

**Sermon preached at the Church of the Holy Trinity, Philadelphia  
on Sunday October 14th 2007 by the Reverend Alan Neale  
“Anger – Time to Move on”**

In his book, *Wishful Thinking, A Theological ABC*, Frederick Buechner writes this about anger, “Of the seven deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back – in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you”.

Last week we observed angry people, very angry people indeed and these people were the people of God (I hope we got over the surprise of such a combination rather quickly!). These people were so angry that they could... spit; indeed far more than spit for they said, “Happy is the one who takes the young children of our oppressors and dashes their heads against a rock”... now there’s anger... and all this was contained in the truly disorientating Psalm 137.

Last week together we accepted, affirmed the truth that anger happens to all of us... it seems part of our human condition but that it is wise and healthy to acknowledge and express that anger before God and to God (yes, even in the presence of others as did those early worshippers of Psalm 137).

Please forgive so early on in this sermon... a digression. I wonder why it is that we often find it difficult to express our anger before God, to own it, to name it as part of the very fabric of our humanity. I think I have a reason... sometimes we hesitate to name our anger before God because, at root, at heart, we are in fact angry with God... those whom we love have been “taken from us” (or so it seems); the dreams we had have been burst (or so it seems); the energy of youth has been drained from us (or so it seems) and we are angry, angry, angry with God but choose to direct that anger elsewhere. How hard, painfully hard, it must have been for the Jews in exile to hear these words, “Thus says the Lord, I have sent you in to exile from Jerusalem to Babylon”. Of the people to whom we direct our anger, God is best and eternally equipped to take our

worst... his arms are outstretched to receive what we can throw at him. Think about this sometime... preferably with another person.

Well today, in our first reading from Jeremiah (29:1,4-7), the story of these angry people continues.

The prophet allows us to observe the causes of this venomous, vitriolic anger.

First, the people have lost what they consider to be crucial, vital to their very being; they have been stripped of those things which they deem defines them as a people. They have been deported from Jerusalem to Babylon and in so doing they have lost their land and they have lost their temple. We are tempted to become angry what we lose what we consider essential to our living and to our importance.

Second, the people have been shamed before one another and, in fact, before the nations. All the important people... the elders, the priests, the prophets... all these have been summarily picked up and deposited in a strange and alien land. The Temple and temple artifacts had been sacrilegiously defaced. We are tempted to become angry when we feel that we have been shamed.

And, third, the people have had to acknowledge that they were powerless before this foreign king, Nebuchadnezzar, who, almost at a whim, was able to use military and political might to move people from land to land. We are tempted to become angry when we feel powerless.

Anger induced when what we consider important is taken from us; when we feel we have been shamed publicly and when we feel powerless.

So, how do we move on and be free from this spiritually corroding and debilitating emotion of anger which seems, at times, to settle for nothing less than complete control of mind, heart, will and voice?

Psalm 37:8, the Psalmist advises, "Refrain from anger, leave rage alone... it leads only to evil". Bill Wilson, co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, writes, "Anger is the dubious luxury of normal people".

How do we move on from that anger which is unhealthy and ungodly?

Pray for acceptance! Look at Jeremiah 29:7 “Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile”... this foreign place which once seemed anathema, obnoxious, unacceptable... this was to be the place where the Jews accepted their lot and stopped wishing for former things. In Paul’s second letter to the young Timothy, he writes of “suffering hardship for the Gospel, of being in chains” but then declares, “but the word of God is not chained”. As we grow into accepting “it is what it is” then be sure that anger will begin to dissipate. There is holy acceptance which sets us free, or moves us toward being free, from anger.

Pray for blessing! Look at Jeremiah 29:5–6 “Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce; take wives and have sons and daughters... multiply there, and do not decrease”. It is, to say the least, rather difficult to be both grateful for God’s goodness and angry at the same time. There is no place so dry, so arid, so barren, so distressed that God cannot, if sought, bring life and blessing and, yes, even abundance.

Pray for those who have made you angry! Yes, eyebrows are raised and there are some deep signs. Within a week of our liturgy, the people of God had moved from deep anger (“dash their children against a rock”) to “Lord, bless them, please”!!! Look at Jeremiah 29:7 “Pray to the Lord on the city’s behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare”.

Anger – it is time to move on for our health and the health of those around us.

Sometimes, probably looking for justification for unacceptable behaviour, sometimes we look at Jesus in the Temple and we say, “See, righteous anger is acceptable”. Well... first, we are not Jesus and who would be bold to claim the balance and maturity and spirituality of Jesus? Second, we will be suspicious of others (and ourselves) when we claim that our anger is of God and God ordained. And, third, the so-called righteous anger of Jesus was short-lived, was not covert and underhand, it was not passive aggressive nor laden with hidden agenda... it really was what it was and it did him no spiritual, psychic harm. Oh yes, St. Paul says in Ephesians, “Be angry” but he continues “be angry and sin not”.

At today's 11am service the choir will sing the anthem, There is a balm in Gilead. Friends, there is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole, to heal the sin-sick soul, to bring release from anger... "Sometimes I feel discouraged, and think my work's in vain, but then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again".

Anger - it is time to move on and allow the Holy Spirit to revive my soul, your soul again. AMEN

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