

“A Matter of Life and Death”
Matthew 4:21-27
Lent III: Fear, Lament, and Rage
March 12, 2023
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Our Scripture today comes as part of the Sermon on the Mount, following the beatitudes, as Jesus elaborates on the Hebrew Bible that he knew from his Jewish tradition and teaches the crowds about behaviors and ways of being that lead to a flourishing community. This text comes just four verses after Jesus says to the crowds, “Do not think I have come to abolish the Law; I have come to fulfill it.” With his teachings, Jesus is not getting rid of the Hebrew Scriptures, as many supercessionist Christians think, but he is reinterpreting them—and actually *expanding* the interpretation. Our Bible Study group discussion this last Thursday compared Jesus’ reinterpretation of scripture to the Socratic method, as well as to rabbinical debates recorded in the Talmud, and to Bible scholars today! So how does Jesus expand the Law in the Hebrew Scriptures?

In the Feasting on the Word commentary, Professor of Ethics Marcia Y. Riggs writes, “The verses on anger offer us an interpretation that enlarges the frame for understanding the prohibition against murder [in the Ten Commandments]. Jesus enlarges the prohibition by pointing to ways in which the anger of revenge or punishment that can lead to murder is also evident in the course of living. When you judge and insult a brother or sister in the community, as well as when you are in a legal conflict (both ways in which anger surfaces), you have an opportunity to rectify these situations by seeking the other person out so as to apologize (in the former case) or by making amends outside of the legal process (in the latter case). In both cases the objective is clear: to restore relationships through acts of reconciliation.”¹

Restoration of relationships through reconciliation—that definitely sounds like Jesus, giving the crowds listening at the time (and us, listening two thousand years later) an objective that *sounds* straightforward, but has profound implications for how we live together in community.

I appreciate this text because Jesus is not labeling anger or rage as “bad.” Again, Marcia Y. Riggs: “Clearly Jesus is not rescinding the prohibition against murder, but he does place murder on a continuum of outcomes related to anger. Furthermore, Jesus is recognizing that humans do get angry; rather than prohibiting anger, he teaches that it can be transformed by living as a peacemaker... initiating acts that manifest the reign of God in our midst.”²

¹ Feasting on the Word, Year A: Proper 6, Marcia Y. Riggs.

² Feasting on the Word, Year A, Proper 6, Marcia Y. Riggs.

What we *do* with our anger is what matters. And the Biblical text recognizes that, and I think that's Jesus' message in our scripture for the day. Emotions are morally neutral....and they have been since the beginning of time! The stories recorded in our sacred texts show us that emotions like fear, lament and anger are real and normal—and the Holy can help us process these tough emotions.

For example,

To fear, God says, “Do not be afraid,” 365 times as recorded in the scriptures. Those living in fear are offered divine comfort and accompaniment, even through “the valley of the shadow of death, we shall fear no evil.”³

To lament, God witnesses the lament and receives the laments of the psalms and of the prophets and even of Jesus himself. A majority of the psalter, those beautiful poems of wisdom in the center of our Bibles, are laments.

To anger, God listens, God relates, and God places a boundary around anger so that it would be given its due when it is righteous, and when it is dangerous and could even lead to murder, as Jesus says, God hems it in.

But how do we know, when anger is righteous, and when it is dangerous? Cole Arthur Riley writes, “It is easy to mistake oppressive anger for holy anger when you believe that you are worthy of more than someone else, that your dignity depends on this.”⁴

Fear, lament, rage.

I don't think we see any emotions in our world today more than these. These are the most human emotions, ones that each of us feel at some point in our lives, ones that we see represented in the news and on tv and in the streets. Fear guides so much of the political realm—fear of losing power, fear of others' gaining power at your expense. And lament is all around us—ongoing gun violence, natural disaster, loved ones dying too young.

