

Do you remember going on family vacations that involved long trips in the car? We would drive to the beach most years, only two hours if traffic wasn't bad, but of course for kids, two hours in the car is a long time. And that was in the age before smartphones and tablets. We'd play the same oldies tapes, hear the same jokes — look kids, it's the scrapple factory! Let's take a tour! The free samples are the best part! We'd ask, "Are we there yet?" And the answer would always be, "We're closer than we've been all day." All of that can only get you so far. So, what do kids do when they're bored in the back seat? They complain, bicker, and fight over the most trivial things.

There's a bit of this in both the Old Testament and Gospel readings this morning. The Israelites were on kind of the ultimate long road trip, wandering in the desert, hoping to reach a promised land they had never been to before. Jesus and the disciples were on their way from Galilee to Jerusalem, but rather than milk and honey, Jesus was predicting rejection, suffering, and death. In both cases, trouble is brewing.

In the desert, "everyone" was complaining about the food. I say "everyone" because it was not just the Israelites who were complaining. The Bible does not dwell on this fact, but it does make it clear that the Israelites allowed other people to join them on their journey, probably people from other cultures who had also been enslaved by the Egyptians. Allowing others to join them was simply the right thing to do, and a reminder of God's love and care for all people, and explicit commands to care for the foreigners in society. And, hey, strength in numbers. So when the narrator says, "The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again," that means that both groups were complaining. The foreigners might have started it, but complaints have a way of spreading, and taking on a life of their own.

God responded in two ways. Our reading skips over the part where God send the people so much meat that some of them literally got sick of it. The more important response was giving Moses some help with leading the people, and more importantly, showing the people that rather than following Moses, judging him based on their own whims and satisfaction, they would be sharing in leadership, taking on responsibility and keeping everyone focused on their goal, which was not just reaching a geographical destination, but more importantly, trusting God and living up to the responsibility of being a holy nation.

By the same token, there were many other people following Jesus besides the famous 12 disciples, 12 representing the 12 tribes of Israel. Who else would have been casting out demons in Jesus's name? It's true that some of those other followers didn't understand Jesus and his mission as well as they could have, but then, neither did the 12 disciples. That is clear from their complaint.

John, of all people, John, the gentle, compassionate, beloved disciple who would rest his head on Jesus's chest at the Last Supper, John seems a little out of character here. "Teacher," he said, "we saw someone casting out demons in your name..." OK, good start. Is John excited that word is spreading about Jesus, that Jesus's compassion

and power are inspiring people outside the inner circle, inspiring them to imitate Jesus? No. Is he moved with compassion for the suffering people this healer is trying to help? Not really. Is he sad or afraid because of the suffering in the world. Uh-uh. Did he or any of the disciples try to help those suffering people? Nope. “We tried to stop him...” Imagine the look on Jesus’s face. But it gets worse. “We tried to stop him, because he was not following us.”

The same disciples had just been arguing about which of themselves was the greatest have apparently bonded over their shared sense of superiority over others who also glorify Jesus’s name. Ironically, as apostles and evangelists, they would become bona fide leaders of faith communities, but right now they have a lot of growing up to do. They put themselves, their own dysfunctional, self-defeating circle, in the place of Jesus. They define right and wrong in relationship to themselves, instead of to Jesus. He still loved them, of course, loved them so much that he had to set them straight.

He astutely points out that unauthorized healers still end up supporting him. Even if they are using Jesus’s name to garner attention for themselves, they can’t very well go back and start speaking ill of Jesus. They are stuck supporting Jesus, giving him glory despite themselves. The healings themselves, the defeat of evil and mending of brokenness, are the work of God regardless of who does them, or how they are labeled. And finally, what matters is our relationship to Jesus. He speaks highly of “Whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ.” Rather than try to amass glory and power for themselves, followers of Jesus should be growing in humility, accepting hospitality graciously and recognizing their identity and purpose in Christ. Those who did created the legacy in which we stand today.

The Israelites and their foreign fellow-travellers weren’t perfect, but they stayed faithful, and they made it to the Promised Land. The 12 disciples and other followers of Jesus weren’t perfect either, but they stayed faithful too, they grew, and they became apostles and leaders who shared God’s grace and grew communities of faith.

Here at Advent, our community’s journey of faith is about to begin a new chapter. We are at a crossroads. You will have to decide for yourselves whether to complain, bicker, and divide into factions, or instead, to support your leaders, invest in this community, and embrace the new things God is doing here with faith, hope, and positive energy. The latter path leads to a bright future, and it’s also a more pleasant journey to be on. That is the way that God has ordained and blessed. That way is not always easy or clear, but God’s way is the way of life and peace, truth and grace, salvation and hope. That’s the way imperfect people are made whole, the way flawed people bless and heal the world. God supports and sustains the people who follow this way. God may feel far off sometimes, and we certainly aren’t in heaven yet, but united in the grace of worship, we’re closer than we’ve been all day.