



TO GRUMBLE IS HUMAN, TO GIVE THANKS IS DIVINE

These days, shopping at my local grocery store feels oddly unfamiliar. I have frequented the Cashiers location of Ingles, Western North Carolina's flagship grocery store chain, at least once a week for years, so I can normally cruise through it with ease. I know the layout and the shelf location of all my usual purchases well. But all that has changed since Hurricane Helene roared through.

We now find dramatic shortages and reconfigured inventories, reminiscent of the early days of COVID-19. This feeling, this current reality, is no pleasant stroll down Memory Lane. And this time, it also carries the weight of knowing that the Ingles distribution center in Black Mountain, NC, is mired in mud from the unprecedented flooding, bringing drastic losses and challenges never before encountered.

All this weighs heavily on our local Ingles employees, as they strive to keep calm and carry on. And besides this, they face grumpy customers who are disturbed by disrupted lives, frustrated by low stock, and impatient with long checkout lines.

Facing skimpy shelves, I will admit that it's tempting to complain. I am not a wonderful cook, who uses gourmet ingredients and expects that they should be readily available. But even I am challenged by having to make do, invent substitutions, or go without. Given the gravity of the larger situation, I am deeply chagrined to realize and admit how attached I am to a certain kind of granola. When the shortages first came, I wouldn't even try a different flavor of the same brand, holding out for my favorite. Now, even the alternate flavors are missing, and I find myself pining for "my" granola. Seriously??

While giving myself an inner talking-to about this, I recalled the biblical story of the ancient Israelites pining for favorite foods on their long journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. In Egypt they were slaves, as their ancestors had been for generations. They were oppressed and forced into hard labor, building cities for the Pharaoh and working the fields; "the Egyptians used them ruthlessly" (Exodus 1:11-14).

But God saw the misery of his people and heard their cry, so He commissioned Moses to lead them out of slavery (Exodus 1:23-25; 3). Against all odds, through spectacular miracles and the sovereign will of God, the Israelites were indeed set free, and they set out for the place God promised them, "a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey" (Exodus 3:8).

Even so, they complained, first about the lack of water, then about the lack of food: "We sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve the whole assembly to death" (Exodus 16:3). For God's amazing grace, they returned griping.

When God miraculously rained down manna from heaven to feed them, they *still* grumbled: "We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost — also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!" (Numbers 11:5-6). They fondly remembered the "no cost" food in Egypt, yet foolishly forgot the hard labor and oppression.

They also forgot God's protection, provision, and presence with them even before they left Egypt (e.g., Exodus 1:20-21; 9:6; 11:4-7; Exodus 12), and throughout their journey in the desert (Exodus 13:17ff).

As you and I make our way through natural disasters, contentious elections, and all kinds of personal crises, let's be on guard against the common human tendency to grumble. To resist it, let's ponder Moses' earnest plea to remember God's protection, provision, and presence (Deuteronomy 8) — such amazing grace — and recognize it in our own stories.

Instead of fondly recalling the insignificant niceties of former days, let's cultivate gratitude and trust in God today, based on our own experience, on the biblical record, and especially on this rock-solid evidence of his unwavering love and faithfulness: Jesus Christ willingly laid down his life to save us.

When we exude this gratitude and trust, instead of compounding worldly woes by grumbling, we will bear Christ's comfort, light, and hope into a world that sorely needs it.

With love in the Lord,
The Rev. Christine Maddux