

## October 27: Anger (Psalm 109:1-15) – Pastor Heather McDaniel

Welcome, my friends, to “Soulcare: Help for Heavy Times”. This is our new series, and over the next year we’ll be shifting into a different style of sermons and a different kind of topic. In the past, we’ve followed a lectionary—or a predetermined set of texts that take us through the Old and New Testaments—but this time, we’re treading our own path through the scriptures. We’re still exploring passages from all parts of our Bible, but with a new intention, a desire to see this congregation continue to grow as a healthy, life-giving, safe, and compassionate community.

To that end, we will be discussing a wide range of topics related to mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual wellbeing. This is the final sermon in our October series called “Being Human”, a look at experiences that are pretty close to universal—and we hope that what we learn together will offer you hope and healing, no matter what you are going through.

As we get ready to hear more about anger, I invite you to pray with me.

*Compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, we pray for your justice and mercy in a world that is awash in injustice. We lift our hearts to you this morning and we entrust you with the anger that we carry. Please take what we give you and transform it with your love. Amen.*

Was anybody here surprised by this morning’s Scripture reading? It’s not often that our Bible reading for the day is a prayer for the misery and downfall of people who have wronged us. Did anybody feel that it was weird to respond to such a hostile, angry prayer with “The Word of God, thanks be to God”?

If you did, you’re not alone. Psalm 109 is not a Scripture you will ever find in the lectionary, and it is one of only three psalms missing from the official Catholic prayerbook. C. S. Lewis writes that “in some of the Psalms the spirit of hatred that strikes us in the face is like the heat from a furnace mouth,”<sup>1</sup> and that Psalm 109 is perhaps the worst of all. It’s an imprecatory psalm, meaning that it’s a psalm of imprecations, or curses, against enemies. And the curses are harsh: “may his days be few; may his children be fatherless and his wife a widow; may they be driven from their ruined homes...May no one extend kindness to him or take pity on his fatherless children; may the LORD blot out

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Reflection on the Psalms*, p.20.

their name from the earth.” This is not what Jesus had in mind when he told his followers to “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” These are the bitter words of a person who has been deeply wronged and knows rage. Psalm 109 is a prayer of anger.

Anger is the strong emotion of displeasure or opposition that we experience in response to a perceived injustice or a perceived threat. It’s what we feel when we believe that wrong has been done or something important to us is in danger. Anger is an emotion of energy and action; it triggers our bodies and brains and mobilizes us to respond to the threat we’ve identified and make things the way they should be. Physical signs of anger include tensed muscles, a clenched stomach, waves of heat or coldness, a faster pulse; we can tremble or get a headache or grind our teeth. Anger is powerful, and its power can easily be directed towards destruction: both repressed and expressed anger can wreak havoc on our souls.

Chronic anger can destroy our health: it can raise our blood pressure, stress out our hearts, upset our stomachs and contribute to a range of diseases. Anger can prompt us to engage in risky health behaviors, from disordered eating to substance abuse to aggressive driving. It can lead to anxiety, depression, and burnout and prevent us from living fully. A person who is continually angry is not happy or joyful or free or at peace with themselves or others.

Anger can also destroy our relationships. It can lead to openly violent behaviors like yelling, screaming, breaking things, or physically hurting somebody. Or it can look like irritability, sarcasm, criticizing, mocking, or nagging; or manifest as ignoring, stonewalling, or passive-aggressiveness. All these behaviors destroy trust, create distance, hurt the people we love, and perpetuate cycles of dysfunction, generational trauma, and endless revenge.

Because anger is such a powerful emotion, it can become weaponized by those who desire power: appeal to anger is an effective political technique, and by constantly feeding our sense of outrage, we can be manipulated into believing what’s not true, forgetting the humanity of other people, going against our own interests, and supporting things we’d otherwise find unethical. And right now, with just eight days left before our election, our nation is awash in anger and outrage. And it is exhausting and soul-killing. Amen?

When you consider the destructive potential of anger, you can understand why it's one of the seven deadly sins. The first murder in the Bible is triggered by Cain's anger towards his brother Abel, and things just spiral from there. Jesus himself preached that "anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment" (Matthew 5:22), and his brother James tells us to be slow to anger "because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires" (James 1:19-20). John Wesley, who founded the Methodist Church with his brother Charles, wrote that anger arises from the "inbred corruption of the heart" and that even if we can't help feeling anger, "we should avoid, with all possible care, the very appearance of it. Let there be no trace of it, either in the eyes, the gesture, or the tone of your voice."<sup>2</sup>

This is the view of anger that I developed as I grew up – that it is dangerous to my soul and that I should never let anger control me or respond in anger. For much of my adult life, I've been afraid of anger and its power, both in myself and in other people. I've seen the damage it can do, and I will go to great lengths to shield myself from anger and avoid conflict.

