

Scripture Reading for Sunday, August 20

Hebrew Bible

The Book of Jonah, Chapters 3 and 4

1 Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time:

2 “Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.”

3 Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it.

4 Jonah began by going a day’s journey into the city, proclaiming, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.”

5 The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

6 When Jonah’s warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust.

7 This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink.

8 But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence.

9 Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.”

10 When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

1 But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry.

2 He prayed to the LORD, “Isn’t this what I said, LORD, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.

3 Now, LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.”

4 But the LORD replied, “Is it right for you to be angry?”

5 Jonah had gone out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city.

6 Then the LORD God provided a leafy plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the plant.

7 But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered.

8 When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah’s head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, “It would be better for me to die than to live.”

9 But God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?” “It is,” he said. “And I’m so angry I wish I were dead.”

10 But the LORD said, “You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight.

11 And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?”

New Testament

Mark, Chapter 3, verses 1-6

Jesus entered again into a synagogue; and a man was there whose hand was withered.

2[The Pharisees] were watching Him to see if He would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse Him.

3He said to the man with the withered hand, “Get up and come forward!”

4And He said to them, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or to kill?” But they kept silent.

5After looking around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, He said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” And he stretched it out, and his hand was restored.

6The Pharisees went out and immediately began conspiring with the Herodians against Him, as to how they might destroy Him.

- My name is Cheryl Klein,
- And at the beginning of this summer, when Herb approached me about preaching for this series,
- I volunteered to talk about anger.
- I chose anger because I'm a mild-mannered Midwestern female children's book editor—
 - All identities that are heavily invested in being nice and getting along well with other people.
- And this means I have a complicated relationship with anger—
 - when to feel it, *how* to feel it, how best to handle and use it.
- When something goes wrong, thanks to my years of conditioning in niceness,
- I may get angry, but I *manage* it.
 - I curse. I talk to my friends and husband.
 - I try to solve the situation with a minimum of drama.
 - And if it's a matter for public consideration,
 - I'll write a sharply worded Facebook post.
 - (My enemies quake in their boots.)
- This means I have a pretty peaceful life, and honestly, I like that.
- But I also run the risk of letting internal anger burn me up,
 - And managing situations when I should be walking away from them altogether.
- So I thought this sermon would be an interesting chance to explore this paradox in more depth,
 - And to see what the Bible had to say about anger as a sin.
- Then the last month happened!
 - The Republicans almost destroyed the healthcare system!
 - We were on the edge of nuclear war!
 - Actual effing Nazis marched!
 - The president spoke up for the Nazis!
- For the last two years, the biggest disturbance in my peaceful existence has been Donald Jerkface Trump.
 - I'm sorry if you're a Republican; I cannot be nice about him.
- And these events stirred the anger and grief I've been banking since November 9 of last year, and long before,

- at the racism, sexism, authoritarianism, obstructionism, selfishness, greed, cruelty, and often sheer stupidity of this country—
 - Which I also love, I should say.
- This fury seems to be shared by most of the nation, on one side or the other,
 - And exacerbated in both instances by the rise of the effing Nazis.
- Suddenly my nice, intellectual examination of anger became super political and timely.
 - Forget gluttony, envy, sloth—anger is the sin of the moment!
- So in today’s sermon,
- I’m going to explore the idea of anger as a sin,
- Consider both its positive and negative uses and abuses,
- And offer five strategies for dealing with our anger—for managing it, more or less,
 - To help us be functional Christians in a malfunctioning world.
- And actually, I’m going to dive right into one of those strategies,
 - as the first method for dealing with our anger is to express it,
 - And let it leave us altogether.
- At my college, the night before finals began, we had a ritual called Primal Scream, where every student went outside at 9 p.m. and screamed for two solid minutes to relieve stress.
- It was tremendously cathartic, and we were able to return to studying with a clearer mind, because we’d purged all that stress out of ourselves.
- So perhaps you too are filled with anger at Donald Trump and his terribleness,
- Or perhaps you’re angry at your partner, or your boss, or your kids, or your health, or that jerk who cut you off in the bike lane this morning.
- Whatever it is, we’re gonna let our anger out here for fifteen seconds—I’ll time it.
- You can scream, rant, wave your fist, whatever.
 - You could also just have fun shouting.
 - I’ll count down three, two, one . . .
 - < fifteen seconds >
- All right, now we can begin our nice theological discussion of Anger.
- Several Hebrew words translate as “anger” in the Bible, especially 'aph.
 - which is used 45 times to refer to human anger, and 177 times for Divine anger.

