

Isaiah 56:6-8 ~ Mark 11:15-19
Temple Turmoil: What is He Doing? Risking Righteous Anger
 3rd Sunday in Lent ~ March 24, 2019
Entering the Passion of Jesus: To Jerusalem and Beyond
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Introduction to Scripture:

What was Jesus' *next* move, right after the parade? Our Gospel story for today's second sermon in our Lenten Sermon series, "Entering the Passion of Jesus" picks up right after the "Hosanna" parade, right after he dismounts from his donkey, right after the hubbub has died down. According to Mark, Jesus' next move was to go directly to the Temple straight to the religious heart of Jerusalem. In Mark 11:11 it is written, "Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple, and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve."

This is an important detail that only Mark includes. Today's lesson, the disruption that Jesus creates in the Temple, occurs the next day *after* Jesus had observed carefully the situation in the Temple, and taken an evening to think and pray and decide what he must do. Why is this important? This tells us that Jesus' dramatic display of righteous anger was not an immediate impulsive reactive tantrum, but a planned and calculated action. Jesus knew what he was doing and the huge risk he was taking. And he did it anyway. This teaching was that important to him. Surely, he achieved his intended impact. The crowds loved it, the chief priests and scribes, well--not so much. Let us see what we think his message was between the crashing tables and the clanging coins.

Sermon:

"If you're not angry, you're not paying attention." Remember that bumper sticker? I think it's been around awhile. It may have found its way into traffic jam/parking lot reading material as early as the 1960's. Protest was in the air and so was anger. However, when I first saw that bumper sticker I was taken aback. Being raised a nice, Christian, Presbyterian girl I had not been taught to be attentive to my anger. Righteous or otherwise. I had been trained to dismiss anger as something else. Anything else. Disappointed, yes. Frustrated, yes. Concerned, often. But angry? Never. Anger is bad. It's not Christian, or so I thought.

Growing up in my family, we ended most days with night-time prayers that centered on being thankful, praying for others in distress, and blessing our loved ones. This is a practice I cherish—one which Bob and I shared with my now 95 ½ year old mom each of the three evenings we had with her during our visit this past week in Philadelphia. On the first night, when Bob said the prayer after the "Amen," my mom, who struggles with her fading memory, looked at him with a direct and intense gaze and said, "I will never forget that prayer."

As much as this nighttime prayer ritual means to me, I read recently about a family that engages in a slightly different one. Each night the bed-time ritual with their son, Alex, included three questions: "What made you happy today? What made you sad? What made you angry?" Alex would *also* ask those three questions of his parents. They found it to be a good challenge for them to express honestly and in an age appropriate way to their son about what angered them on any given day. Apparently, Alex especially enjoyed asking that last question, growling like a lion as he said the word "angry."¹

Although Alex was being playful and fun with his lion growl, he was tapping into the spiritual powder keg that goes all the way back to the ancient story of Cain and Abel just East of Eden. In Genesis

4:5, we are told that Cain was “very angry” because his father, Adam, favored Abel’s offering over his own. And God asked Cain, “Why are you angry? ...Sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.” Well, we know how the story goes. Cain did not master it, instead he chose door number two and killed his brother Abel. Anger can go wrong, very wrong and very quickly. But even here in Genesis 4, our Bible tells us: anger can also go right. It can be mastered—not by suppressing or stifling it, but by attending to it. By waiting and watching with it. By asking ourselves and one another, like God to Cain, “Why are you angry?” Or like Alex to his parents at bed time, “What made you angry today?” There’s power in that anger that God gave to catalyze it for good.

Really! Are you wondering how anger can go right, in other words, how anger can be transformed from a devouring to an empowering force in our spiritual lives?ⁱⁱ Today’s story about Jesus “cleansing the temple” gives us a clue. And it may surprise you. In more ways than one. What made Jesus angry that day? Angry enough to enter the temple and immediately start turning over tables and chairs of the money changers and sellers of sacrificial animals and stop business as usual. What is he doing? And why then? He could have kept a low profile, he could have extended his days in Jerusalem, more time for teaching, preaching healing-- more time training his disciples (God knows, they could have used it), but instead he chose to pay attention to his anger, wrestle it down to the source, and then confront it.

