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2nd Sunday of Lent

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“The Myth of Righteous Anger”

(Psalm 4:4)

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*“In your anger do not sin. When on your beds,
search your hearts and be silent” (Ps. 4:4).*

COLLECT: O God, You see that of ourselves we have no strength. By Your mighty power defend us from all adversities that may happen to the body and from all evil thoughts that may assault and hurt the soul; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

Today in America, we live in a profoundly angry culture. Anger is all the rage this election year. In a crowd of candidates, you have to do something to stand out, and the candidates are resorting to anger. Sometimes it seems they're even pretending to be angry, to appeal to angry voters. Today anger is in vogue. It's almost regarded as a virtue. We applaud people who angrily "go off on" and belittle someone whom we think deserves it.

As Christians, we find ourselves living in an angry culture, and we kid ourselves if we think the culture's view and tolerance of anger isn't wiggling its way into God's church. But this isn't just about the culture or the church. This is about you and me as individuals. I too have a temper. And I've noticed that when I'm angry, I rarely do or say the wise or loving thing. To be sure, when I'm angry I have lots of energy to do something, say something, but whenever I give in to anger, things usually turn out badly. I've end up hurting someone.

This sermon is about anger, more specifically what the Bible actually says about anger. And God's Word seems to be making the case that for us as humans it's well nigh impossible to get angry without also sinning. We all get angry, and we all feel our anger is what we like to call "righteous anger." For Christians, however, the place to start that conversation is with the Scriptures. What does God's Word say about anger, God's anger and human anger?

In the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, it seems God is often angry. It's not because anger is God's nature and resting state. Not at all. In Exodus 34 he tells us what his nature is. He is, quote "merciful and gracious,

slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (v. 6). That’s who he is. That’s his resting state. So why does he so often seem angry? It’s because we keep doing things to provoke him to anger.

Think of it this way. A. God is slow to anger. B. God is often angry, especially with his own people. Therefore, what can we conclude? C. God’s people have given him plenty of reasons to be angry. God’s anger in the Bible says more about us and our nature than it does about God and his nature. He expects better of us.

Only twice is Jesus explicitly said to be angry. Once it was in Mark 3 because the Pharisees didn’t want him to heal a man on the Sabbath. Verse 5: “And Jesus looked around at them with anger.” The other time was when his disciples dared prevent the little children from coming to him (Mk. 10:14). Of course there were other times when he showed anger, such as when he drove the money changers out of the temple courts. As in the Old Testament, the anger of Jesus is always justified simply because he is God. Paul writes as a man he was “like us in every way, yet without any sin” (2 Cor. 5:21). He’s the only man who in anger never sinned.

What about people who get angry in the Bible? Plenty of people get angry in the Bible, but there are very few texts in which one might conclude that anger was justified or righteous.

Instead, there are plenty of examples where human anger causes great sin. Remember Cain and Abel? Gen. 4, “So Cain was very angry and his face fell.” The LORD warns Cain of his anger. “Sin is crouching at the door” he says. “Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it.” That is, don’t give in to your anger. Of course, Cain ignores that. It’s no accident that the first mention of anger in the Bible happens right before the first murder.

God’s Word, especially in Proverbs links human anger with fools and sin. A few examples:

“A man of quick temper acts foolishly” (14:17).

“A hot-tempered man stirs up strife, but he who is slow to anger quiets contention” (15:18).

“Better the man who is slow to anger than a mighty warrior, better the man who controls his temper than one who conquers a city” (16:32).

“Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is to his glory to overlook an offense” (19:11).

“Make no friendship with a man given to anger, nor go with a wrathful man, lest you learn his ways and entangle yourself in a snare” (22:23-24).

When we see wicked people doing wicked things, it makes us angry and most of us would call that righteous anger. But listen to Psalm 37: “Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him; do not fret when men succeed in their ways, and carry out their wicked schemes! Refrain from anger, and turn from wrath! Do not fret—it leads only to evil. For evil men will be cut off, but those who hope in the LORD will inherit the land. A little while, and the wicked will be no more . . . But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy great peace” (7-11).

Jesus expands on this. The classic passage is from the Sermon on the Mount. “You have heard that it was said to people long ago, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment . . . And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell” (Mt. 5: 21ff).

Elsewhere in the New Testament, “anger” or “wrath” are simply added to the lists of sins, as if by their very nature they are sin. 2 Cor. 12, “For I fear that there may be quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder.” Anger is just another sin in that list. Galatians 5: “Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality . . . enmity, strife, fits of anger, dissensions, division. . . and the like. I warn you, [Paul says], as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God (20-21).

And again in Ephesians 4, “Get rid of all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander along with all malice” (v.31).

We all want to think our anger is righteous, but there’s nothing about man’s righteous anger in the Bible. There are only a lot of warnings of the spiritual dangers of anger. In the Bible, the one who is patient and self-controlled is truly wise, while the angry man is condemned as a fool.