- So there are nearly three times as many documented instances of God being angry with us as there are of humans being angry with anything.
- But if God gets angry, someone might ask, and God is perfect, how can anger be a sin?
- Well, technically, the deadly sin here is not Anger but Wrath.
- The catechism of the Catholic Church states that anger is among the passions, and “in the passions, . . . there is neither good nor evil.”
- The mere emotion of Anger only becomes the sin of Wrath when it is excessive:
 - when it is directed against an innocent person, or lasts long beyond its cause, or employs unnecessary force or violence in its execution.
- Thomas Aquinas said, “He that is angry without cause, shall be in danger; but he that is angry with cause, shall not be in danger; for without anger, teaching will be useless, judgments unstable, crimes unchecked. Therefore to be angry is not always an evil.”
- Elsewhere he wrote, “A passion of the sensitive appetite is good in so far as it is regulated by reason, whereas it is evil if it set the order of reason aside.”
- So long as you can govern your anger with reason, it will not become wrath, and it is not a sin.
- The Bible sets up this idea of self-control in Proverbs 16:32: “He who is slow to anger is better than a strong man, and he who masters his passions is better than one who conquers a city.”
- Anger is like a nuclear reaction: harness it in a controlled environment, and the energy can power the tri-state area.
- In his book *Sinning Like a Christian*, William Willimon notes that Martin Luther extolled righteous Anger as the engine that drove him on to some of his very best work. “I never work better than when I am inspired by anger,” Luther said, “for when I am angry I can write, pray, and preach well, for then my whole temperature is quickened, my understanding sharpened, and all mundane vexations and temptations depart.”
- But nuclear reactions can also be used in bombs, or create a meltdown thanks to one tiny crack.
- Luther maybe did his best writing when he was angry, but he also wrote some of his worst and least defensible work under that influence—
 - For instance, his disgusting denunciations of Jews.
- This is why we need strategies for dealing with our anger:
- When we are angry, it is hard to see anything but its cause and our hurt,

- And our singleminded focus on that transgression can drown out all of Aquinas’s reason and proportion.
- As examples here, let’s look at our scripture readings for the day.
- I’ve always loved the Book of Jonah, because Jonah is such a rich and funny character—
 - Just this hilariously whiny little putz.
- In the famous part of the story, God tells him to go to Nineveh to preach, he runs away in the opposite direction, and God sends a whale to swallow him for his trouble.
 - You *know* God could have sent that whale straight to shore,
 - but he lets Jonah sit in its stomach for three days and think about what he’s done.
- When the whale barfs him up, Jonah finally goes to Nineveh and preaches as he was told.
 - But he isn’t grateful to God for giving him a second chance.
 - Rather, he gets angry with God for being too *kind* to the people of Nineveh.
 - “I traveled this far and you didn’t do *anything*,” Jonah says to Him,
 - And then: “I had this great plant and you took it away!”
 - He was stuck in the belly of a whale for three days. That deserves some vengeance, or at least some shade!
 - And when he doesn’t get those things, he says literally, “I’m so angry I wish I were dead.”
 - Jonah has no chill.
- In the Mark story, the Pharisees’ behavior is perfectly right according to Judaic law,
 - which said no work, including healings, should be done on the Sabbath.
- When Jesus violates this law, well, he broke the law!
 - And if the law is the highest value, he must be condemned.
- I have sympathy for both Jonah and the Pharisees here
- Because they each have a great cosmic sense of right—
 - A sense of how things ought to be.
- I am a book editor. You give me a text, and I read it, and I’ll know how it ought to be.
- My husband can testify, in daily life too—
 - I know how things ought to be,
 - And I *will tell you* how things ought to be,
 - Even if that “ought to be” is based on nothing more than how *I’ve* always done those things.