And there is plenty to be angry about right now. So much it is hard to even focus or name. Ongoing war. Struggles for indigenous land rights. Anti-trans bills across the country. Tennessee passing a law that essentially guts marriage equality. Killings of Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian American and other people of color by police continue. Apartheid. Forest protectors in Atlanta getting charged with domestic terrorism. People being forced to live on the streets in the richest country in the world. Children dying of starvation and lack of medical care access.

³ cf. Psalm 23

⁴ This Here Flesh, p. 118.

Sometimes anger is a completely reasonable response to an unthinkable situation.

But this society does not recognize everyone's anger as valid. Some people's emotions are more valid than others—namely, white men's anger is tolerated, while white women's anger is brushed off as hysteria, and the anger of people of color is seen as dangerous, incendiary, without reason, or extravagant. Think of how Brett Kavanaugh's behavior was tolerated and now he sits on the Supreme Court, while rioters in Ferguson, Missouri were attacked by police. Think of how a white woman like me could get away with crying angry tears and be given sympathy, while a Black woman demonstrating those emotions could be labeled “dramatic” or “an angry Black woman.” It's not fair.

Because I can only speak to my own experience with authority, I must be honest that I have trouble with anger. It's an emotion that I was taught to shove down, to cover up, to ignore, that I just had to “get over.” I was taught to do this by a version of Christianity closely entwined with patriarchy, racism and misogyny—this Christianity that is prevalent in the US American culture almost as if it is part of the air we breathe. But as Cole Arthur Riley prompts us to ask throughout her book *This Here Flesh*, I wonder who benefits from the belittling and dismissal of these emotions that are sometimes labeled “bad”? Who benefits when fear governs us? Who benefits when lament is so full and heavy within us that it is all we can focus on? Who benefits when rage bursts out and must be heard, making some uncomfortable and threatening the power structure?

So who benefits? Systemic power and oppression are what is threatened when we parse oppressive anger from holy anger. When righteous anger is expressed because inequity has been identified and justice has been denied, it is those with privilege who benefit from tamping out that flame of rage. It is those who believe their (or our) dignity depends on someone else being “less than” in some way. And so, there is a great misunderstanding of anger in this country, and it is weaponized ruthlessly against those who continue crying out again and again because lives are at stake and people are dying unjustly.

So when people protest and break windows in downtown Seattle; when people barricade a harbor or a street to disrupt the flow of business; when people set fire to property in Saint Louis, in Minneapolis, in Detroit, in DC...let us remember those prophetic words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who in his 1968 speech “The Other America” famously said, “a riot is the language of the unheard.”⁵

Beloved ones, as we seek to live each day following in the Way of Jesus, remember that much of Jesus' ministry was bearing witness, and truth telling about what he witnessed. And so we must bear witness to the world around us. Bearing witness means paying attention, listening thoughtfully and watching carefully, observing not only what we see on the surface, but also

⁵ <https://the-other-america.com/speech>

what may be lying out of sight. Fear and lament and rage are like an iceberg—when we see outbursts of rage above the water, a great and deep fear and lament are often underneath.

Let us speak plainly today, because we love each other, and because we must. SBFC, you are people with privilege. You are people with power. Individually, that looks different for each of us—some people have racial privilege or gender privilege or economic privilege or educational privilege. But as a community, Seattle First Baptist Church has a platform. We have a place in this neighborhood and in this city, and in this American Baptist denomination. We are known for being a church that places social justice at the heart of our preaching, teaching and action. We are known for being a church that provides a safe place for people who have been wounded by their faith communities due to their sexuality and gender identity. We are known for being a church that welcomes and includes people—how we are known, the reputation we have, is something we cannot take for granted. How will you, as Seattle First Baptist Church, bear witness to the world around you and speak into the present moment? How will you, Seattle First Baptist Church, share the gospel message of reconciliation with our neighbors?

When we encounter rage, when we encounter yelling in the streets and demonstrations shutting down traffic and people cursing and swearing at police, at community leaders, at government entities: that is a time when we as the Church are called to bear witness.

