

The First Reading is from Psalm 51:1-3, 10-12

- ¹ Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
- ² Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.
- ³ For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
- ¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
- ¹¹ Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
- ¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

The Word of God

Thanks be to God

The Second Reading is from Exodus 32:1-14

¹When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, ***the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him."*** ²Aaron said to them, "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." ³So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. ⁴***Aaron took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"*** ⁵When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a festival to the LORD." ⁶They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

⁷The LORD said to Moses, "Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; ⁸they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'" ⁹The LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. ¹⁰***Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.***"

¹¹***But Moses implored the LORD his God,*** and said, "O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? ¹²Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that God brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'? ***Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people.*** ¹³***Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to***

them, 'I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.'" ¹⁴ ***And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.***

The Living Word of God

Thanks be to God

The Message is entitled *Averted Wilderness Disaster*

This probably sounds like a strange way to begin a sermon, but I want you to recall the last time you were angry. That's right! Recall a recent moment of anger... whether it was directed at someone who cut you off on the freeway, an injustice that you witnessed, a blatant disregard of decency or something else; or maybe you were even angry at yourself. Recall a recent moment of anger.

"Anger is a signal, and one worth listening to," writes Harriet Lerner in *The Dance of Anger*. Anger is an emotion, which means it is a response to something we experience. In and of itself anger is neither good or bad. The emotion just signals that something is not right according to our internal sensors.

It's a signal of something, but the question is of what? I believe that is why we need to listen to the wisdom from the Persian poet Rumi who concludes his poem entitled *The Guest House* with these words, "Be grateful for whoever comes, because each has been sent as a guide from beyond." Rumi defines "whoever comes" as a joy, a depression, a meanness, a sorrow, a dark thought, shame, malice," or in our case this morning anger. Whatever emotions come suggests Rumi, we need to listen to them for they are guides, signals to what is going on inside of us in response to the world around us.

God angrily said to Moses, "Go down at once!"

God and Moses were together on Mt. Sinai hammering out the Ten Commandments on stone, while the people were waiting and waiting and waiting. The people were restless for Moses had been gone at first for a day, then for a week, and now for over a month. The people wondered if Moses was even still alive, as all they ever heard and saw from the cloud covered mountain was thunder and lightning. Would Moses survive the apparent turbulent storms? Would he ever come down and return to lead them once again?

God's anger burned hot for God said to Moses, "**Your** people, whom **you** brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely." Note the pronouns! "**Your** people", Moses, not mine! "**Your** people" are perverse, Moses! "**Your** people" that you brought up out of the land of Egypt, Moses. "**Your** people have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them." God's wrath burned hot in response to the fickle actions of the people, as they demanded a new god, one of their own making from the spoils of Egypt.

The people's actions really shouldn't surprise us though. As reformed Christians we recognize our human tendency towards idolatry, for who among us has not made an idol, a god of our own making from our sports team or career, our gender or ethnic identity, our wealth or status, our age or youthful appearance, our golden state or our nation. Our personal gods might seem as ridiculous as the golden calf, if they weren't so insidious and corrosive to ourselves and the world in which we live.

Yet, at the foot of the Sinai mountain the people's personal god was fabricated with little resistance from the remaining leadership. The people grew weary of waiting and they demanded

a god. Aaron simply complied. I have to admit that I am rather disappointed in Aaron. Along with Moses he had witnessed everything that God had done, yet he doesn't even suggest that the people continue to wait. He doesn't remind them of their miraculous journey from slavery to freedom and from freedom to God's continual provision. He doesn't call together the leaders to listen for God's word. He simply gathers their spoils from Egypt to make a god of their own making to worship. Once the golden calf is molded, the people immediately surround it and say, ***"These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"*** Really? This golden calf caused the series of plagues brought upon Egypt, which lead to their freedom? This golden calf miraculously parted the Red Sea? This golden calf provided manna and quail for sustenance and fresh water to quench thirst? Is it any wonder that God was angry with the people, given how quick they turned aside from the ways God commanded them – to have no other gods or make idols?

The LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. ¹⁰ ***Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them.***" God is done with these people whom God has freed. God is done with their whining and complaining. God is ready to blot them out from the face of the earth. And this is exactly why Richard Dawkins in his bestselling book *The God Delusion* wrote, "The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction." Dawkins then goes on to catalogue a very disturbing list of attributes for God, saying God is jealous and proud of it; petty, unjust, unforgiving, control-freak; a vindictive... bully, the entire descriptive list Dawkins includes in his book is very unbecoming of God. Yet, author David Lamb has a different take in his book entitled, *God Behaving Badly*, for Lamb writes, "While the God of the Old Testament, does get angry, what characterizes God is love."

"Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them," says God. This doesn't sound very loving. This doesn't sound like a God who is "merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness," a phrase that is found at least seven times in the Old Testament. But, one could argue from our story that God is faithful, for God does say to Moses, ***"And of you, Moses, I will make a great nation."***

Moses stands on Mt. Sinai between God's anger and the people's idolatrous behavior. This is a defining moment for Moses. Will he side with God's anger and become the sole survivor and then fulfill God's promise through his future lineage? Or will he stand with the people and confront God's anger?