- Usually our “ought to bes” are based in reason.
 - If someone steps on my foot on the subway, and doesn’t apologize,
 - Well, that is wrong, and it is perfectly reasonable for me to be irritated.
- But if we’re not careful, this cosmic sense of right, righteousness, *oughtness*, can become a seductive trap,
 - Where that sense is set by our egos and priorities, not by God’s.
- Our rightness is our safe space, our bubble, where we get to do what we want,
 - A utopia where things always go easy for us, where our effort is recognized, where we are permanently loved.
- When that bubble is violated—
 - By something as big as the presidential election, or as small as a red light—
- We react with fear and anger, because it shows our bubble’s a lie.
- We aren’t always right. Things aren’t always easy. Life isn’t fair. Love can go away.
 - And given those truths, I’d rather live in my bubble.
- William Willimon says, << “Anger tends to drive us . . . even deeper into ourselves, in seething, simmering resentment. Part of its sin is isolation. We are right; the world is wrong. We are victims of injustice; the world is unjust. Anger is the master that keeps us out of the world of others by locking us within ourselves. >>
- Martin Luther defined sin as “the heart all curved in on itself.”
- And while all of the deadly sins curve us toward selfishness,
- None is more powerful than anger,
 - which combines the energy of our desire to maintain our personal rightness
 - with the raw offense of having that rightness violated.
- We see this toxic stew in the Jonah story, when Jonah wants his personal satisfaction at the cost of the destruction of an entire city.
 - And in Mark, when the Pharisees want the letter of the law, the pleasure of their personal rightness,
 - more than they want the crippled man to have a whole hand.
- But God’s anger, and Jesus’s anger, takes a wider view.
- They also have a cosmic sense of rightness—but it comes from being actually and truly cosmic:
 - knowing all, seeing all, understanding all, loving all,

- and holding all of this knowledge in balance as they choose how to act.
- God says to Jonah, “You have been concerned about this plant, which grew up overnight and dies overnight. But you want a city of a hundred and twenty thousand human beings to burn because you’re annoyed.”
 - “Get your priorities straight, man.”
- Jesus presents the same challenge to the Pharisees in the temple. “Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath?”
 - The answer is obviously yes, but the Pharisees cannot let their righteousness go and admit it.
- Jesus looks around with anger, “grieved at their hardness of heart,”
 - And then he performs a miracle—a transformation, the healing of a man,
 - Which is much more important in the grand scheme of things than the rule of law on a Sabbath.
- So here we have an answer to the question of why God’s anger is so much more acceptable than our own:
 - God’s anger is regulated by his reasons, his cosmic sense of right,
 - While we can see only our own bubble, where our reasons are necessarily limited, biased, self-serving, and imperfect—really not reason at all.
- It’s because of our failure to see the wider view that God says “Vengeance is mine,” not ours.
- We cannot know how actions done in anger will resonate or iterate in the wider world,
 - And given that, we are asked to moderate those actions, to let God respond in his own time.
- William Willimon says, << Gross injustice, great Anger, ought to be given to God as our offering, our confession that we have come to a place in our lives where we are unable to fix that which afflicts us. >>
- This is our second strategy for dealing with our anger, especially when it seems too overwhelming to manage:
 - Take a deep breath, and commit the situation to God, because he can handle it better than we can.
- The third strategy is, oddly, empathy.
- Etymologically, anger is an Old Norse word that means “grief” or “vex,”
 - While wrath is related to both the Dutch word “wreed,” or *cruelty*, and the verb “writhe.”

- Grief, vexation, cruelty, writhing—these are all forms of pain,
- And it can be useful to think of anger as a form of pain,
 - And try to understand it through that lens,
 - Because we are ALL in pain, all weak.
 - We all get our bubbles broken and search for comfort in the dark.
- If we can recognize the pain in others' anger, and give it a name,
 - That distances us from their fury, and helps to defuse our own.
 - We might even come to understand their pain, and sympathize with it,
 - And that gives us more space and direction to choose how we want to react.
- This is also a strategy that works well when you're angry with yourself or caught up in your own pain.
 - If you can recognize your anger in the midst of it, you've taken the first step at piercing your bubble.
 - Naming your anger helps you know why you're upset.
 - The name might help you connect this instance to other patterns in your life,
 - And soon, like God, you might see a bigger picture.
- Maybe you'll still be angry after going through this process, and that might be a good thing—
- You might need the energy provided by anger to handle this situation properly.
- But slowing down helps us to react with more control,
 - And perhaps, like Jesus, make a transformation.
- This strategy is perhaps most appropriate to use with people you love, with whom you're in a long-term and committed relationship, where their pain matters and needs to be healed.
 - And, conversely, with small situations where you'll never see the other person again.
 - If I step on someone's foot on the subway, and they swear at me,
 - Recognizing their pain and apologizing is way more appropriate than swearing back.
 - It costs me nothing, the interaction is over, everyone's life goes on.
- Empathy is harder on the national level, where many pains compete for our attention.
- The news media has written innumerable articles about lower-class white Trump voters.
 - Before the election, these articles focused on how angry they were at the injustices they experienced—lack of jobs, lack of health care, stagnant wages, lower standards of living—

