

The Lord Became Angry

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 6th Sunday after Pentecost, June 30, 1991. Scripture Lessons: 2 Samuel 6:1-15; Psalm 24; 2 Corinthians 8:7-15; Mark 5:21-43.

The Ark of the Covenant was one of Israel's most sacred relics. The Lord had commanded Moses to build it in the desert. It contained the Ten Commandments written on stone tablets and brought by Moses from Mount Sinai. It was made of acacia wood and beaten gold. Carried on its poles by the priestly clans of the Tribe of Levi, it had gone before the Israelites from the plains of Moab to the walls of Jericho. Above all, the Ark was the visible symbol of the presence of the holy God who lived among his people. It was the footstool of the invisible Lord. It was to be carried only by priests. Just as in monarchies the common person must not presumptuously touch royalty, the Ark, as the visible sign of the Lord's presence was not to be touched. To touch the ark was to impinge upon God's holiness. It is in this context that we read:

"When they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah reached out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen shook it. The anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah; and God struck him there because he reached out his hand to the ark; and he died there beside the ark of God." 2 Samuel 6:6-7.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

A group of people are gathered in a living room discussing our Old Testament lesson where Uzzah reaches out to steady the Ark of the Covenant and is struck dead by the anger of the Lord.

A woman puts down her coffee cup, clears her throat and says, "When I was a child I hated to go to church." She pauses, clears her voice nervously, and continues. "The minister use to shout about the wrath of God and I'd really get scared. I was terrified of this angry God. I'm in *this* church because it preaches that God loves us in Christ. I can't believe in a God who, in anger, strikes a man dead simply for touching a religious object. It's so childish. I simply can't believe that God is like that."

A man in the group, takes a long drag on his cigarette, slowly exhales, leans forward and begins to talk softly, "This passage reminds me so much

of my father. My father expected perfection from me. I could never please him. He'd fly into a rage for the slightest infraction of one of his many rules. I wanted so much to please him, to just hear him say, 'This is really a good report card' or 'you really played a good game' but he never said anything to affirm me. It was always criticism, anger. I could never get close to my father. This passage seems to say that God is like my father, remote, critical, judgmental, a perfectionist, ready to strike out in anger for the least infraction of his many rules."

Tears run down the cheeks of one of the woman in the group. "When my Bobby was hit and killed by a car he was just ten years old. All I could think of was that God must be angry with me. It took years for me to begin ~~to believe that God loves me, that God wasn't punishing me by letting my~~ little boy die. But this passage of Scripture frightens me. I don't like it. I wonder how Uzzah's mother felt when she heard that her son was struck down by the Lord."

Sally, the eight year old daughter of the host for the Bible study is supposed to be reading but she's been listening to every word and says, "When I heard you read that about God zapping Uzzah I thought, 'Man, God must be a real mean dude.'"

Everybody laughs. There's a few moments silence. Then one of the members of the Bible study who's a practicing psychologist speaks up. "What Sally said would be funny if it weren't so sad. So many of my

patients believe in this wrathful and jealous God. For them God *is* 'a real mean dude'. It's incredible how neurotics and depressed people seem to dwell on these parts of the Bible. They seem to be incapable of finding in the Bible anything else at all."

Another member of the small group Bible study has been silent throughout the discussion. He looks very angry and disgusted. Finally he says, "Who are you people to judge the Bible. The Bible is the Word of God. God said it. I believe it. That settles it."

Now, let's come away from that Bible study and reflect for ourselves on this difficult passage. Is there a word from the Lord for us this morning in this ancient holy text? There's not much support anymore for a God who gets angry. You won't find many people speaking up in Bible studies for an angry God. Love is in. Anger is out. Nevertheless, I'd like to say something positive about anger this morning. I don't entirely understand the anger of God against Uzzah. But as a minister in the Reformed tradition I'm bound, not to share my personal opinions and feelings, but to listen to the Word of God in Scripture and try to interpret within our present context. On the one hand I'm tempted to explain this passage away rationalistically, in such a way as to appeal to people heavily influenced by the Enlightenment even when we don't realize it. On the other hand I'm tempted to explain it in simplistic, dogmatic terms: just believe it without thinking because it's in the Bible.

But I do believe in a God who gets angry. I believe there's a positive side to anger, although that's hard for me to see in our Old Testament lesson. Anger, though, can be a sign of love. I get most angry with those I love the most. You have never seen me have an angry outburst. My wife and family have. If God ever gets angry with us, it's because he loves us. "Be thankful," counseled the Anglican scholar, P.T. Forsythe, "that God cares enough for you to be angry with you."

Anger can also be an expression of concern for what's just. Abraham Lincoln once watched slaves being auctioned and he was angry. He said, "If I ever get the chance I'm going to hit slavery and hit it hard."

This past week a great American resigned from the Supreme Court. ~~Thurgood Marshall who, by the way, was a graduate of Lincoln University,~~ was the great grandson of slaves. He traced his passion for civil rights to his father.

"'Son,' his father use to say to him, 'if anyone ever calls you a nigger, you not only got my permission to fight him--- you've got my orders to fight him (Wilmington, News-Journal).'" Anger in the face of injustice is not only allowed, it's a duty.

Thurgood Marshall use to tell a story about how he once came to a town to defend a black man accused of murder. When he arrived by train in the little town he discovered that the man had been lynched the night before. There was nothing left for Marshall to do but to go back home. While he was

waiting at the train station a man came up to him and said, "Hey, boy, what're you doing here?" "I'm waiting for the train." "You better make sure you get on that train, boy, because the sun has never gone down upon a live nigger in this town." Thurgood Marshall fought that kind of bigotry with a righteous anger throughout his life.

There's something morally wrong with us if a story like that doesn't make us angry. There's something morally wrong with God if God doesn't get angry with injustice, oppression and bigotry although just how that applies to our Old Testament lesson isn't clear to me.

But our anger is not like God's anger. Our anger is never entirely pure, God's is wholly pure. Our anger is never entirely selfish, God's anger is wholly selfless. Our anger is so often fickle, God's anger is always purposeful and salvific, having as its intent salvation. Our anger is never entirely righteous, God's anger is wholly righteous.

God's anger is never the anger of a tyrant. It's always the anger of the God who has already saved us by pure grace and who out of love has given us his law and promises. God's anger is the anger of the God who has given Himself in His Son to suffer the divine judgment on us.

The Bible bears witness to a God who loves and hates, who feels compassion and anger; in short to a God who is personal and not simply a force. The Bible bears witness to the God who became a human being in Jesus of Nazareth, one who felt hunger, thirst, weariness, anxiety, fear,

temptation, compassion, love and also anger.

One more thing. The Bible bears witness to a God who becomes angry at times but never in the Bible do we read that God's anger endures forever. We do read, however, that "His mercy endureth for ever." We read that God tells his people, "I have loved you with an everlasting love." (Jer. 31:3) "I will betroth you to me for ever... in... love, and in mercy." (Hosea 2:19) We are never told that his anger goes on forever. Rather we are told that God is slow to anger and plenteous in mercy. "God will not be angry with us forever" the Psalmist wrote. God's anger is limited. God's love has no limits.

Let us pray:

~~O-Saviour, as-thou-hang'st-upon-the-tree;~~
I turn my back to thee, but to receive
Corrections, till thy mercies bid thee leave.
O think me worth thine anger, punish me,
Burn off my rusts, and my deformity,
Restore thine image, so much, by thy grace,
That thou may'st know me, and I'll turn my face.
(John Donne)