

WHY SO ANGRY?
THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY
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Immediately after Jesus says God's promises were now fulfilled

Everyone in the synagogue was filled with anger.

They rose up and ran him out of town . . . so they could throw him off the cliff.

There you have it, today's news in a 2,000-year-old-book.

If the headlines I see, the mail solicitations I get, and the talking heads I hear, have anything in common, it's that everyone is filled with anger and they are itching to throw SOMEONE off a cliff.

The outrage is apparently endemic; really, the only thing that separates us is who it is that we think needs to be hurtled off the cliff.

Each one of us is absolutely certain we are right.

The most dangerous among us are the religious ones, who are not only sure that we are right, but that we are justified by God.

God – however we define that term – is on OUR side.

So, there's a joke about the time the Pope and all the cardinals were at the Vatican.

An aide came up to tell the Pope he had a phone call.

The Pope allowed as he was kind of busy and to take a message.

The aide said it was a pretty important call because it was from Jesus.

"Jesus *Christ?*" said the astonished Pope.

"Yes, Our Lord. And there's good news, and bad news."

By this time everyone is on their feet in wonder.

"What's the good news?" the Pope almost shouted.

"Well, the good news is that Jesus has returned," said the aide.

"And?"

"The bad news is that he is calling from Salt Lake City."

Now, that's funny, but not too scary, because the Mormons may be a bit weird, but they are at least Christians, by most accounts.

But what if the call were from Jerusalem? Well, still OK. Mecca? or Mumbai? or . . . Clearwater?

There's a place in each of our hearts where we would actually be offended if God were to favor THEM instead of US.

That's what's behind that violent fury in the synagogue that day:

Jesus had just declared that God's promise of good news to the poor,

release to the prisoners, sight to the blind, liberation of the oppressed, and the year Lord's favor, then made it very clear these weren't just for the chosen people of Israel,

they were for everyone, absolutely everyone,

even their ancient, sworn enemies in Lebanon,

and – as we'll soon see when Jesus heals the Centurion's servant – the detestable Romans.

This was intolerable, disgusting, and must be stopped!

In their fury, the men of the synagogue rose up to stop God's promise of grace;

if they couldn't have it all for themselves, then no one on earth would get it.

This wasn't just ME first, this was ME ONLY, or nobody.

This toxic anger is today's news in a 2,000-year-old story.

I know toxic anger when I see it, because it came close to killing my spirit.

Today's Collect and Scripture readings are at the end of the sermon text.

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A long time ago, well over 30 years, I had it all, but I was unhappy.

My husband was, and is, a good man, we had a beautiful daughter,

I had a successful career. But, I was unhappy. Not just unhappy, I was just generally angry, a simmering toxic stew that came out as, well, we'll say "witchiness."

I know I could not have been pleasant to be around, let alone live with, because even I didn't like being around me very much.

I wasn't going to church yet, so I asked the person I trusted most, my primary care physician, Dr. Willows, for help. A pill, maybe? Nope. A counselor, she said.

She gave me a name or two, and I finally made the appointment and went.

The counselor and I talked about my life, my hopes, yada, yada, yada.

I didn't think the counselor and I were getting much of anywhere until one session when we talked about my simmering pot of toxic anger.

She said anger can come out in different ways: general witchiness, sudden outbursts of rage (like those men in the synagogue),

or everyone's favorite, passive aggressiveness. (Queen of that, I was.)

Then she said something that changed my life.

She observed that anger isn't usually the first emotion, it's the second one.

We feel it after we've felt something else. So, what are your first emotions? What led to your anger?

And then, you need to decide whether anger is the best response

to what you're feeling, whether life is better for you when you're wrapped in all that anger, or if there's another way you might cope.

Yowza. Wait, what? Anger is a choice? It didn't make any sense.

I thought emotions just happened, like car wrecks or hurricanes.

So she and I explored some of the things that "made me angry," and she was right.

What often comes before anger?

Fear. Grief. Disappointment. Frustration. Hurt. Rejection.

Confusion. Abuse. Degradation. Disrespect.

The list of "first feelings" is pretty long, actually. You might think of others.

Whatever the first feeling is, it is at least unpleasant, often devastating, and we want it to stop.

