

**Sermon preached at the Church of the Holy Trinity, Philadelphia  
on Sunday October 7th by the Reverend Alan Neale  
“Anger – God Loves Us The Way We Are”**

In her book “Gorgeous Lies”, Martha McPhee recounts this conversation: “Anton and Father Master talk about ‘everything under the sun except the thing that troubles Anton most. Sex to Father Master is like Antarctica. He knows it exists but he knows he will never go there”.

They talk about everything except the thing that troubles Anton most. Recent years have shown that the Episcopal Church is more than willing to talk about politics, to talk about sex, even (with caution) to talk about money... and we do this because the God who loves us, the God whom we are coming to love, this God has to be involved (by his very nature) in all of life. But... I think there is a place to which we rarely go, a subject of which we seldom speak... anger!

How strange! How sad! And yet in his book “Jesus for the Non-Religious”, Bishop Spong has a chapter titled ‘Recognizing the Sources of Religious Anger’. He writes: “As a bishop, the levels of hostility that I have been forced to absorb have been all but inconceivable. Vitriol has come [in many ways]... Most delivered by Bible-quoting Christians who defined themselves as true believers, men and women who said they were acting in the defense of or on the instructions of God. God, indeed, appeared to justify their killing rage, their overt anger. The connection between religion and anger is real”. I read this morning “Self-righteous anger can be very enjoyable. In a perverse way we can actually take satisfaction from the fact that people annoy us; it brings a comfortable feeling of superiority” (Bill Wilson, 12&12). It sadly has been my lot to receive scurrilous, bad, nasty letters which end with, almost believably, “in Jesus’ Name”.

Anger – this is a subject to which we must go because this is a place which we all, from time to time, inhabit, occupy, some even begin to build houses and dwell there. There is a member of this congregation who will often tell me how often “love” has been mentioned in my sermons... I fear what he forgets is that the sermon needs be realistic, and we are replete with all sorts of

emotions... anger included and not only, not always, love! And so today, the first of two sermons on anger!

But we find it hard to go to this place. And so to read Psalm 137 today in the context of worship, alongside other people, is surely a challenge. Thanks to Scott Jones (our Parish Missioner) I learnt this week of Walter Brueggemann's book "Praying the Psalms". In the book, Professor Brueggemann speaks of the capacity of the psalms to move us from orientation, through disorientation, and returning to yet a new space, a stance of reorientation. Well, surely Psalm 137, disorients us... verse 9 "Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock".

There was a time when the compilers of our lectionaries protected us (how kind) from such verses in the Psalms, sometimes called the imprecatory psalms. It was as if we were considered children, immature, unsophisticated and naïve. Pick up a Book of Common Prayer, turn to page 976... see the Psalms for Sunday, Saturday, Tuesday, Fridays... these verses have been put in brackets, we (poor things) need not read them.

Phooey... I do not want an anemic, sanitized record of man's dealings with God... I want to see it all, for then I can identify, for then I can have hope, for then I can believe in rescue and liberation!

We deny anger at the cost of our humanity and our health. And we hide anger for we fear that God cannot, will not, love us as we really are. When will we stop making God in our image?!

Now we can sympathize with the Psalmist...  
verse 1, sitting by the waters of Babylon, in exile, upon alien soil, he feels he has no home, no safe place to which he can return;  
verse 2, the harps are left hanging desolately on trees, he feels useless, he has no purpose;  
verse 3, led captive by unknown people to an unknown place, he feels powerless.

Homeless, useless, powerless... when we experience one or more of these, we can easily feel angry, we can quite readily justify our

anger. For a while the Psalmist feels some anger toward himself but he chooses not to stay there too long.

And then begins the relentless journey to vitriolic, mean anger... step one, resentment (verse 7 "remember the day of Jerusalem, O Lord, against the people of Edom"), step two, revenge (verse 8, "O daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy the one who pays you back") and then step three, anger, ( verse 9 "happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock").

Today's Psalm urges, encourages us to recognize the presence, the power of anger in our lives... and even if we do not choose to name that beast in public, we must choose to name it before our God... for there only lies the way to redemption, to rescue, to health. For over seventy years twelve step programs have learnt that to name that which enthralls us is the way to lessen its hold. For centuries the Christian community has known that to name the sin, weakens its power... and so James writes, "Confess your sins to one another that you may be healed". Name it, name it, name it!

In today's New York Times, there is an article titled "Thou shalt not kill, except in a game at church" – oh, if only the sub-editor knew that for some that title is too chillingly close to home! But anyway, the article tells of many churches which are using the immersive and violent video game, Halo, to reach young people. This game has as its credo, "thou shalt kill". The tactic seems to be working and yet many have expressed dismay and concern.

Now, we will not be showing Halo in our sanctuary, nor anywhere on our property, but we should be ready to tell others that this is a place where God accepts us all, and He accepts us as we are... anger and all! Remember these words of Ashley, in the film Junebug, "God loves you just the way you are, but God loves you too much to let you stay that way." This sermon is the first of two on anger. I struggled a little over titles but Ashley's words helped me so this week "Anger – God Loves Us The Way We Are" next week "Anger – God Loves Us So Much To Let Us Stay That Way".

Today's letter from Paul to the young Timothy contains these poignant words, "Rekindle the gift of God once give to you". Brothers and sisters in Christ, God wants our lives to be rekindled with His grace, His love, His power... unrecognized, unresolved

anger will continue to pour gallons of cold water on our hearts and so prevent any true, lasting, healthy rekindling.

So let us turn to the Lord in all honesty and in all dependence... for He will save us. AMEN

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