In a moment of anger, we all have a choice. Will we stand in the presence of anger, whether it is someone else's or our own? Will we explore it and challenge it or allow it to act out in fury? Will we consider anger a guide and plumb its depth, listening for what it might possibly teach us?

In the face of God's fierce wrath, Moses boldly refocuses the conversation. Moses focuses on God's desired actions – isolation (leave me alone) and destruction (consume them) – rather than on the people's sin (worshipping the golden calf). Sure, God had every right to be angry with the people. But, were God's planned actions reflective of God's character? Richard Dawkins would have expected this story to end with God following through on his threat. But, David Lamb and Moses didn't expect a catastrophic end for the people, for they knew God's character as voiced in our psalm, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love." Moses knew that God was merciful. Moses knew that God's love was steadfast.

So Moses stayed present and faced God's anger saying, "O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people." "Your people God, not my people," said Moses." "Your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand." Moses reminds God of God's word in the giving of the commandments, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." These people are your people, God, remember? These people, are people whom you have chosen and whom you love.

Then Moses speaks to God about his international reputation if God were to destroy the people. Imagine what the Egyptians will think of you. I can already see the Egyptian News headlines already says Moses: *Catastrophic Disaster, Orchestrated as Planned*.

Moses doesn't stop with these two excellent points. Moses stays present to God's anger and proceeds to tell God what to do: turn from your anger, change your mind and keep your promise. Would you have the audacity to do what Moses did? I pray we do with each other!

How might these three reminders help us in our moments of anger? Recall your moment of anger from earlier this morning. What would turning from your anger have looked like? Would it have averted disaster? How would have changing your mind and responding differently have changed the outcome? What promise is your anger trying to undermine or nullify?

In the heat of the moment, Moses is asking God, and in turn us, to consider the impact of our anger and its actions. If even for a nanosecond, consider what your action, provoked by anger, will do to your reputation. Will the planned angry action support your core character or will it tarnish it? What would it mean to take ownership of this emotion and the desired response; would it change outcomes?

I would surmise that the emotion of anger triggers the part of our brains known as the amygdala, the fight or flight portion of our brain. For in our anger, we often fight back with our words or actions, being as destructive or even more so than the perceived offending person or party. I am certain that most of us have experienced or at least witnessed anger that escalates, often leading to disastrous results. Yet, most of us would rather not confront our own anger, let alone the anger of someone else. To stay with anger, ours or someone else's, is difficult, yet absolutely necessary if we are going learn from it and prevent remorse.

This biblical story didn't end as Dawkins argues, for God's promise wasn't fulfilled through Moses alone. Moses' willingness to disregard God's immediate command, "Go down at once," led to an ending of this biblical story that is reflective of God's core character. Moses also didn't listen to another request by God, "Now let me alone." In the heat of the moment, Moses stayed present to God's fierce wrath and it changed the outcome.

The outcome: God listened to Moses. Friends, this is good news. God listens to us. God listens to us even when we challenge God. God is listening when we ask for a clean heart, a new and right spirit. God listens to us when we remind God of God's love for us. God doesn't cast us away or take the holy spirit from us. God, even in the face of our sin, listens and stands ready to restore us and sustain us. God listened to Moses, averting a wilderness disaster.

In the wilderness of our world, anger simmers and erupts leading to unfathomable violence. We see it played out on our highways as road rage, in our homes behind closed doors as battered bodies, on our school yards as fights break out, and in places of employment, entertainment and worship as shootings. Author Steven Stosny writes, "Symptomatic anger covers up the pain of our 'core hurts.' These core hurts, key distressful emotions, include feeling

ignored, unimportant, untrustworthy, accused, guilty, devalued, rejected, powerless, unlovable.”
*

Core hurts can erupt in anger. God’s core hurt was rejection, for the people chose another god, one of their own making. Yet, in the face of God’s erupting anger, Moses stayed present; and through Moses confrontation, God’s mercy and grace, God’s steadfast love and faithfulness prevailed.

Could it be that in the wilderness of our world around us, you and I are being called to be present, as Moses was to God, to help uncover the core hurts of others and maybe even of ourselves, so that disasters are averted? May the God who listens to us equip us to be present for each other in ways that bring forth life.

Steadfast loving and faithful God, sustain in us a willing spirit to stay present with each other, even in the midst of anger. Amen.

Sources:

- David T. Lamb, *God Behaving Badly: Is the God of the Old Testament Angry, Sexist and Racist?* Intervarsity Press: Downers Grove, IL; 2011.
- Harriet Lerner, *The Dance of Anger: A Woman’s Guide to Changing the Patterns of Intimate Relationships*. HarperPerennial: New York, NY; 1989.
- * <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/evolution-the-self/200807/what-your-anger-may-be-hiding>