Now.

Anger is the beginning of a sequence to make the first bad feelings stop.

Yes, sometimes, anger is, indeed a valid response.

Jesus was angry at the money-changers in the Temple

who were preying on the poor and abusing Jewish traditions to make money.

Some anger is indeed righteous anger.

Once again, I quote what Frederick Dale Bruner says about God's wrath:

The wrath of God is the love of God in friction with the injustice and hatefulness of people.

The wrath of God is the grace of God in collision with the selfishness and mercilessness of humanity.¹

God's prophets, Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Micah, and many others were given the dangerous vocation of telling us not only that God loves us, which we like to hear, of course, but that God's wrath is very real.

Most of those prophets, along with Jesus, sooner or later were thrown off the proverbial cliff for telling God's truth to us.

Each of these prophets warned us that we need to turn from sin

(and remember that our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry,

said that another word for sin is "selfishness") and fulfill God's will and law.

¹ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary. Volume 1: The Christbook, Matthew 1-12*. Eerdmans, 2007. p. 92

God's will and law are that we are to love God, love our neighbor, including the people we cannot stand, and love ourselves.

Let's be honest. The vast majority of the time, our anger isn't righteous anger about injustice.

It's about ourselves, and the bad feelings we have that we don't like, or that we don't know how to deal with.

Back to those men in that synagogue in Nazareth.

Do you see that in their venomous hatred of others that undergirded their plan to stop Jesus' healing by throwing him off the cliff, they not only broke the commandment to love their neighbor, they also broke the commandment to love themselves?

A world without love for God AND neighbor AND self will result in a scorched earth where everyone is left in misery.

The great thing is that the same 2,000-year-old book that shows us that the news doesn't change much also shows us how to ask God to heal us and then join God in healing the world instead of scorching it.

In the Letter of James, we are given this path:

Know this, my dear brothers and sisters: everyone should be quick to listen.

Listening, deeply and without pre-judging the other, may be the most compassionate act of love one human can do for another.

The test of real listening is whether we can tell the other person what we heard them say in a way that they can respond with, "Yes, that's exactly what I meant."

It's hard. But when we do it, when we really understand what another is saying, we still may not agree, but we will at least be treating the other as we wish to be treated.

It's how we love our neighbor.

The letter continues: *be slow to speak*. Being slow to speak tremendously reduces the possibility that we will say something we'll regret and can't ever un-say.

Once we say something, other things are set in motion that we can't stop.

So, first, we need to consider what we want to happen, what helps us be the kind of person we want to be, and for those of us here, the kind of person that God created us to be.

A short test: say nothing that you wouldn't say with Jesus there.

Or, said another say, so only what you'd say if Jesus were there.

Because, you know, he is.

Finally, the letter says, *be slow to grow angry*.

Sometimes our anger grows slowly; sometimes it bursts out in a sudden rage, but either way, it means we haven't dealt with one of those first feelings.

These emotions are real, they are important, they are affecting our life, and they point to whatever it is that we really need to deal with.

So, back to my counseling. What did I need to deal with? What were my first feelings?

What was behind that witchy anger? It took a while to sort out, but it came down to two things:

Resentment – my long work hours as a litigating attorney meant not enough time for my baby, my family, or myself.

The other feeling was unworthiness, that I wasn't truly lovable, desirable, valuable.

In the years since I discovered this sense of being unworthy,

I've found out that so many feel the same way;

in fact, I've stopped being astonished how many others have felt unworthy.

People who feel unworthy are, in a way, like those men in the synagogue:

in not loving ourselves, we cannot truly love anyone else.

I've worked hard on these issues over the years; other first feelings popped up, too.

The hard work has been worth it; I'm now much more comfortable in my own skin.

I don't as readily forget who I am when I walk away from the mirror.

There are still days, though, when I struggle to put love into practice.

Life is difficult, and people can be annoying, not doing what I want them to do.

I get all wrapped up in myself and can get pretty cranky.

You wouldn't like me much those days, and I don't like myself much, either.

How thankful I am that God is patient, and putting love into practice starts with God, not me.

Sooner or later, God's love does something to bring me back to myself.