- which they blamed on immigrants, people of color, Democrats, take your pick.
- I don't actually believe that every Trump voter was acting out of racism. That certainly may have motivated many of them,
 - And ALL votes for Trump ultimately served as a racist act, because they empowered him.
- But I believe some people DID experience "economic anxiety,"
 - or a desperation for a different politics that would help them out of their circumstances,
 - and for some reason, contrary to all available evidence, they believed Donald Trump would provide some relief.
- Their pain was real—is real, since he hasn't done a thing to help them—
 - And pain deserves to be acknowledged.
- In comparison, the news media has barely covered the pain of the Muslim families affected by the travel ban,
 - Black communities devastated by mass incarceration,
 - Latino families ripped apart by ICE,
 - Even the pain of passionate Hillary Clinton voters, as I was—
 - And my grief and dislocation are just as valid as Joe Schmo's in Tennessee.
- For both demographic and capitalistic reasons, our media creates a feedback loop for white people's pain—conservative white people's pain, to be really specific—
 - Where Making America Great Again is really Making America Right Again,
 - In that cosmic sense of rightness,
 - Restoring that bubble where everyone knew their place and class,
 - And white privilege is always guaranteed.
- These people aren't dealing with their anger. They dwell in it,
 - and that keeps us as a nation from moving forward.
- The wonderful novelist and essayist James Baldwin said, "I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain."
- And one huge cause of our present national fury is
 - America is long overdue for dealing with its pain.
- If America wanted to deal with its pain, we would start by remembering the Native people on whom the European invaders committed genocide,
 - And the fact that right here, right now, we are sitting on Lenape land.

- If America dealt with its pain, we would have to remember the millions of enslaved people Europeans brought to this continent from Africa, and the injustice endured by their descendants,
 - While those of us who descended from those European invaders would face our own complicity in a racist system that still benefits us.
- If America dealt with its pain, we would talk about economic inequality and the environment—what we have done to one another and the earth through decades of exploiting workers and our natural resources.
- If American dealt with its pain, we would, as a nation, look at all of these situations honestly.
 - We would listen to the voices of those affected, historically and today.
 - We would accept their truth and complexity,
 - And we would take responsibility for the pain we have caused.
- And then we would sacrifice as we need to to make change in those situations,
 - To do what's necessary to achieve justice at last.
- This need to be done with great care and forethought, because people often do not react well to being called out on their painful behavior.
 - As an example, we're only in Chapter 3 of Mark, and the Pharisees are already plotting Jesus's downfall.
- But this is our fourth and perhaps healthiest strategy for dealing with anger:
 - Accepting and dealing with the pain.
- It is so, so much easier to cling to the hate, especially in a fast-moving capitalist system
 - Where there's money in anger and slogans, not so much in pain and sacrifice.
- But there is more awareness and acknowledgment of our national wounds since the election—
 - One good thing Trump has done: Gotten a lot of people speaking out—
- So someday, perhaps, we'll get there as a country,
 - If we don't consume ourselves in our anger first.
- And that points to a fifth and final strategy for dealing with our anger.
- We can step away from our sense of personal rightness, our bubble,
 - And consider the big picture:
 - The people of Nineveh
 - The man with the withered hand
 - Those immigrants, prisoners, the environment

- People in need and in pain.
- Then we can apply the energy of our anger to working for their good, rather than our own.
- If you've been to a protest in the past year,
 - If you've spoken out against injustice,
 - if you've rage-donated to a cause,
 - You're practicing this one already.
- This strategy is far from foolproof
 - Because it is so damn easy to be pulled back into our own concerns,
 - Like Jonah with the plant,
 - Or, like the Pharisees, to believe we're working for the big picture
 - When we're really still thinking about ourselves and our egos.
- Nonetheless, this gives us something productive to do with our anger,
 - To break out of the feedback loop it can create,
 - And direct all that nuclear energy toward giving light.
- To wrap this up, I must note,
- Our Buddhist and Hindu brothers and sisters would encourage us to let go of anger altogether.
- Gandhi said, "True ahimsa should mean a complete freedom from ill-will, anger, and hate and an overflowing love for all."
- While the Buddha said, among other things, "An angry person is ugly and sleeps poorly."
- We may not be able to reach that degree of enlightenment, peace, or beauty,
- But in the meantime, we can act with reason, express our anger safely, look to its causes, try to alleviate its pain,
- And give it to God in the big picture, while we work for justice here on earth.
- Thank you again for this opportunity to speak, and for your kind attention here today.