

My family went to Atlanta, GA and Nashville, Tennessee last weekend to start the process of checking out colleges. The trip back to York County from Nashville is not a short trip. 7 long hours in the car not including stops. When you are a family of 5 and you have to stop, you want to make the most of your stops. That's why I love those 3 in one travel centers that you find along most interstates today.

We found one somewhere in eastern Tennessee that provided us a place to get gas, snacks in the convenience store, Subway sandwiches, fried chicken, and, most importantly, bathrooms. The folks who invented travel centers knew what they were doing. Is this not a great country or what? 3 in 1 travel centers with all of your basic needs met. We had no need to go anywhere else on that exit. It was all there.

This morning I have a goal. I hope that every time you drive past a travel center, you catch a glimpse of God Almighty. Because I think that 3 in 1 Travel Centers are great places to teach us about the grace of God.

I want to invite us to see those 3 in 1 Travel Centers in a Holy Way because I hope that those stations remind us of this story we are about to read. Here goes.

We have been reading through the story of Exodus. We have read about how God's people, the Israelites were in slavery in Egypt. They complained about being slaves and God heard their prayers. God then spoke to a man named Moses through a burning bush to lead these people out of slavery into a promised land. Reluctantly Moses accepts this calling.

Moses confronts the Egyptian Pharaoh king but he does not want to let the Israelites leave. Ten plagues are sent upon the Egyptians and finally Pharaoh relinquishes. But not really. The Egyptian army pursues the Israelites until they come to a sea. And in a scene which we have been guided more by Charlton Heston than the Bible, the sea is parted, the Israelites venture through, and the Egyptian army is consumed.

From there the Israelites continue their journey and then they come to a 3 in 1 travel center. Let's pick up their story.

Read 15:27-16:15 (invite to read along)

When you have been traveling through the Sinai Peninsula and you come upon an Oasis, it truly is a blessing. Twelve springs of water and 70 palm trees. A place of respite. A real Travel Center. But then this group of thousands cannot stay there. They must continue on. But the trip becomes hard and long. They become hungry and they become thirsty. There are no exits anywhere nearby.

And so the complaining begins. How long until we get there? I'm hungry. I'm thirsty. I want to go back home to Egypt. At least in Egypt we had a place to stay and food to eat. I don't care that we were slaves. At least we were taken care of.

And that is when the moment of grace begins. The Lord says to Moses, "I am going to rain down bread from heaven. Each day the people will receive what they need. Live each day trusting that God will take care of you.

And so the people find this resin on the ground. Could be from a tamarisk bush. Could be insect dung. It's called manna from the Hebrew word that describes their question. They see this stuff on the ground and they ask, "What is this?????" But it's not food. They are given the ingredients to make food. They still have to take this stuff, work it, and make it into something they can eat. And then migrating birds, exhausted from their flight come upon the community. But the people still have to pluck them and cook them. God provides ingredients. They make it into something useful.

So many times we read the Old Testament and think that God's miracles are some supernatural event. For instance, how do you imagine the crossing of the sea? Do you see 20 foot high walls of water? That's not what the Bible says. That's what movie makers and cartoonists see. The parted waters could very easily be a natural and normal event. But if Moses is connected to the will of God, then he knows from God when to cross. The Egyptians who are hard hearted to the will of God do not know when to cross.

In the story we have just read, the miracle manna in the desert is most likely insect dung. Not real exciting. Not a real supernatural event. But these everyday things are interpreted by Moses and the people as signs from God. In their midst of yearning for their past, they are fed to move forward.

(article about Amy Fisher complaining about her food in local restaurant)

Do you find yourself complaining a lot nowadays. You complain that the person you are married to for 5 years, or 10 years, or 20 years is not like the person you had fun with on your honeymoon. You complain that the tasks in your job are not as much fun as that job you had way back when. You complain that school has gotten a lot tougher than it used to be. You complain that you can't afford whatever you want in your life.

You complain about stuff at church or in other organizations that you are a part of. You complain that retirement is not what you thought it would be like. You complain that certain people seem to be annoying you more and more. Do you find yourself complaining about stuff more and more and more these days?

Some of us complain so much nowadays we don't even know what it looks like to not complain. Complaining has just become second nature to us. It's rare that someone doesn't find us complaining about something. And complaining is something that breeds more complaining.

If you are with your friends and you are complaining about something, what happens? Does your friend tell you to quit complaining? Or does your complaining feed into them complaining about something as well. Pretty soon we find that all that we do is complain about something that we wish we could make to be just like we want it to be.

The Israelites are complaining. They complain to Moses that they don't like where they are. Things used to be soooo much better. But then what happens? They complain and God delivers ingredients and they say, "What is this???" They get ingredients that they have to then make into something useful. God doesn't give them food. God gives them ingredients that they have to create something from.

But then in the retelling of this event, this insect dung and dying birds become a sign in the dessert that God will provide for them. The insect dung and dying birds become the proof that God is alive and active around them and that God will take care of them.

We want miracles in our lives. We want to see very powerful things occur to reinforce for us that God is alive and active and transformative in our lives. We want God to deliver miracles in our laps. But maybe we are looking for the wrong things. Instead of complaining about what is missing in our lives. Instead of complaining and asking for things to be like they used to be in our lives. Maybe it is time we look around for some insect dung and dying birds. Every day things that are signs that God sustains us.

What does true faith in God look like? True faith in God may mean looking at the everyday and mundane things and becoming thankful for them. True faith in God may mean seeing things that are boring and without a lot of flavor as signs of God's subsistence.

We want “wow” in our lives. We want “wow” in our relationships. We want “wow” in our church. We want “wow” when we notice nature. But maybe looking for the “wow” factor is not where real faith in God is found. Maybe we need to learn to appreciate and celebrate the mundane.

I am around a lot of complaining. We complain because we don't like the taste of the food we eat. (info from bulletin about hunger) We complain about stuff at church. But in Egypt right now Christians are being killed at the hands of their national army. We complain at sporting events. It is a privilege to have free time to attend an event and watch young people do something they enjoy. We are all a bunch of complainers in one way or another. Just like the Israelites.

Maybe it is time we look for some insect dung and dying quail and tell God thanks for these everyday and boring things. Instead of looking for “wow,” maybe we need to look for the ingredients that God provides. Instead of being stuck in complaining, maybe we need to take the basic ingredients that God provides and make something with it.

Some of you will be traveling soon. Every time you approach an exit and see one of those travel centers, I hope that travel center will remind you of something important. That insect dung and dying quail is a glorious sign that God provides. AMEN.