

FINDING OUR WAY TO JOY
Exodus 17: 1-10
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The Jews had nothing on me when it came to murmuring and whining: I did plenty of it, if only at times to myself, while cycling the 2,500 miles from the Gulf Coast to the Great Lakes. Never in my life have I attempted anything so physically strenuous for so long. At times I had to remind myself the slaves escape to freedom was a whole lot worse.

Now, of course, no one made my friend Joe Culpepper and me do this, though there was a certain poetic symbolism in “climbing every mountain” between Mobile, Alabama and Owen Sound, Ontario, Canada. Hauling our 65 lbs. of bikes and equipments each over what equaled more than 45,000 feet of ascent gave us at least a whiff of the struggle Negro slaves must’ve experienced trying to make their way to freedom on the Underground Railroad. But this didn’t stop me from wondering, like the Israelites, “What did we get ourselves into?” especially since I realized the only way I was going to get home was to cycle across 9 states and a Canadian province.

One day particularly stands out. We were in western Kentucky, cycling merrily along the Ohio River. It was our first day fully packed out without the support vehicle we’d had the first 2 weeks when, all of a sudden, Joe’s special Adventurer Cycling route map showed a sharp turn to the right up a 15% grade (in Colorado 6% grades get signs)! I huffed and puffed up a

270 foot climb over 1/3 of a mile long! The hill was so steep I had to stop 3 times to catch my breath! My heart was racing while sweat poured down my face and arms. But I got up it; only to have to face another 15% climb a few miles later, and grumble like the Jews against Moses.

Then it happened. Once we got past these two terrible climbs Joe missed a turn. Of course, we've all missed turns in a car and it's no big deal. You just make a few extra turns and lose a few minutes in the process. But not so a bike! You miss a turn and you can easily add miles, even hours! Joe's innocent mistake added 6 miles *AND a third 15% grade to our day.*

The curious thing is: this happened while we were on our way to Joy...Kentucky, a real town. I found meaning in that name; because when I put together what we were doing, cycling all this way, I realized that finding our way to joy whether in Kentucky on the Underground Railroad or in life, is what life's journey is all about: finding our way to the joy of living in God and the joy of living in freedom. I also realized finding this joy has everything to do with the attitude we bring to the inevitable obstacles we face. Like the children of Israel, we can murmur and grumble our way through life or we can learn from our hardship and grow stronger.

But how to do this? How do we learn to persist through life's struggles to find our way to the joy of living and loving others and God?

The exodus story offers some hints: Among them, the story tells us we don't have to deny our struggles and the obstacles that can make our life miserable. In fact, we can celebrate them by remembering them, as the Jews do as they recite the story of their deliverance from slavery in Egypt again and again. As Paul says in Romans 5, "*We boast in our sufferings, knowing suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us, because of God's love.*"

Paul says nothing about denial, which is more than a river in Egypt!

Remember the teacher you despised but whom you later realized was an important mentor? Ironically, joy often comes by remembering how much stronger hard times made us and thanking God for getting us through them. Memory and gratitude embolden us to face life's challenges. They comfort us with the joy of knowing we never face the future alone.

Sometimes, though, we just need to stop long enough to listen to ourselves complain. In downtown Corydon, Indiana, Joe and I stopped for breakfast at Frederick's Café. As we waited for our food, we happened to notice a sign above the kitchen door which spelled out as one word: QUITCHERBELLIEACHIN'! From that point on, I often found myself repeating that word: "Quitchebelleiachin'."

Then I thought of something I'd heard our kids, Erica and Peter say, they learned working at Boy's Town. For every negative remark they make

to correct the young people, they are required to offer 5 positive remarks: more if the child is especially difficult. This ensures that family teachers keep the negatives at a minimum while maximizing the positives. As our journey progressed and I caught myself becoming whiny, I'd try to list 5 positive things. Guess what? It worked! I found myself feeling more joyful and more grateful for even the simplest things!

Deep down, I think our tendency to whine, to carp, to see the clouds even before they show up, bespeaks an inner anxiety we all carry within us. Trouble is: we can let this anxiety about our families, our fortunes, our futures, become the controlling attitude in our lives. God knows, there's enough to be worried about these days. But after a while, these frets and frustrations can so define the way we live emotionally and spiritually, we end up wondering if God cares or if there even is a God!

Like the Sunday we were cycling to Oberlin, Ohio. The day started with hills, continued through a long stretch of bad pavement, and ended with strong headwind. It was also a day when services were too few and far between for a place to stop for a drink, for lunch or for a restroom. The town we thought we were headed to just seemed to move farther away. I wanted to keep going, until finally, we realized we had to stop for lunch or fall over.

As we pulled over to fix and eat some PB&J sandwiches and a few cookies and chips we had with us a bronze-colored PT Cruiser rolled up. The woman driving the car rolled down her window and asked if we wanted something to eat. “YES!” we exclaimed. She said she had some pumpkin bars she’d taken to her Congregational church for a pot-luck to welcome their new pastor after the service. Each one of us took 4 bars. Then she added, “Would you like some cabbage rolls?” Enthusiastically we answered, “Yes!” “Do you have some forks?” she asked. “Yes,” we said one more time. “I live just a couple of doors down and I’ll bring you some bowls.” While she was gone we snarfed down the delicious bars. When she returned we both heaped our bowls full of her wonderful beef-filled cabbage rolls. We also asked for more pumpkin bars, knowing she had another full pan at home.

As she pulled away for the last time, Joe turned to me and said exactly what I was thinking: “If this doesn’t make you believe in God, nothing will.” Had we stopped earlier or anywhere else, we would never have experienced such exquisitely timed grace. As God in the wilderness heard the Hebrews grumbling, thirsty and hungry for food, so God heard our growling stomachs and knew our need. Her food was like manna from heaven. After that I never had such a ravenous appetite the rest of the way!

This incident showed me something very important. It isn't so much that *we* find our way to joy; it's that God is eager to surprise us with joy that cannot be artificially created but only received and passed onto others.

But this is what is so amazing about grace and about God! Sometimes manna tastes a little like pumpkin bars and cabbage rolls when you're hungry, unhappy, murmuring against everyone and everything and caught in the wilderness, out in the middle of nowhere!