But a perspective on anger that names it as a deadly sin and only points out its potential to destroy does not tell the whole story. There's another side to anger that reveals it as a gift to us, a capacity that alerts us to injustice and gives us the motivation, energy, and courage to respond. For victims of abuse and violence, anger is an advocate of hope; instead of sinking into despair, anger can motivate people to defend themselves, fight to survive, and resist the chaos that threatens them; it can empower and embolden them. The activist Dorothy Day writes that "to feel anger, I think one must have a sense of self, a sense of one's own worth and identity";<sup>3</sup> and for people whose selfhood has been diminished or denied through prejudice or abuse, anger can be a necessary first step towards reclaiming who they are.

Anger can also provide needed courage in the fight against injustice. The beloved Mr. Rogers, famous for his gentle outreach to children, said that "when those things that we care so deeply about become endangered, we become enraged. And what a healthy thing that is! Without it, we would never stand up and speak out for what we believe."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> John Wesley, quoted in *The Angry Christian* by Andrew Lester, 132.

<sup>3</sup> Dorothy Day, quoted in *The Angry Christian*, p.195.

<sup>4</sup> Fred Rogers, *The World According to Mr. Rogers: Important Things to Remember* (New York: Hachette, 2003), 35.

In the Scriptures, I believe that anger is what gave Rizpah the endurance to publicly protect the lynched bodies of her sons and their companions for months until King David noticed and took steps to right his injustice towards them. And I believe that anger is what motivated Mamie Till-Mobley, centuries later, to publicly display her son's lynched and mutilated body in an open casket so that others would become outraged and respond with action against racial violence. Her anger wasn't about revenge; it was about changing an unjust culture and system.

So how do we hold these two sides of the anger story together – of anger as a destructive, soul-damaging force *and* anger as a spiritual ally in our soul-care journey? How do we deal with this powerful emotion so that it moves us towards wholeness and healing rather than away? I believe that there are three things we must hold in mind and live out in order for anger to be our friend and not our foe.

**First, we have agency and responsibility when it comes to anger, both over what makes us angry and how we express that anger.** Most experts believe that anger itself is an innate, primary emotion. In other words, we don't choose whether or not we feel anger in this life – it's an inescapable part of being human. Denying anger doesn't make it go away, and if you're like me, you need to learn to recognize when anger is triggered, by paying attention to its physical signs– increased heartbeat, heat, tension; and its subtle behavioral signs, such as increased irritability and reactivity, or being critical or withdrawn – and identifying what triggered them. If you frequently and openly express anger, you still need to start paying attention to what triggers those expressions, because that's important information.

Remember, anger gets triggered when something we value is threatened, or in response to a perceived wrong. And those things that we value and treasure; and those things that we consider right or wrong or just or unjust – they're the products of deep narratives, or stories we believe and live out, which might or might not be true and helpful. If we believe that good parents will have quiet and "well-behaved" children and our child creates a scene in a public place, we're going to be angry because our own self-worth is threatened. If we believe that our own worth comes from our achievements or service or position or education or what we can provide, we're going to be angry if those things are threatened or not recognized properly by others. If we believe that if we follow a certain set of rules and work hard, we deserve certain things in return; and then we don't get those things, or we lose them, or we see

somebody who didn't work as hard as we did get them, we feel angry. If we experienced a past trauma in which we were helpless and threatened, a current incident that makes us feel out of control could trigger anger.

I believe that if we want anger to be a constructive rather than destructive force in our lives, we need to start noticing when we get angry, and do some soul work to figure out why – what was the perceived threat or injustice that triggered our anger? And what are the core stories that underlie that sense of threat and injustice? And then, once we identify those stories, we can evaluate them. Were we responding to a true current threat? Do our stories line up with reality? Are they in line with who we want to be and how we want to live?

In Genesis 4, Adam & Eve's first two sons each made an offering to God, but God only accepted Abel's offering, and Cain was furious at his brother. And God came to Cain and asked, "Why are you angry? If you do right, will you not be accepted?" God didn't condemn Cain's anger, but did question the false narrative that triggered that anger, a story in which Cain's brother Abel was the threat and the reason that God didn't accept Cain's offering. God gave Cain the chance to rewrite his story, to see himself and his own behavior as the problem that needed to be dealt with and could be changed. Tragically, Cain didn't listen and respond; his misdirected anger mastered him and he killed his brother. But it didn't have to be that way. He had a choice, and so do we.

