

September 20, 25A (Exodus 16:2-15)

Who gets to complain?

by [Kentina Washington-Leapheart](#) in the [September 9, 2020](#) issue

I have always had a love/hate relationship with the gospel song “I Won’t Complain.” A popular selection at black funerals, the lyrics are offered as a testament to a life now ended—a life that, while replete with the requisite ups and downs, elicits not one complaint from the one who endured its mountains and valleys:

When I look around
And I think things over
All of my good days
Outweigh my bad days
I won’t complain

While the sentiment is admirable, I can’t help but wonder what the deceased might really feel about that song being sung at their funeral (assuming they didn’t request it themselves). Is it realistic for a human never to complain? Is one’s faith in God proportionate to how much they resist the urge to grumble?

In the category of grumblers, the Israelites take the cake. Despite being led out of slavery into freedom, the allure of the life they had before is enough to turn their heads and hearts backward time and again. The taste of the food in their former life still lingers on their lips. Whatever new life is waiting for them on the other side of the present hardship pales in comparison to what they had before. The faithfulness and promises of God are no match for their discomfort. They *will* complain.

Complaining becomes a habit for the complainer, a default orientation. It also gets under the skin of others, who often have little patience for such curmudgeonliness. These two tendencies will tend to prick at each other, to make people rub each other the wrong way.

The times when I've heard "I Won't Complain" and felt the urge to run out of the church or funeral home, what has pricked me is this notion that death and heartache are things we shouldn't complain about. Are we singing the song simply as a reflection (accurate or not) of how the deceased felt about their life? Or is it a charge to the family to only remember the good times—or to take solace that their loved one has "gone on to a better place?" Is the absence of complaining a sign that one has accepted what God allowed?

Is there a hierarchy for when complaining is acceptable? Is it OK to complain about the death of a child or young adult but not that of an 89-year-old grandmother? Does the manner of death matter? Who in our society is allowed to complain about the harsh conditions in their lives that, for some, lead to an early death?

As I write this, the United States is still knee-deep in a pandemic with no end in sight. Infection rates continue to climb in many states, hospital ICUs are full, and families are still eulogizing loved ones via Zoom. I have the good fortune to live in a state where masks have been mandatory in public places since March. Yesterday while in a store, I noticed a customer wearing a red mask with white lettering. Before I could see the lettering clearly, I assumed it was a MAGA mask—our current political reality has me on edge all the time. I was close: the mask said, "Tom Wolf SUCKS!" It was a jab at the governor of Pennsylvania for his aggressive approach to stopping the spread of the virus here: long shutdowns, phased reopenings, and compulsory mask wearing.

The man wearing this mask was a complainer. He and many others who refuse to wear masks—or do so as if under duress—want us to know how disgruntled they are. The masks we wear are for the protection of others. If you're complaining about having to wear a mask in a retail store where the low-wage employees are highly susceptible to infection, it seems to me the only life you care about might be your own. Many of the loudest voices of dissent during this pandemic have been white, male, and privileged, while those who are expected to grin and bear it have been the essential workers, mostly black, brown, and low income.

There is a hierarchy of who gets to complain.

Death, trauma, abuse, and bondage are more than valid reasons to grumble. Many Christians have been taught that to complain to or against God is to be less than faithful. But whether God thinks the Israelites' complaints are valid or petty, God is

still God. God can bear our complaints—our sorrows, laments, and frustrations—while also offering provision. We can mourn, we can be rightfully angry, and still be on the receiving end of love and peace via the Spirit's presence in our supportive family and friends. We can be momentarily annoyed with having to wear a mask, and we can get over ourselves and wear it as a way to be our siblings' keeper. We can be enraged at the state of the world, spending our time complaining on social media about all that is wrong, and we can channel that rage into action.

If there is to be a hierarchy of who gets to complain, let it be used for good.