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God's Anger and Our Own

Putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. Ephesians 4:25-5:2

35Jesus said, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. 41Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." 42They were saying, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?" 43Jesus answered them, "Do not complain among yourselves. 44No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. 45It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. 46Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. 47Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. 48I am the bread of life. 49Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. 50This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. 51I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." John 6:35, 41-51

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My plan this morning was to preach on the Bread of Life. You may have noticed that we've been camping out in the 6th chapter of John's gospel for a couple of weeks now. It is in John where we hear the great "I am" statements, connecting Jesus with God speaking to Moses in the Exodus story when God said: I AM WHO I AM. Today we hear: I am the bread of life. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever.

These words of Jesus evoke mystery and meaning and invite us to consider what feeds us spiritually and what satisfies and meets our deep needs. To be filled and known and loved and valued. There's always work to do in the sorting of those commitments and priorities

that can fade so quickly – as we measure them up to what only God can offer: love without limits and eternal life.

That was my plan. And then I paused on a verse in the passage from Ephesians. Paul writes: “Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger.”

“Be angry but do not sin” feels to me like there is some latitude – some wiggle room -- when it comes to anger. It may not be all that bad. Just don’t take it too far. Don’t sin.

How many times have we probably heard or repeated that one should not go to sleep angry with another person? The subject almost always comes up as I meet with couples before their wedding.

Yet we know that some issues don’t easily get resolved overnight. Disagreements can linger. In families, between colleagues and friends. We can all probably stew over things longer than is healthy and that we’d like to admit. We know first-hand that when and if we do, the chances of a peaceful sleep are not that great.

We really don’t talk much about anger, do we? Our own anger, let alone God’s anger. A vision of an angry God, after all, is one of the things that turns people off and keeps them away from certain preachers or scars them in their young church going days.

Let’s reflect on anger. What makes you angry? Not a touch miffed, or upset, but pulse racing, hands shaking, voice trembling angry? We probably should start with God and work our way back to our lives.

There are many human emotions and actions that Scripture attaches to God in the Bible. God makes, gives, cares and protects. God has regrets. God loves. God laughs. The play on the old Yiddish proverb is this: “If you want to make God laugh, tell God your plans.”

When it comes to anger, we hear this in Exodus. God’s anger is slow anger.

Then the Lord passed by in front of Moses and proclaimed, “The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in loving kindness and truth.”
Exodus 34:6

God is patient, but when that patience runs out, watch out.

In Isaiah we read: The Lord’s anger burns against his people; his hand is raised and he strikes them down. The mountains shake, and the dead bodies are like refuse in the streets. Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away, his hand is still upraised.

God’s anger burns.

But here’s something important. The renowned rabbi Abraham Heschel who marched with Dr. King wrote that “The prophets never [portray] God’s anger as something that is

unpredictable or irrational. It is never a spontaneous outburst, but a reaction occasioned by the conduct of humans...and motivated by concern for right and wrong.”

There’s always a reason for God’s anger.

This fall I will be leading some conversations on Zoom on Monday nights using videos from the Bible Project. In one of their resources, we are reminded of the many things that makes God angry. Righteous anger. Human violence. Powerful leaders who oppress others. God is angry at humanity’s idolatry, when we elevate and make gods of wealth, power, security, political leaders – all the while neglecting the needs of those on the margins. Plain and simple: God rages at injustice.

If this is true, our anger should follow.

So, I ask again: what makes you angry?

Righteous anger is something deeper.

It is when our anger aligns with God’s. Anger at injustice, unfairness, racism, indifference. Anger at the destructiveness of war and cruelty.

Yet even righteous anger should not burn and fester for too long. It all needs to be transformed into something more.

We believe that God’s anger is overshadowed by God’s love.

We can see this in the movement in Ephesians.

Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

We are to move from anger to the kindness, and forgiveness and love.

Here’s another way to think of this movement, this change that we are called to.

You may have heard the word ‘liminal’ in a sermon or come across it in reading. What does it mean? Essentially it means “threshold.” Clinical social worker Melissa Cohen describes this space as “going through a change or going from place to place -- from one thing to the next. It’s the space between what is and what will happen next.”

With that perspective, we read the writings of Paul through this prism of ‘what now.’

Remember that the central purpose of the gospels is to tell the world about the life, death and resurrection of Christ. It was the mission of the once persecutor of the early Christians, Saul of Tarsus, who later became the Apostle Paul, to teach and form many of the early

communities through his missionary travels. He took the gospel on the road to much larger audience.

Paul met people where they were and shared the powerful story of how his own life had changed. And then he painted a picture a new way of living and being. What now.

2 Corinthians 5:17 So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

I often return to this passage often as I live, as you live, through the ordinariness of life – days that are pretty much the same wee to week. Predictable by in large. Routine.

When I feel stuck or unsettled, I will often think about the sunrise. It comes up each day like the last. And the day it begins may be the same as yesterday, but it is still new.

Paul's work – with help from the Holy Spirit – was the show through his own life how drinking deeply from what God provides will touch and satisfy our deepest longings far more than the temporary and perishable things that normally fill our days and worries.

Going back to this liminal space – this threshold.

Yes, there's a lot to be angry about in our world today. But we cannot just be angry or sad or feel helpless or removed.

Paul's words can inspire us today: "be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."

Let us align our anger with God's. When we do, we will see the work yet to be done more clearly.