One of my favorite Bible stories is the book of Jonah, which ends with a scene in which the prophet Jonah is outraged because God showed mercy to an enemy city that was a threat to Israel. God helped Jonah change his narrative by gifting him with a leafy plant that shaded him for a day until a worm ate it and Jonah was once again furious. "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?" God asked Jonah. "It is," Jonah retorted, "I'm so angry I wish I were dead." God then gently used Jonah's anger about a dead plant he didn't even care for to help him understand God's deep concern for a city full of people and animals that God created and loved.

The good news is we can change the unhelpful or untrue stories that cause destructive anger to be triggered in us. We can be transformed through the renewing of our minds, the rewiring of our brains. We can become slow to anger. It's not an easy or instant process, though. A lot of our core stories have deep roots, and it will take perseverance and often require the help of others or the support of therapy, but we can change what makes us angry. And just like with Jonah, God will be our companion and co-participant in this work.

Not all narratives are false, however. As we do the work of noticing and acknowledging and exploring the reasons for our anger, we will uncover true threats: real injustice that has been done or is being perpetrated against ourselves or others. When anyone, including ourselves, is treated as less than human or violated or abused, when there is radical suffering or oppression, or when God's good creation is endangered, then anger is an appropriate response, and one that I believe mirrors the compassionate heart of God. But here's where I want to emphasize my second point:

**Anger is only constructive when we allow it to be a catalyst for action towards justice and wholeness and healing and full life.** Anger is not meant to be our constant companion. In the words of researcher and activist Brené Brown: "Holding on to [anger] will make us exhausted and sick. Internalizing anger will take away our joy and spirit; externalizing anger will make us less effective in our attempts to create change and forge connection. It's an emotion that we need to transform into something life-giving: courage, love, change, compassion, justice."<sup>5</sup>

And so, if we've identified anger in response to a real betrayal or wrong, or a threat to a relationship or to our own true worth and identity, then we are called to respond with a step of action within our sphere of influence – to have a difficult and honest conversation, to risk conflict, to make a change in our circumstances, to do the work of forgiveness. If we're angry about injustice, we are called to act, again within our sphere of influence: to listen, learn, give, risk, partner, volunteer, sacrifice, vote. When we don't transform anger into constructive action, it becomes destructive to our souls and our relationships.

But how we act matters. Responding to injustice with revenge or retribution or dehumanization simply perpetuates the spiral of violence and trauma; there are examples of this all over the world right now. And this brings me to my third point: in order to be redemptive, **anger must be guided by love and used in the service of love.** I believe that we each reflect the image of God, and our capacity for anger reflects something true about who God is – when God's people and creation are violated or victimized, God experiences anger that spurs divine action. But God is love, and God's anger is always secondary to and in service of God's love and compassion.

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<sup>5</sup> Brené Brown, *Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience*, p.224

Just look at where the gospels say that Jesus got angry: when synagogue leaders dehumanized a man with a shriveled hand (Mk. 3:5); or when Jesus' disciples rebuked parents for bringing their children to him (Mk. 10:14); Jesus responded to his anger by defiantly healing on the Sabbath and welcoming children into his arms to bless them. And look at the times Jesus didn't get angry: when he was betrayed and arrested; when he was falsely accused; and when he was tortured on the cross. Jesus' ultimate action in response to injustice and threat was to bear the hatred and misplaced rage of broken humanity and ask God to forgive those who were killing him. The cross of Christ breaks the wheel of retributive violence.

This is our model, but most of us do not have the capacity to respond to injustice in this way: with perfect action united with perfect love. Sometimes, when we have been deeply hurt and harmed, when the wrong seems so entrenched and the injustice so outrageous and the oppressors so evil, we can't transform our anger and we can't respond in love. It's beyond us. There are certain people in this world right now that I cannot bless. And here's where I want to return to Psalm 109, the prayer of nasty curses towards enemies. Sometimes, all we can do is cry out a song of honest rage and cursing, as ugly as it is, to our crucified and risen Savior who can receive our anger and our hatred and transform it into something life-giving. The very presence of this prayer in our Bible shows us that God takes our anger seriously and cares about the evils that we rail against.

So if your heart is raw from a betrayal; if you are carrying the pain of others who are trapped in cycles of violence or abuse; if you have been working and advocating for justice but don't see anything changing; or if you are furious about the way the powerful continue to oppress the vulnerable and get away with it; consider this your permission to curse, to tell God exactly how you feel about the evil and wrong in this world and the human beings who perpetrate it. It's not a deadly sin. Release your rage to the God who works restorative justice in the most broken and hopeless of situations. God stands with you in your suffering, identifies with your woundedness, and loves you no matter what. May God transform our anger into life-giving courage, compassion, love, healing, and action for justice. Amen.