Is the anger of God’s people in the Bible ever a good thing? The answer is, not really. Sometimes it is overlooked, without pointing it out, but one suspects that’s just for the sake of the narrative, the story. You can’t stop a story every time someone gets angry just to point out his sin. We might think Moses’ anger was righteous anger, when he came down from the mountain and saw the calf and the idolatry. The text says his anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets out of his hands and broke them (Ex. 32:19). Was that righteous anger? Just because Moses displayed anger and wasn’t punished for it (that we know of). . . that’s hardly an endorsement of his anger. Another example might be when the people’s constant grumbling at Meribah finally pushed Moses over the edge and in anger Moses struck the rock twice. We can certainly identify with his frustration. Not a big deal, we think. But it was a big deal to God. As a consequence for his anger, Moses never got to set foot in the Promised Land.

There are very few examples in the Bible of what we would call “righteous anger” and even those few are up for debate.

Now, our sermon text says, “In your anger do not sin; when you are on your beds search your hearts and be silent” It recognizes the reality of anger but puts a quick control on it. When you’re angry, “search your hearts and be silent.” James 1 also recognizes the reality of anger, but urges us to slam the brakes. It says, “Let every person be . . . slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God” (19-20). The Bible is within a whisker of saying that human anger is always and intrinsically sinful.

Contemporary American society admires those who speak out in anger and insult another individual or group. That's a big part of the Trump phenomenon. But as Christians, we have the responsibility to stand out and to be different from the culture. We are called to be the salt of the earth, and the light of the world. Even when we feel angry at the injustice or evil or immorality in the world around us, we cannot call that "righteous anger," thereby justifying our own angry actions or insults. God can be angry in a righteous way, but we are not God. We are saints and sinners simultaneously. So we have to be very careful with this thing call anger.

Instead of getting angry, we have this from Paul, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. . . Live in harmony with one another. . . Repay no one evil for evil. . . If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "'Vengeance is mine, I will repay,' says the Lord." To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink . . . Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom. 12:14-21).

Notice, there's a place for anger in this text, but it does not belong to the disciples of Jesus. It belongs to God alone (v.20). Apparently vengeance is too dangerous a weapon to be placed into the hands of sinners.

Some have said, "But anger motivates you to get up and do something." Should it require anger to move me to action? Shouldn't compassion or mercy or love be sufficient?

Well, the reality is you and I are sinners living among other sinners and we're going to get angry. So suppose you're angry, really angry. (Maybe it's this sermon on anger that has ticked you off.) What do you do when you're angry?

First, one very good option is to do or say nothing. Our text says, "In your anger, do not sin. Lie on your beds and be silent." That ancient advice turns out to be very

wise, because brain science tells us the fight or flight part of our brain runs much faster than our reasonable part. So taking a step back to let the reasonable part of the brain catch up is good advice. Don't write any emails or texts or tweets or anything when you're angry. Chances are it will make you a fool, at least in God's eyes. Be SLOOOOww to anger.

Second, trust that the LORD's vengeance is totally adequate. As Paul wrote, "Do not take revenge . . . leave room for God's wrath" (Rom. 12:19). In his own time God will bring about justice without sin or collateral casualties.

Third, try to "explain everything in the kindest way". (SC, 8th Comm.). Maybe the one who didn't greet you wasn't trying to dis you. Maybe she was distracted by something else.

Fourth, Jesus said pray for your enemies (Mt. 5:44), maybe in part because it's hard to hate someone you're praying for, or even to be angry with them.

Fifth, Paul wrote, as much as possible, be at peace with one another (1 Thes. 5.). Work toward that peace. It doesn't come easily but it's well worth the efforts.

Sixth, if action is necessary, do it according to Matthew 18. "If your brother sins against you go and show him his fault, just between the two of you" (not with everyone else!). If that doesn't work take along two or three witnesses. If that still doesn't work tell it to the church and so on (15ff.).

Seventh, seek out a safe and careful listener, not for the sake of slandering the one you're angry at, but for the sake of getting advice and support. Keep it all anonymous. Again, our Stephen Ministers can be very helpful here.

Eighth, if you are often angry maybe it's time to seek professional help, a skilled counselor who will help you discover why. God uses such people to help us.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, forgive the one who sinned against you. If it was a big hurt, it won't be a one and done sort of forgiveness. It will be a lot of work leading up to that forgiveness, and then, in your mind at least, a 70 times 7 sort of forgiveness as you, day after day resolve again and again to tamp down the resurgent anger (Mt. 18:21ff).

One last thing: the Gospel is going to get short shrift today, so listen up. After all that Law, I don't want you to miss the precious little Gospel. Here it is: The most important teaching about anger in the Bible is that the Father has provided a way out by actually using anger. He has saved us from his righteous wrath when he focused his wrath on his Son Jesus as a substitute for our sin. And Jesus saved us by not lashing out himself. Jesus was falsely accused, falsely sentenced, slapped, spit on, whipped, beaten up, mocked, humiliated, and finally crucified. If there were ever an opportunity for a burst "righteous anger" that was it. But he didn't retaliate. He didn't unleash a stream of verbal abuse and profanity. He didn't go on the attack. He held his tongue and unclenched his fist to save us from the sin of anger. He trusted his Father to deliver him and deal with his attackers in his own time and way.

In Romans 5, Paul writes, "God shows his love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life." (vv. 8ff). Thanks be to God. Amen.

(I owe much to a paper written by Dr. Jeffrey Gibbs entitled, "The Myth of 'Righteous Anger': What the Bible says About Human Anger" Concordia Theology, October 19, 2015).