

# **THE SHADOW OF ANGER**

James 1:17-27

Luke 19:45-46

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The way you react to the word “anger” depends, in part, on the kind of home in which you grew up. A friend of mine grew up in a loud home. Yelling was not unusual, nor was it frightening. Every Sunday cousins and grandparents, aunts and uncles would gather at one home or another for Sunday dinner. It was impossible to carry on much conversation over the din of one person shouting at another. When she first brought the man who is now her husband to Sunday dinner, he was appalled. In the car afterwards he said, “Why is everyone in your family angry at each other?” She looked at him as if they’d been in two different houses. “So much yelling,” he explained. “Oh, that’s just the way we talk to each other,” she said.

In other homes, it feels as if everyone is walking on eggshells. Everyone, except the person who erupts in anger. And when that person yells, it’s usually an insult, a personal comment that cuts to the core. It’s the unpredictability that makes living in that kind of household so traumatizing. You never know what might set off the person with the uncontrolled temper. Dinner might start pleasantly, playful, but say the wrong thing, and a fist slams down, and everyone eats the rest of the meal in silence, all appetite replaced by fear and disgust.

No matter what kind of home you grew up in, we’ve all been on the receiving end of anger. Maybe it wasn’t a parent, maybe it was a coach who yelled at you when you struck out at a critical point in the game. Or a boss who called you names when you

made a mistake. Being on the receiving end of anger causes a physical reaction. Blood pressure rises, palms sweat, and there's that feeling in the pit of your stomach.

Probably, it's happened at least once to everyone in this room, that you have been startled by the anger you've expressed to someone else, too. Like when a child wakes you up in the middle of the night, over and over again, just when you have fallen back to sleep. You hear angry words coming out of your mouth, directed towards the little person you love fiercely, and you are taken aback.

Anger can scare us, whether we're the one producing the anger or whether we're the one experiencing its wrath.

A few weeks ago, my daughter and I met at the movie theater for a matinee. The theater lobby wasn't very crowded. She wanted something from the concession stand, so we got in line. We weren't paying attention to much around us; we were chatting, catching up. It was kind of a long line, but we had plenty of time before the movie started, so we weren't worried. All of a sudden, the man behind us started screaming, "Excuse me, didn't you notice that we're all in line? What makes you think you have the right to waltz right up to the counter? Did you think we're all just standing here in line for the fun of it?" One angry loud rude question after another. Here's what had happened. There were two workers operating out of two parts of the counter, one in front of us and one to our left. For some reason, there was only one line. The people in front of us were all taking turns when they got to the front of the line, either staying where they were, or fanning out to the left, depending on which worker was free. The system was working, but obviously someone wasn't aware that there was only one line. All of a sudden, this couple saw a worker with no one in front of him, and they sauntered right up. I don't think it was malicious; I don't even think it was intentional. But clearly the man behind us

thought differently...or maybe he wasn't thinking at all. He was just reacting, expressing anger without any thought to the bigger picture. He certainly was quick to jump to the worst conclusion possible. It could have been handled so differently. He could have said, calmly, and pointed, "Excuse me, but here's the end of the line." I found myself getting angrier and angrier at *him*. Have you noticed how that happens? How anger is contagious? I was angry because the man behind me was so rude. His over-reaction to a completely innocuous situation infuriated me. But I didn't say a thing. What do you say that doesn't cause a situation to escalate? What do you say when you know someone could be dangerous? Anne bought her snacks and we meekly walked into our theater.

I don't know if the times we're living in are angrier than ever...it's impossible to assess that. I do know that we live in angry times. We live in an era of heightened sensitivity, so that one word can cause the person you're talking to to make assumptions about you, about which side of the political divide you're on. Most of us live as if we have nothing of value to learn from a person on the other side, so our reaction to them is frequently angry.

The book of James, or the letter of James, is classified as both prophecy and wisdom literature - you can hear the voice of the prophet, calling Christians to high standards of behavior, and you can hear the voice of wisdom which reveals a practical understanding of human nature. Verse 19 says, "You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger, for your anger does not produce God's righteousness." James seemed to know what modern psychology teaches: that our emotions, including anger, are not to be judged, but are to be accepted. Feelings are not good or bad; they just are. The worst thing we can do is to be so afraid or ashamed of our anger that we try to bury it or ignore it, for it will come out sometime - and

often in a destructive way. The BEST thing to do is to pay attention to your anger and use it as a cue or a clue to what's going on inside of you. Rather than judging your anger, be curious about it, as in, "Hmm, I wonder why that person, that comment triggered me? What is that telling me about myself?" WISDOM comes in choosing how to EXPRESS our anger.

