

## THE CHARACTER OF GOD: SLOW TO ANGER

Isaiah 54: 7-10

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We are already almost halfway through the season of Lent, the season of spiritual growth, the time when we prepare ourselves for the good news of Easter. This year during these six weeks of Lent, we are focusing our attention on a core description of God that is found in the book of Exodus. Exodus 34:6-7 describes a God who is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

By exploring each of these descriptive phrases in depth, we hope to gain new understanding of the character of God. **Always** during the season of Lent, we are thinking about Jesus. Our walk through these forty days coincides with his walk towards Jerusalem and the cross. He would have known this description of God. He would have learned this verse from the rabbis in the synagogue. How did Jesus try to embody the character of God as he interacted with people?

And as people who bear his name and claim ourselves as his followers, how does this description of God inspire us to live?

The phrase we're focusing on today is the phrase, "Slow to anger." So we'll spend a few minutes this morning thinking about what it means that God is slow to anger...what does it mean for our own relationship with God? And what does it mean for our own behavior as we try to live as people shaped by our relationship with God?

The first time God is described as angry is in the fourth chapter of the book of Exodus. God has chosen Moses to be the leader of the people of Israel, to free them from

slavery in Egypt. But Moses resists. He makes all kinds of excuses. "But God, how will they know that I'm their leader? What words will I say to them?" God assures Moses that he's the right person for the job. "Look, Moses, I'll be with you. When you need to prove yourself, I'll help you. A snake will turn into a walking stick in your hand." And God makes it happen. Other miracles too - right before Moses' eyes. But still Moses resists. "Please, God, I don't like public speaking. I'm not good at it at all. Pick someone else." At that moment, God is angry with Moses. But the anger only lasts for a moment. God will not be deterred. "Your brother Aaron - take him with you. He's a good speaker. The two of you can work as a team."

Interesting that it is Moses' resistance to God's call that causes the first example of God's anger. This is a passionate God - a God who wants good for the world. God wants the people of Israel to be free. And he sees leadership potential in Moses. I'm imagining God full of passionate excitement about this plan - "yes, this is how it can happen. I will equip Moses to lead the people out of Egypt." And when Moses drags his feet, it frustrates God.

I wonder how often God is angrily frustrated with us, when we resist God's call, when we fail to recognize the gifts God has placed within us. I wonder how desperately God wants us to see our own potential, to see ourselves through the eyes of divine love.

We know that Moses does eventually lead the people of Israel out of Egypt - the story of the Exodus shows God's desire for Israel to live according to God's laws, a way

of life that will bring them into harmony with one another. Sometimes they trust, sometimes they don't, and sometimes, again, God becomes frustrated, yet God keeps faith with them.

Our passage for today from the prophet Isaiah gives us another example of God's patience during times of anger.

Here's how Isaiah describes God in the first two verses for today:

“For a brief moment I abandoned you,  
but with great compassion I will gather you.

In overflowing wrath for a moment

I hid my face from you,

but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,

says the Lord, your Redeemer.”

I don't like reading about a God who abandons us, however briefly. I don't like hearing about a God who feels wrath towards us, but that is part of the biblical testimony. Thankfully it is not the final word. Throughout the Bible, the writers describe a God who sometimes experiences a change of mind and heart. It happens in this passage. The prophet has God saying, “Yes, I abandoned you momentarily. Yes, I was overflowing with anger. But in the end, I will show compassion and I will redeem you.”

The Hebrew word for “Redeemer” is the word: “go'el.” It had a very specific legal definition. In biblical Israel, when a woman was widowed, her future was more than uncertain. All property was owned by men, so she was left completely vulnerable. Her future was marked by suffering, hardship, even possibly slavery and death. The law

gave one provision, however - that a relative could take her in and provide for her. The word for that relative is “go’el” - redeemer, the same word used in our passage. So here, God is saying, “I will save you from a life of suffering and hardship. I will redeem you. You are my family. Yes, for a moment, I hid my face from you, but now I have taken you on as my own.”

This is a God who experiences anger, but then dismisses it. A God who chooses another path.

God’s anger is motivated by deep hurt and rejection. As Beau mentioned a few weeks ago, the Hebrew phrase, “slow to anger,” is literally translated, “long of nostrils.” Picture an angry bull, pawing the ground, breathing loudly, nostrils flared. That would be, so to speak, “short-nosed.” But God, by contrast, is long-nosed.

Other passages in the Hebrew scriptures describe God being provoked to anger. God’s anger requires provocation. In other words, it takes a lot to make God angry. Usually God is expressing passionate frustration that people are choosing to live in destructive ways.

In the last two verses of our passage from Isaiah, God acknowledges the anger and pledges to continue to control it:

“This is like the days of Noah to me:  
Just as I swore that the waters of Noah  
would never again go over the earth,  
so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you  
and will not rebuke you.

For the mountains may depart  
and the hills be removed,  
but my steadfast love shall not depart from you,  
and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,  
says the Lord, who has compassion on you.”

God is reassuring us that we do not need to live in fear of God’s anger. God’s anger is motivated by God’s deepest desire for us. God who has given us this beautiful world to care for, God who has given us the commandments as a way of life — God wants the best for us. It’s only when we disregard everything we truly know that God becomes frustrated. Always it’s anger rooted in love.

So we are left with a strong reminder that God can be trusted. Yes, sometimes we will feel abandoned by God - that is part of the human condition. But abandonment is never the last word. In the end, God chooses to love us, God chooses compassion.

What does this passage say to us about how we are to express our anger? We learn from psychology that anger is natural, that feelings are to be accepted rather than judged. Our anger can be a clue to something we’re thinking, to something going on inside us that we haven’t yet acknowledged. It’s the **expression** of anger that can lead to problems.

When we are aware of our anger, we can use the energy it provides for good. Righteous anger can be a powerful force for good. When we are angry at the injustices of the world, we can be motivated for action. What we often see, however, is anger expressed as blame. The problems of the world are solely the fault of another nation, or

the other political party. Instead of asking, “What is my role in the solution?” or “What can I do - within my sphere of influence - to make a positive difference for good?” - we spend our energy blaming others. That is a horrible waste of our passion. Righteous anger is a gift from God, meant to be used to inspire and encourage positive action.

In his last week on earth, already in Jerusalem, Jesus expresses anger at the people who have turned the holy temple into a place of greed, a place where the poor are cheated. He seems to be in full control of this provoked anger, and uses the power of it to make a point and teach a lesson.

There’s plenty to be angry about in our world. If we’re passionate about trying to build a better world, the kind of world God envisioned for us at the creation, the kind of world the commandments point towards, the kind of world Jesus loved, then we’ll let ourselves be angry. Angry enough to care, angry enough to find ways to help. And patient enough to stop pointing fingers and placing blame.

Let us pray. Holy One, thank you for being a God we can trust rather than a God we need to fear. Shape us into people who are provoked to love and to righteous action, people who control our anger rather than letting it control us. We pray and live in Jesus’ name. Amen.