Jesus Christ as unconditionally loving. This is not "karma," it's grace. The notion of "karma" that seems so popular these days, that we get what we deserve exactly in proportion to what we do, good or bad, is one of those things that is simply at odds with Christian theology. When the Beatles sang "*And in the end, the love you take is equal to the love you make*" they were expressing this popularized view of "karma." But it's not the **Christian** view. The Christian understanding of God is that God does NOT treat us as we deserve, for if God did, we would could not but despair. If God were the great scorecard keeper in the sky, then we might as well call the game and go home because we will always lose. But that's not the Christian view. The Christian understanding of God is that God forgives and seeks our good always, not because we deserve such grace, but simply because that is who God is.

I said there were **two** problems with Moses' seeming to think that God was making the people behave badly in order to punish Moses for what he had done or not done. The first, as I have said, is that our God just doesn't work like that, but the second is simply this: somebody needs to tell Moses, "**Moses! It's not about you.**" The assumption that Moses has that is reflected in his question to God makes him think that he is far more important than he is. And while he was indeed crucial to the Hebrew's flight from Egypt, if he had not been there God would raised up another leader up. Moses was not indispensable. In fact, eventually the Hebrew people would go on and finish their journey without him. You and I know people who seem to make everything that happens about them. You begin to not want to tell them anything, because they've always got a story that can top yours about what happened to them, or

they want to compare their experience with yours, and theirs is always more dramatic, more terrible, more wonderful, more whatever than yours could possibly be.

Psychologists call it “narcissism” and it and depression sometimes go hand in hand.

For, again, make no mistake: Moses had good reason for his anger, his depression, his “exaggeration.” But those things were made worse by the fact that he had a flawed view of God, and by the fact that he seems to think that it is all about him. But, as Rev. Vogel says,

“Where did God ever say that the people's life or death is solely dependent on Moses? When did God say that Moses is indispensable? Moses's despair centers around his faulty conclusions that God intends for him to do it all. He took the people's sin as one of personal rejection.”

Someone needs to say to Moses: it's not about **you**, it's about **them**. You didn't cause their bad behavior and until you lift your eyes beyond your navel, you can't really lead your people.

So how does God respond to Moses' exaggeration, his depression, his moment of narcissism? The way God want to respond to us all. It's in the last two verses of our scripture:

So the LORD said to Moses, "Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel...; bring them... with you. I will come down ... and I will take some of the spirit that is on you and put it on them; and they shall bear the burden of the people along with you so that you will not bear it all by yourself.

“The clear message to Moses is this: ‘You are not alone. It all doesn't depend upon you.’ But we all struggle with this simple lesson. We like to believe in our own self-importance.” Moreover, if the notion of karma is at odds with the gospel of Jesus Christ, so is the idea of stoicism when it is taken too far. Now, there is something

admirable about people who bear life's hurts stoically, uncomplainingly, silently. But taken too far, it is not a virtue, but a sad sin. To quote Rev. Vogel one last time; instead of simply bearing things silently and stoically,

Ask God to send others to share your load. Give others the right to help. Be thankful for them.... [Complete] stoic self-reliance flies in the face of what it means to be a Christian. The Gospel says, "You cannot carry the load..... It doesn't [all] depend on you."

My friends, there **are** those times in our lives when things **are** just plain depressing, when everything around us would try very hard to get us "exaggerated." Life is like that at times. But we don't need to compound the difficulty. We don't need to think that God is somehow sending us these problems as payback for our sins. We don't need to give in to a narrow narcissism that seems to think that everything that happens has to do with us. We don't need to go our way alone. For we have, first of all, a Savior who in the words of the psalmist is like a mother eagle who will lift us on her wings. And second, we have fellow travelers on the way, in whom Christ resides, who can help us with our load, and whom we can lean on until life indeed is back on keel, less exaggerated. I always thought that the Bill Withers' song, "Lean on Me," could have been sung about what it means to be a Christian – where we don't have to be stoic, but can both give and receive help. Do you remember those lyrics?

*Sometimes in our lives, we all have pain, we all have sorrow....*

*Lean on me, when you're not strong and I'll be your friend, I'll help you carry on...*

*If there is a load you have to bear that you can't carry.*

*I'm right up the road, I'll share your load if you just call me.*

For, after all, "We all need somebody to lean on."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup><http://www.lyrics007.com/Bill%20Withers%20Lyrics/Lean%20On%20Me%20Lyrics.html>