

Anger as a Path to Prophetic Preaching

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The words of the sermon apparently didn't get through to a man attending Sunday morning services at a Buford, Georgia, church.

According to Gwinnett police reports, the man was arguing with members of the church around noon and then grabbed the pastor's clothes. Another member threatened to call the police and have the man arrested for hitting the minister.

The man then grabbed a church member in a headlock and began punching him on top of the head, according to reports. Other church members intervened and broke up the two men. No one was arrested (*Atlanta Journal*, October 6, 1992).

In and out of the church, anger is a prevalent trademark of many personalities these days. A journalist and tourist from another country describes his encounter with an American who was a receptionist in an office: "He was as snappish as an injured dog. Resentment of the world seemed to have eaten him away from the inside; and since no one else was around, he vented his irritation at the world on me. *I was in the wrong place. I could well pay in advance. I had the wrong money.* He cussed and grumbled. His surliness was intent and elaborate."¹

The rise in domestic violence, the unrest in cities (riots or rebellion?), and numerous instances of open conflict around the globe are all instances of anger gone wild. With piercing insight, Carlyle Marney once reminded his hearers that anger is inherent to human nature, and that anger is ignored at great peril: (I have edited these paragraphs, written in the 1960's, for inclusive language.)

Human beings are the most savage of the beasts. Our bite is poisonous; our hand is a club; our foot is a weapon; nothing in nature is so well equipped for hating or hurting. Confuse us and we lash out at anything. Crowd us and we kill, rob, destroy. Deprive us and we retaliate. Impoverish us and we burn villas in the night. Enslave us and we revolt. Pamper us and we may poison you. Hire us and we may hate both you and the work. Love us too possessively and we are never weaned. Deny us too early and we never learn to love. Put us in cities and all our animal nature comes out with perversions of every good thing.

If you should suspend for a single ten years the processes of education our civilizations would be devastated. If you destroyed past the memory of our generation the etiquette, the laws, the patterns of civilized conduct we would be swamp creatures again. Excite us, frighten us, anger us in a crowd and we are devastating — more than locust swarms or herds of animals.

And nowhere are we more savage than at home; to none are we more destructive than to ourselves. Society is a composite picture of our great power to harm.

To subdue our powers of destruction requires all our strength. This is what law is for. This is what civilization is about. Art, Culture, Philosophy, Order, Religion, all our powers are needed to cage and tame our strength for evil.²

It is tempting for preachers to consider simpler topics. In the catalog of subjects in Union Theological Seminary in Virginia's Reigner Recording Library, there are twice as many sermons on stewardship, and three times as many on anxiety, as there are on anger. It is safer to deal with institutional and individual well-being than with the difficult truths about ourselves.

In many ways the scriptures are ambivalent about anger. On the one hand, anger is viewed as an occasion for sin ("Be angry, but do not sin." Ephesians 4:26), and even as sin ("Put away anger, wrath . . ." Colossians 3:8). Historically anger has been considered one of the seven deadly sins.³ And yet, on the other hand, God's anger and wrath are major themes of the psalms and the prophets, and the Gospels record that Jesus became angry on several occasions. This brief article will focus upon some of the imprecatory psalms and upon the anger of Jesus, in order to suggest possible avenues for contemporary preaching.

It is surprising and even embarrassing to discover the imprecatory psalms are still in the Bible! They do not sound religious, or even civil. Speaking of Psalm 58, the commentator in the *Interpreter's Bible* somewhat apologetically says, "(It) is barbaric in its realism."⁴

John Calvin observed that the Psalms are as mirrors for the complete anatomy of the human spirit. In angry prayers such as Psalm 109, 137, and 58, people are confronted with that which is ordinarily well-hidden, even camouflaged by our piety. Anger connotes fire and heat; still the ideal is to be cool. Thomas Jefferson once advised, "When angry, count to ten. When very angry, count to one hundred!" But Mark Twain was more honest. "When angry, count to four. When very angry, curse!"⁵

In the Psalms human anger is revealed with astonishing candor. While initially people may recoil at the brutality of Psalm 137, which concludes "Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rocks!" - that is literally what occurs in any war, including the United States' most recent one with Iraq. The great majority of casualties were women and children, noncombatants. The brains of children may as well be crushed when fewer of a nation's resources are given to education. Bond issues for school improvements are often voted down, almost as if many are now saying, "Let the children take care of themselves."

During Lent, worship focuses upon self-examination and repentance. The clear articulation of anger belongs to any serious understanding of human personality. The capacity for anger is not extinct, but living in contemporary hearts and minds. As Carl Sandburg put it in his unforgettable poem, "Wilderness," "There's a wolf in me—fangs pointed for tearing gashes...." The imprecatory psalms may be the basis for honest confession, the gate to real penitence.