When have you experienced these situations? Black Lives Matter protests? Vietnam protests? Protesting police brutality? Demonstrations witnessing against the murders of indigenous people? Rallies for justice for undocumented immigrants? The pursuit of marriage equality?

How do you behave when you encounter these situations?

Audre Lorde, in an address from 1981 on “The Uses of Anger,” said, “...anger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification, for it is in the painful process of this translation that we identify who are our allies with whom we have grave differences, and who are our genuine enemies.”⁶

So, beloved church, we are not called to dismiss those calling for justice in the streets, call them “crazy,” or retreat into racialized stereotypes about who society does and does not allow to display anger. We are not called to tell them how to be angry, or to demand that they display their rage through their action at a time more convenient for us. We are not called to say, “let’s just all get along,” as if the “getting along” we talk about isn’t the false peace that relegates fear and lament and rage to a silent, internal killer that eats away at someone’s humanity, just so we can feel better about being “peacemakers.”

⁶ <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/speeches-african-american-history/1981-audre-lorde-uses-anger-women-responding-racism/>

Cole Arthur Riley writes, “The more we listen to our own anger, the better a listener it becomes.”⁷ And that is a call I receive, though it is uncomfortable. And I hope that you, that we, as Seattle First Baptist Church, can also receive this call. Listen to rage. Listen to anger. From others as well as within yourself. Is the rage speaking for fear? Is anger the garment of lament?

Listen closely, though it may be hard.

Again, Audre Lorde from “The Uses of Anger,”: “I cannot hide my anger to spare you guilt, nor hurt feelings, nor answering anger; for to do so insults and trivializes all our efforts. Guilt is not a response to anger; it is a response to one’s own actions or lack of action. If it leads to change then it can be useful, since it is then no longer guilt but the beginning of knowledge. Yet all too often, guilt is just another name for impotence, for defensiveness destructive of communication; it becomes a device to protect ignorance and the continuation of things the way they are, the ultimate protection for changelessness.”

How we express our feelings, how we witness the feelings of others, how we metabolize our emotions to move us toward action or not: these are matters of life and death.

Emotions themselves are information. They are not moral, they are not bad or good. But emotions can be barometers of our health and the health of our society. So let’s make space for emotions, others’ and our own. From the scripture today, we recognize the danger of anger gone unchecked, rage without cause...so let us listen closely to it. Can we discern the cause? Have we done something to participate in the cause? Is there an opportunity to speak truth to power alongside the person calling out the problem? Can we cooperate with efforts towards reconciliation?

As Cole Arthur Riley says, “Reconciliation cannot be forced if it is to last.”⁸ And so, we must be mindful of that truth, and know that, like the intimate stories we share with each other about our lives, *reconciliation cannot be demanded*. It is a process. It requires a mutual recognition of wrongdoing and necessitates support of the steps that must be taken to make the harm right.

Reconciliation doesn’t mean that everything goes back to how it was before the harm was done. It doesn’t mean all the anger is gone, or the hurt has disappeared. It doesn’t mean there’s forgiveness, even. But I think reconciliation means that the people who have caused harm and who have been harmed have acknowledged the issue openly and honestly; have made efforts to listen to each other; and have agreed to move forward together toward a future vision they agree on.

⁷ This Here Flesh, 115.

⁸ This Here Flesh, p. 142.

So this day, beloved church, hear the good news: embrace your emotions. Feelings are neutral. It is what we do with our feelings that matters. Let us bear witness to our own lives and the lives of those around us, that we might together create a beloved community where true reconciliation is the norm. Where love casts out fear, where hate has no home, where laments are held tenderly and with communal witness. Let us build a community where all God's children are seen and known and loved as essential parts of a beautiful, complex, diverse humanity whose flesh and spirit are deeply precious. Let us bring this community into being every day by bearing witness, so that all live a full life.

May it ever be so. Amen.