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Advent 3B - December 17, 2017

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us.

As I first read this collect, I thought, “what a great one for this time of year.” Calling on God to come right away and take away our sins, which at this time of year can show up as frustration and anger. Today is Rose Sunday, when we pause in our Advent preparations to focus on the anticipated joy of the birth of Jesus. But, don’t you find it ironic, that at a time when we’re asked to prepare ourselves spiritually for the arrival of the Christ child, instead of the peace and tranquility that should be growing in us, is often overshadowed by a wild frenzy of buying, cooking, decorating, eating, etc. And what often comes of this frenzy of activity, is not the joy we should be feeling at the anticipated birth of Jesus, but anger, annoyance, and frustration. Two weeks ago I spoke about how to use contemplative prayer as a tool for Advent preparation. Yet, even though I have a pretty active prayer life, feelings of anger and frustration can still overtake me at this time of year. Last week when I was in Prescott for the Bishop’s search retreat, I felt the anger rise up in me a number of times, as I tried to maneuver the congestion through Phoenix and around Prescott Valley.

As I’ve mentioned a few times before, I often translate the word sin into fear, which I think is the underlying impetus for most of our character flaws, especially anger and frustration. And so what I want to share with you today is a few thoughts about anger. But first I want to give a disclaimer - whatever I share today is not to for you to take and apply to others. This could bring very unpleasant consequences. Rather, if you hear something in what I’m sharing today that applies to you, that’s great, but don’t try it on an angry friend or family member.

From an evolutionary standpoint, anger is a good thing. It gives us the heightened energy to deal with perceived threat. When there is a trigger event, the amygdala, located in the temporal lobe of the brain, springs

into action and adrenaline is instantaneously pumped into the system to give the body the extra energy to defend itself. But, what if there is no enemy, what if the trigger is just a shadow of some past threat or slight. Well, at the same time that a trigger event happens and the amygdala is springing into action, blood flow increases to the frontal lobe, that part of our brain that tempers our emotions, and within seconds of a trigger event, helps determine whether the perceived threat is real or not. The frontal lobe, acts as a safety switch, and immediately sends out hormones to dilute the adrenaline. But, sometimes the frontal lobe gets overworked tempering potential outburst after potential outburst, and it misses. That's when angry outbursts happen, those pesky tantrums, snide comments, and other acting out. In my research I was amazed to find that people with chronic anger problems have twice the risk of coronary artery disease and three times the risk of heart attack. The science says that when you're constantly being activated by triggers your nervous system becomes overexerted and can't keep up. Your body is unable to produce enough acetylcholine, the hormone that helps to reduce the effects of adrenaline pumped into the system when we're angry. Some scientists believe that chronic anger may be more dangerous than smoking and obesity as a factor contributing to premature death.

Obviously, uncontrolled anger is bad for us, not only spiritually, but physically as well. So, what can we do, and where does God come into all this neurological stuff? Well, here's the good news. In my considered theological opinion, God has given us the power to overcome irrational anger through the gift of his son Jesus. Throughout God's history with us, as recorded in holy scripture, he has continuously reminded we have nothing to fear. The Bible abounds in these reminders - Do not fear; let not your hearts be troubled; Be not afraid. In Jesus God physically showed us that God's love could overcome anything, even death. And so, Satan, or our out of control amygdala, or whatever we want to call it, ultimately has no power over us. Using words from the saint of anger management, St. Paul, "If God is for us who can be against us?" So, how is this knowledge applied in practice? Let me tell you, I have many years of experience here, and this is what I've found that helps in letting God manage my anger.

First I need to recognize it. I need to look for signs that my anger is getting the best of me - when I find myself judging people more often; or I get more and more impatient about little things; or I take things too personally; or I find myself regretting harsh words I said or emailed. When I recognize that this is happening, I look for the triggers - maybe it's long lines, or traffic, or a particular person who pushes my buttons, or criticism that I find threatening. I also try and figure out what the disproportionate fear is. When I know what the triggers are, and realize the irrational nature of the fear, I can step in and give my frontal lobe a little help with some comforting words of scripture. Phrases that remind me that I have nothing to fear, that God is on my side.

When I experience the indignant kind of anger, when I feel jealous, or disrespected, or that I'm not being given the recognition I think I deserve, or annoyance at some one else's ignorance or thoughtlessness, I try to remember that it's not about me. Other's behavior is not a threat, it's not aimed at me; it's just their behavior. I try to use the phrase, "You are God's beloved. In you God is well-pleased." When I remember God's extravagant love for me, the perceived slights of others become insignificant.

Then there's the frustration sort of anger, which is often manifested as impatience or irritability. Long lines, bad traffic, slow customers in stores, all of these become targets of my impatient rage, and I know it comes from the irrational fear of not having enough - not enough time, not enough resources, not enough whatever - this is the kind of anger that creeps up on me during busy seasons like this one. That's when I need to remember to use the phrases, "There's more than enough, because God fully satisfies all my needs. All things work for good to those who love God." Let me tell you, I have to use those verses a lot during the holidays, especially when I spend any time in Green Valley or Tucson

And then there's the worst anger of all for me - defensive anger. This is the anger that ramps up when criticism makes me feel threatened. Being questioned about something I feel insecure about, snide criticism, or even innocent well-meaning suggestions can bring this anger to a boil. I know this kind of anger plagues many of us and I attribute its prevalence to the excesses of atonement theology in Western Christian thought.

Those excesses, the remnants of overzealous puritanical thought has left us with a false shame that can too often make us overly defensive. With defensive anger the underlying fear is of being judged or condemned. For me, this is the hardest one to catch before it takes hold, but when I do manage to intervene, it's the easiest one to temper, all I need to ask myself is, "Who's the judge?" Since I know in my heart that there is no judge, the rhetorical question, "Who's the judge," usually dissipates defensive anger right away. Jesus did not come to judge the world, but to save the world with God's extravagant love.

Disproportionate anger is an obstacle to recognizing God's love in the world, it hinders our ability to fully answer God's call in our lives, and is a huge waste of time and energy. But, when we remember that we have nothing to fear and that God's extravagant love trumps any perceived threat to our sensitive egos, anger becomes an opportunity for God to manifest his love in our lives.

Now one last time I want to remind you, please, don't try this on others. I know how easy it is to find the faults in others and want to correct them, but when someone is in an angry place, if you say, "why don't you just remember God's love," you may just get a punch in the nose. Or if you say, "Fr. Ernie said you should think happy thoughts about God," ...then I may get punched in the nose. These words were meant for you. If they strike a chord with you, then great, if not, that's fine too. Last time I spoke about anger in a sermon, a few people came to me afterwards, and said, "I know you said to take your message for ourselves, but if I know someone who has problems with anger, what do I do?" Well, if you know someone who has anger issues, the first thing to remember is, it's not about you - you didn't cause it, you can't control it, and you can't cure it. The best thing you can do is keep yourself safe and connect with others.

Today John tells us to make a straight path for God, Isaiah reminds us of the wonderful news of Christ's coming. Learning to release some of our irrational anger by understanding the physiology behind our emotions and remembering God's extravagant love made manifest in Jesus helps straighten that path and opens us to rejoice greatly in the LORD, and allow our whole being to exult in our God. Science and religion do mix. Amen.