



TEMPLE TANTRUM
SCRIPTURE: PSALM 19; JOHN 2:12-22
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
March 4, 2018

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John 2:13-22

2:13 The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

2:14 In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables.

2:15 Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables.

2:16 He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"

2:17 His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me."

2:18 The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?"

2:19 Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

2:20 The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?"

2:21 But he was speaking of the temple of his body.

2:22 After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

A Meditation on Anger in 3 Parts

Part One: Excavating Anger

James Baldwin Quote#1: "It is astonishing the lengths to which a person, or a people, will go in order to avoid a truthful mirror."¹

James Baldwin was the grandson of a slave, born in 1924 in Harlem. Called to the pulpit in his teenage years, he learned to speak a redemptive word into despair with the courage of telling the truth.

By age 18 he left the pulpit and became a poet and storyteller of the American disease that he believed must be named to be healed: racism. He connected racism, sexism, homophobia, poverty—all the ways hatred and otherizing seeped into the American psyche—and these connections stitched together his love song to us—a love song that went deep and that hoisted a heavy weight onto his black body, even as it surely freed him, too. Baldwin was fueled by a love for this country that resolved to hold us accountable for our hypocrisy and to our moral capacity to be transformed.

After the assassinations of his three friends Malcolm X, Medgar Evers and Martin Luther King, Jr., some say Baldwin's writing took on a bitter tone. A bitter tone? Or a bitter pill that American still collectively resists taking in?

Indeed, it is America's collective lack of nuance around anger that attempts to silence truth tellers like James Baldwin. It is America's collective lack of nuance around anger that helps fuel our fear of the discomfort of facing how deep the roots of anger run in our country's DNA.

Surely anger is a profound actor in today's American moral landscape. So, it seems the right time for us—Christians, those who follow a God who seeks to heal us of our deepest wounds, to find the courage to take a closer look at anger. Indeed anger is both killing us and calling us toward resurrection even now.

James Baldwin's poetics can mark the depths of our dive in anger's power to enslave and to liberate.

Definition of Anger: Anger is the primary protective emotion, designed to protect us from harm or from loss of something of value. The most physical of all emotions, anger sends action signals to the muscles and organs of the body to prepare us for one purpose and one purpose only: to neutralize or defeat the perceived threat.²

James Baldwin Quote #2: "Any real change implies the breakup of the world as one has always known it, the loss of all that gave one an identity, the end of safety."³

JESUS' DID NOT COME TO GIVE US SAFETY; BUT TO HEAL US WITH THE TRUTH THAT TROUBLES OUR ACCEPTED WAYS OF DOING THINGS. He came with a truth that has the power to heal us. His power is compassionate—compassion feels the pain of those who are diminished and harmed by injustice.

Jesus's temple tantrum

- Jesus' first public act in John's Gospel

- Early in John, later in Synoptic Gospels
- Jesus will change the existing order of things
- What he is raging against is not corruption, but the system itself.
- Passover—people needed unblemished animals for the sacrifice, most were pilgrims who had traveled long distances.
- Temple tax currency couldn't be paid with coins that had the image of emperors on them. (the economy of salvation)
- “My Father’s House”—deep connection, hit him in an intimate place—his father.
- Many say this reveals Jesus’ humanity; But what if what it really reveals is his divinity—the immediacy of God’s compassion for a wayward world, a world captive to greed and idolatry and delusion and distortion.
- Jesus’ anger is toward any institution or practice that trivializes God and God’s activity in the world.
- Post-resurrection Gospel: It is the resurrection that retrospectively reveals the purpose of Jesus’ temple tantrum—to amplify God’s nature and power and transforming love in a world that has trivialized and distorted how we mediate God’s love and power in the world.

How do we know when our anger is in God’s service rather than in the service of those things that trivialize and distort? How do we know when our anger is in the service of God’s justice and not just us spewing out from our insecurity and distorted ways of understanding ourselves?

Part Two: Toxic Anger

James Baldwin Quote #3: “I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain.”⁴

Definition: Cardiologist Dr. Cynthia Thaik, “Anger and hatred are natural, but they are also some of the most toxic emotions that we can have. Feelings of rage and hatred build up in the mind, body and soul, affecting the body’s organs and natural processes and breeding even more negative emotions. Expressing anger in reasonable ways can be healthy, but explosive people who hurl objects and yell at others frequently may be at greater risk for heart disease. Prolonged bouts of anger can take the toll on the body in the form of high blood pressure, stress, anxiety, headaches and poor circulation. Research also shows that even one five-minute episode of anger is so stressful that it can impair your immune system for more than six hours.”⁵

Indeed anger takes a personal toll. And it is a contagious disease—like second hand smoke—just being around it can hurt you deep down, we breathe in its poison even if we are not the one’s stoking its fires. Our contemporary moment is all about white supremacy and patriarchy being exposed and deposed—and with that comes a fearful and painful and angry reaction by many who feel they are losing their value and their power.

Historian and social theorist Steve Gillon and a white male himself describes some of the collective anger we are seeing today this way: *“White men believed the American culture they shaped and institutions they ran were fair and sound and drove our triumphs. They saw little reason to change a society that had served them so well. But now they find their value system under assault from all directions. They aren’t even sure what they can say without being branded racist or sexist, thanks to the reviled culture of political correctness. Many have responded to these challenges by embracing a toxic brew of resentment and victimization.”*⁶

Psychologist Steve Stosney describes how *“[The angry man] gets caught on a recurring roller-coaster of resentment-anger-depression-resentment-anger-depression. Chronic blame keeps him mired in victim-identity which continually reignites the cycle. If he allows himself to realize that he may be a victimizer, he sinks lower, possibly into thoughts of [self-harm].”*⁷

Toxic anger and despair and violence make their steady march of destruction together.