Early Wednesday morning, I was preparing for Bible Study by reading some scholarly commentaries on the book of James. I was reminded that this book was written to the early church at a time when those Christians made up a tiny minority. The world around them was indifferent and sometimes hostile to their beliefs. It can be hard to live as a minority; it's always tempting to adopt the values of the majority, to just go along with the crowd. The writer of James knows that these men and women are in danger of falling into the values and behavior of the surrounding population. So, with the authority of the prophet's voice, and with the wisdom of the Hebrew book of Proverbs, this writer teaches and encourages these Christians to stay the course. "Be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger." In other words, be respectful of the people around you...and there is no greater sign of respect than truly, deeply listening to someone. Finally, James writes, be aware that people are watching you. They know you are Christian - they're watching you to see how Christian people behave. And this is the true test for those who follow Jesus - are you caring for orphans and widows? Are you meeting the needs of those who are most vulnerable?

I copied this sentence from one commentary in the handout I prepared for Bible Study: "The prophetic denunciations of arrogant wealth and immorality are strengthened and completed through the development of wisdom."

That was Wednesday morning when the front page story on every newspaper was that of the 50 people arrested in the massive bribe scandal that is all about privilege and entitlement. I kept reading that sentence, “The prophet is denouncing arrogant wealth and immorality.” There could be no more blatant example of arrogant wealth and immorality than the one on the front page of the paper on Wednesday. And then came the responses, and that’s when I became angry. Story after story about people who have faced discrimination on our college campuses. People of color who have been told, “You only got admitted because of affirmative action.” People of poverty who have been looked at as if they don’t belong. People with legitimate learning disabilities who have had to take advantage of special college programs, always forced to justify why they need them. One heartbreaking story after another about how difficult the college environment can be for certain groups of people. I became angry.

And Friday I became angry again. Heartbroken again as the news came that dozens of worshipers were gunned down in New Zealand by a man calling himself a white nationalist. We can’t talk about anger without talking about righteous anger.

Martin Luther King was only 26 years old when he was thrust into a leadership role in the struggle for civil rights. Rosa Parks had just been arrested in Montgomery, Alabama, where King was working as a preacher. King found himself having to speak before thousands of people who had gathered in a mass meeting at the Holt Street Baptist Church—and those people were upset.

“How could I make a speech that would be militant enough to keep my people aroused to positive action and yet moderate enough to keep this fervor within controllable and Christian bounds?” King later wrote. “What could I say to keep them courageous and prepared for positive action and yet devoid of hate and resentment? Could the mili-

tant and the moderate be combined in a single speech?” He told the crowd that the only weapon they would use was the weapon of protest—that they would follow the teachings of Jesus.

Righteous anger has fueled every movement for liberation and social justice from the moment when Moses stood up to the Pharaoh and said, “Let my people go.” It is anger at injustice that motivates us enough to demand change and to work for change over the long haul.

A biblical scholar, now well into his adult years, remembers an incident of anger when he was ten years old. It happened when he and his brother were at the local swimming pool. He remembers it this way: “Some teenage boys were tormenting my brother Kenny who had Down’s Syndrome. I went ballistic - screaming, scratching, gouging, biting. When the lifeguard pulled me off them, he told me to say I was sorry. I refused to apologize for defending my powerless brother against the powerful bullies.”

Anger can give us the energy and the willingness to speak up, speak out, march, vote, protest, refuse to participate, resist evil, and blow the whistle. Anger provides courage.

Christians SHOULD be angry at the injustices of our world. Complacency would be a sin.

Elie Wiesel was the Holocaust survivor who wrote of his experiences in many books, including the bestseller, Night. He was a child when the Nazi death camps were liberated. An American soldier was in the first group to tour the camp. After he had walked around and realized what he was seeing, the site of unimaginable horror, he be-

gan shouting and cursing at the top of his voice, and continued expressing his protest at this outrage for a long time. Although Wiesel was just a child, as he watched and listened to this soldier's intense anger, he realized it was a signal that humanity had returned to that place. Outrage is the compassionate, loving, faithful response to evil.

In Jesus' last week on earth, already in Jerusalem near where his life will end, he expresses moral outrage when he sees the money-changers at the temple. It isn't the fact that items were being bought and sold that caused Jesus to be angry. No, what he saw was this. Meek, humble worshipers who had traveled for days to be in Jerusalem for the Passover approached a seller to purchase an animal for ritual sacrifice, a part of their worship tradition. The seller would cheat the buyer, one after the other, pocketing more and more money for himself. Widows and orphans, the most vulnerable, were being taken advantage of, right outside the holiest of all holy places, and it made Jesus furious. The commandment at the very heart of his religion - caring for widows and orphans - had become a mockery.

Anger, properly expressed, is a tool used by God for the greater purpose of shining light where there is falsehood, and freeing those who are oppressed.

Let us pray. Holy God, thank you for giving us the gift of anger. Help us to control its expression, never using it as a tool for exerting power over a loved one but rather using it as fuel for the work of caring for those who are most vulnerable and helping to create a world of justice for all. As Jesus did at the temple. Amen.