In Walter Brueggemann's *Praying the Psalms*, the point is made that the Psalms are prayers, addressed to God. They are not actions undertaken by a person; vengeance is referred to God and not expressed directly to an enemy. However strange this may seem, preaching or praying about anger may prevent harmful actions. The psychiatrists inform us that it is healthier to articulate and express anger rather than to repress it, that unexpressed anger often converts into depression or more hostility. But in reading the Psalms, one is reminded about the importance of

where one ventilates. Israel knows that rage and bitterness are yielded not against the enemy, but to God's wisdom and providence. Again, as Brueggemann commented, "The Psalms and the entire Bible are clear that vengeance belongs to God. Vengeance is not human business. We may begin with the awareness that the assignment of vengeance to God means an end to human vengeance. It is a liberating assertion that I do not need to trouble myself with retaliation, for that is left safely in God's hands. To affirm that vengeance belongs to God is an act of profound faith."⁶

Anger has been considered a deadly sin because of the way it so quickly absorbs a person, distorts perspectives, goes out of control, and leads to violence. Of anger, Frederick Buechner said, "The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you."⁷

The anger of the prophets and of Jesus is not an outcry against those who have slighted them, but against those who have violated others, particularly the poor. What angered Jesus was both the irreverence and the irrelevance of the money changers in the temple — their selfishness, their appeal to privilege as they commercialized religion and made a big business out of it, their overcharging the needy.⁸ Any person can rant and rave without attempting to correct an abuse or injustice, but prophetic anger is entirely different. It is anger in the service of a high and holy cause, at work for a purpose which transcends personal whims or moods. In Christ, all the way to the cross, anger is transformed from getting back at others to getting at the heart of a rotten culture.

Thus the challenge in the pulpit during the next decade may well be the reshaping of and recommitment to prophetic preaching. Many preachers have been tamed by a pastoral care movement which too often has limited its concern to individuals or small groups. There are many more pastoral counselors than there are voices for justice. These do not have to be mutually exclusive commitments, but somehow has not a choice been made to expend more energy and training in "comforting the afflicted" than in proclaiming a God who actually cares enough to become red-hot, ripsnorting angry?⁹

Abraham Heschel's two volumes on *The Prophets* are unsurpassed in their insights concerning the nature and the essentiality of prophetic preaching. A few sentences from his opening chapter provide biblically sound insights:

We and the prophet have no language in common. To us the moral state of society, for all its stains and spots, seems fair and trim; to the prophet, it is dreadful. So many deeds of charity are done, so much decency radiates day and night; yet to the prophet satiety of the conscience is prudery and flight from responsibility....

...The prophet is sleepless and grave. The frankincense of charity fails to sweeten cruelties....

...The prophet's ear perceives the silent sigh.

...The prophet is human, yet employs notes one octave too high for our ears.

...The prophet's word is a scream in the night. While the world is at ease and asleep, the prophet feels the blast from heaven.

...None of the prophets seems enamored with being a prophet nor proud of his attainment.

...The prophet should not be regarded as an ambassador who must be dispassionate in order to be effective.¹⁰

Does it anger us that so many children are without shelter, and so many starve? Does it anger us that so many older persons and veterans have inadequate care at astronomical costs? Does it anger us that elected officials continue to pursue policies which desecrate the land? (Recently in Alaska, trees which are 400 years old have been sold for \$2.00 each.) Does it anger us that so many churches flee the problems and the pains of the poor instead of embracing the poor?

The besetting problem of the preacher may be depression, unexpressed anger turned inward. Carlyle Marney once mused that most preachers don't have the ego strength to damn a church mouse, let alone a culture!

Does it anger us that these matters don't anger us as much as they once did? If so, there is hope; perhaps a cross; maybe even resurrection.

NOTES

¹ Jonathan Raban, *Old Glory, An American Voyage* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981), 322.

² Carlyle Marney, "The Interpreter's House," mimeographed sermon.

³ For a contemporary treatment of anger, see Henry Fairlie, *The Seven Deadly Sins Today* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976), 85-111.

⁴ *The Interpreter's Bible*, volume 4 (New York/Nashville: Abingdon, 1955), 305.

⁵ Lloyd H. Steffen "On Anger," *The Christian Century* (January 16, 1985): 47-49.

⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms* (Winona, Minnesota: St. Mary's, 1982), 67-79.

⁷ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 2.

⁸ The preacher will find a clear description of Jesus' anger in William Barclay's commentaries on the passages which relate the cleansing of the temple.

⁹ For example, although the article on "anger" in the *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990) is useful and helpful, there is an individualistic focus throughout, with no mention of social justice.

¹⁰ Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets: An Introduction* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 3-26.