Toxic anger destroys and it distances; it desperately seeks control and some relief from the tension that defines it.

Toxic anger depends on a victim-mentality and its life-blood is the way shame and blame can hook us into cycles of intermittent invasion and then estrangement. Toxic anger is our contemporary collective carcinogen.

Jesus’ anger came not from a place of chronic blame or victimhood or estrangement, but from a place of love, righteous love, healing love, liberating love.

Part Three: Righteous Anger

*James Baldwin Quote #4: “To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a rage almost all the time.”*⁸

Jesus’ anger was in the service of freedom.

Righteous anger has no patience for the chains that bind the human spirit or the walls that separate the human family.

Jaqueline Lewis, a black clergywoman, calls Christians to repent from the ways we both consciously and unconsciously devalue black and brown bodies. She calls to us not with toxic anger, but with righteous anger. Without shared tools for knowing the difference we often fall into the same reaction to either kind of anger: defensiveness, avoidance, and denial.

Take a deep breath and listen. Listen carefully to her strong words to us, Grace Covenant: *“And though this work [of repentance] is for all of us, I would be remiss if I did not say that*

White people have a special role to play in changing this story. You who have privilege must own it. There is no more time for denial. You who have privilege must teach your children that they have privilege and with it comes responsibility. To open doors for others. To share power, to step back from power. To learn how to follow Black lives into the trenches, and to be willing to be taught. You must be willing to learn. Read Black history, because it is your history. Bring those stories to the classroom, to the church school room, and to the pulpit. Read the Bible for the stories of the people of color in it. Disrupt the Whiteness of Jesus/Yeshua and claim his Afro-Semitic roots. You must tell other White people that they have power and you must not mince words. You must — because you are truth-tellers — tell the truth. Because the truth will set us all free.”⁹

Jesus’ temple anger was a compassionate, indignant anger—an anger that would not rest until justice and love were served, so that the joy of the human family’s relationship to God could fully flower.

Righteous anger has a broader view than culpable individuals—it has eyes for systems and habits. Where toxic anger belittles, righteous anger ennobles. Where toxic anger imprisons, righteous anger liberates.

Righteous anger is a carrier of our deep interdependence. An affront to the humanity of one person is an affront to your humanity, to mine. Righteous anger is an explosion of love—for a world that can never be healed on the backs of the misery of any.

This week Asheville made the national news for the brutal beating of Johnny Jermaine Rush by two Asheville police officers for jaywalking at 2am in a place where many of us may have done so ourselves. If you have watched the video and you are not angry, watch it again and imagine that Johnny is your son or your husband or even you.

If you have not watched it, then ask yourself why. Do you feel you are unrelated to Mr. Rush? Do you feel this incident does not concern you?

Johnny Rush is us—he’s our son, our brother, our lover—the person who we cherish, the person who we would not stand by and watch anyone hurt without intervening. We are that connected to him, and yet this incident shows us again the painful reflection of how toxic anger has estranged us from each other and from our own humanity.

Christ’s righteous anger must stir movement in us—silence is support of the status quo, passivity trivializes not just who you and I are, but how we witness to Christ’s power as church. If we claim to be justice seekers in Christ’s name, we cannot skip over righteous anger for the harm, for the humiliation, for the terror of violence against ANY human being.

Tonight our Session will be meeting—a called meeting to discuss how the church should be present in this gaping wound in our community.

This Thursday, Faith 4 Justice, a clergy group I am a part of and that GCPC helps to fund will be meeting with Asheville Police Chief Tammy Hooper to seek and to speak truth, to hold the city that we love to account, to see how people of faith can provoke justice for not just Mr. Rush but for all who carry the weight of racism, transphobia, homophobia, xenophobia, sexism.

Next Sunday after our Youth Sunday worship service we will show our youth that the church does not turn our backs when violence is tearing lives apart in our GCPC conversation about gun violence.

And today, right now, we gather at the Justice Table where we are called to bring our whole selves—hungry for justice, hungry for the truth Jesus tells us here of broken and redeemed bodies.

Yes, things are unsettled now. And things are upsetting. After all, Jesus is toppling more tables in our midst—clearing out more distorted systems, calling us to account once again.

If you remember anything, remember this: Jesus is calling us to righteous anger, not in spite of our Christianity, but because of it.

Thanks be to God.

² James Baldwin, *This Morning, This Evening, So Soon*

² James Baldwin, *This Morning, This Evening, So Soon*

² Steven Stosny, Ph.D. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/anger-in-the-age-entitlement/200812/anger-problems-what-they-say-about-you>

³ James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*

⁴ James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

⁵ Cynthia Thaik, MD https://www.huffingtonpost.com/dr-cynthia-thaik/emotional-wellness_b_4612392.html

⁶ Steven M. Gillon https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/made-by-history/wp/2017/08/29/why-are-so-many-white-men-so-angry/?utm_term=.bda8acdf0a49

⁷ Stosny, S. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/anger-in-the-age-entitlement/201004/anger-men-and-love>

⁸ James Baldwin

⁹ Rev. Jacqueline Lewis, Ph.D. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/the-rev-jacqueline-j-lewis-phd/in-the-matter-of-black-li_b_10867402.html