Usually, that love comes by way of somebody who does something wonderful,
maybe by listening to me, or reminding me I'm beloved, or just being kind.

Never underestimate the power of a smile or a sincere compliment.

God's love, no matter how it comes, switches off the heat under my simmering pot of anger.

This love is the power of God, the power of the Spirit, which upholds, awakens, inspires, guides,
and sends EVERYONE out as prophets, even the children.

Yes, God's prophets sometimes get thrown off a cliff,

but mostly prophets do what God's prophets have done for thousands of years:

we change the world by hearing the word of love, then doing it,

speaking the truth of God by proclaiming good news, healing, liberating,

and that THIS is the time of the Lord's favor to God's beloved creation.

As I've said many times before, yes, it's hard work,

and the forces of aggression, oppression, greed and materialism will oppose us.

But a life of freedom, abundance, healing, faith, hope and love

is the only kind of life that's really worth living, and the retirement benefits are out of this world!

COLLECT OF THE DAY

Almighty and ever-living God, increase in us the gifts of faith, hope, and love; and that we may obtain what you promise, make us love what you command, through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

JEREMIAH 1:4-10

The Lord's word came to me: "Before I created you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I set you apart; I made you a prophet to the nations." "

Ah, Lord God," I said, "I don't know how to speak because I'm only a child."

The Lord responded, "Don't say, 'I'm only a child.' Where I send you, you must go; what I tell you, you must say. Don't be afraid of them, because I'm with you to rescue you," declares the Lord.

Then the Lord stretched out his hand, touched my mouth, and said to me, "I'm putting my words in your mouth. This very day I appoint you over nations and empires, to dig up and pull down, to destroy and demolish, to build and plant."

PSALM 71:1-6

In you, O Lord, have I taken refuge; let me never be ashamed.

In your righteousness, deliver me and set me free; incline your ear to me and save me.

Be my strong rock, a castle to keep me safe; you are my crag and my stronghold.

Deliver me, my God, from the hand of the wicked,

from the clutches of the evildoer and the oppressor.

For you are my hope, O Lord God, my confidence since I was young.

I have been sustained by you ever since I was born;

from my mother's womb you have been my strength; my praise shall be always of you.

JAMES 1:19-27

Know this, my dear brothers and sisters: everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to grow angry. This is because an angry person doesn't produce God's righteousness. Therefore, with humility, set aside all moral filth and the growth of wickedness, and welcome the word planted deep inside you—the very word that is able to save you.

You must be doers of the word and not only hearers who mislead themselves. Those who hear but don't do the word are like those who look at their faces in a mirror. They look at themselves, walk away, and immediately forget

what they were like. But there are those who study the perfect law, the law of freedom, and continue to do it. They don't listen and then forget, but they put it into practice in their lives. They will be blessed in whatever they do.

If those who claim devotion to God don't control what they say, they mislead themselves. Their devotion is worthless. True devotion, the kind that is pure and faultless before God the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their difficulties and to keep the world from contaminating us.

LUKE 4:21-30

[Jesus] began to explain to them, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it."

Everyone was raving about Jesus, so impressed were they by the gracious words flowing from his lips. They said, "This is Joseph's son, isn't it?"

Then Jesus said to them, "Undoubtedly, you will quote this saying to me: 'Doctor, heal yourself. Do here in your hometown what we've heard you did in Capernaum.'" He said, "I assure you that no prophet is welcome in the prophet's hometown. And I can assure you that there were many widows in Israel during Elijah's time, when it didn't rain for three and a half years and there was a great food shortage in the land. Yet Elijah was sent to none of them but only to a widow in the city of Zarephath in the region of Sidon. There were also many persons with skin diseases in Israel during the time of the prophet Elisha, but none of them were cleansed. Instead, Naaman the Syrian was cleansed."

When they heard this, everyone in the synagogue was filled with anger. They rose up and ran him out of town. They led him to the crest of the hill on which their town had been built so that they could throw him off the cliff. But he passed through the crowd and went on his way.

SERMON HYMN: Eternal God, Whose Power Upholds

BLESSING: Beloved, life is short, and we do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those who travel with us, so be quick to love and make haste to be kind. As you leave this place, the blessing of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit be upon you and remain with you, now and forever.