Our author, Amy-Jill Levine, in her book that is guiding this series titled *Entering the Passion of Jesus*, explains why none of the commonly held explanations for his anger fit what we know of Jesus or history.ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus did not hate the Temple, and he did not reject it, nor was Jesus opposed to purity laws, he actually restores people to states of ritual purity. Third, Jesus says nothing about the Temple exploiting the population, and fourth the Temple had an outer court where Gentiles were welcome to worship. In fact, it was in the Gentile’s outer court where this scene occurred. Nor was he driving out “money lenders” from the Temple. There actually was no money lending going on at those tables, there were money changers, (like when you go to a foreign country and change your dollars for the local currency) who were exchanging various currencies of the Roman Empire into Tyrian shekels for the silver coin that the Temple accepted so sacrificial animals could be purchased after the long pilgrimages to the Temple. This was the standard practice, kind of like us having communion on the first Sunday of each month, and the Worship Committee and the Deacons doing their jobs to make sure all is in place for us to share this sacrament.

So, if Jesus is *not* condemning the Temple itself, and is not angry about financial exploitation, or the sacrificial or purity practices. And if the problem is *not* that the Temple excludes Gentiles, then what is he angry about? We got a head start on the answer to this question at Discovery Time: He saw that the people in the Temple had become “a den of robbers” and *not* “a house of prayer for all the nations”. The Temple he loved was going through the motions of being Temple – *doing* church but not *being* the church. To translate into church terms: they were singing the hymns, saying the prayers, taking communion, but only to make themselves feel good and safe, to reinforce their existing opinions and bad business--rather than to learn how to glorify God by welcoming the outcasts and being a force for peace and justice.

Marcus Borg expresses it in his book, *The Last Week*, like this “Temple ritual had to empower justice rather than excuse one from it.”^{iv} Jesus could see that day that if Temple practices continued as they were, his people, his church would not be fulfilling their call. What about us? What about our church, and the witness the larger church is giving to the world? I wonder what would Jesus want to turn over or upset in our churches today in order to reset our agendas. Perhaps one thing would be to wake us up to the constructive power of anger. If only we could learn how to carefully, respectfully, honestly attend it.

We know what destructive, horrific damage anger can wreak. Upon individuals and groups. We remember Heather Heyer, and the anger that drove a man to drive his car straight into an angry crowd in Charlottesville, Virginia on August 12, 2017 and end her life that day. We are witnessing the devouring power of anger to drive our elections and our politics in one direction or another. We also that anger turned inward devours bodies and souls—evidenced by the rise of suicide and drug overdose deaths of young and old, rich and poor.

We have been taught by Jesus about anger that empowers. If anger is attended and listened to, it can become an awesome force for transformation and for good. Jesus showed us how and why. Jesus not only turned over the tables, but went to the cross in order to get our attention and open our eyes and hearts to this truth. Yes, Jesus is calling us to let God use our righteous anger for good. Jesus gives us the courage to risk living out of that love – to notice and respond and confront the source, when it is being violated.

Yesterday, we celebrated our firstborn grand child’s first birthday. Isabel Rae Badillo was born March 27 of 2018. A year later here in 2019, she’s just starting to make sounds that aren’t words yet, and moves that aren’t quite walking, yet. We have yet to hear her tell us what made her happy, what made her sad, what made her angry, at the end of her day. But I wonder (and I worry) what our collective anger will have turned our church, our country and world into by the time she turns 21 years old, in 2039? It’s hard to imagine life in 2039. But I hope and pray we will have become less like a den of robbers and more like a “House of Prayer for all nations,” gathering the outcasts, welcoming the stranger without *and* the stranger within. That stranger for some of us may be our anger right now. I pray that she will see a church and a world where we just might have taken this page from Jesus’ book, and started to listen to our anger, to wait and watch with it, to let it empower rather than devour. If we did this, we just might harness that Holy Spirit power to remake our lives and this world into a safer, more just place for people of all nations.

ⁱ C. Gordon Peerman, III, “Anger: An Instrument of Peace,” *Weavings: A Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life*, Volume IX, Number 2, March/April 1994, p. 17.

ⁱⁱ John S. Mogabgab, editor’s introduction, *Weavings: A Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life*, Volume IX, Number 2, March/April 1994, p.3.

ⁱⁱⁱ Amy-Jill Levine, *Entering the Passion of Jesus: A Beginner’s Guide to Holy Week*, (Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN, 2018) 52-54.

^{iv} Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach about Jesus’s Final Days in Jerusalem*, (Harper SanFrancisco: San Francisco, CA, 2016) 49.