



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by  
The Reverend Peter Thompson, Vicar

## Anger Management

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, August 8, 2021*

*The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost*

*Based on 1 Kings 19:4-8; Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51*

*Let us pray.*

*God, grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.*

As the son of two law-school-educated parents, I learned how to argue at a very young age. My parents had years of life experience on me and they were the recipients of prestigious degrees in part because of their impressive skills in reasoning and argumentation, but, even as a seven- or eight-year-old, I had little interest in letting them win without a fight. It was not uncommon for discussions at our family dinner table to morph into deep disagreements about philosophical issues, current events, or whether or not I really had to eat that fish. One particular evening I was so intensely distressed about not getting my way that I tried a new tactic: I sulked off and went to sleep without saying anything more—just to show my parents how mad I really was.

I no longer have any idea of what the original conflict concerned, but what happened next forms one of my earliest memories. My mother, a preacher's daughter, largely left the Church behind when she moved to Washington to attend college and pursue a career in law. Every now and then, however, her Methodist upbringing would seep through. When she woke me up that morning, she sat at the foot of my bed and stared into my eyes. "Have you ever heard the phrase 'Don't go to bed angry'?" she asked. Looking at me kindly, she went on to explain how important it was to resolve disagreements promptly rather than let them fester and spiral out of control. Caring about other people required me to do all in my power to ensure that any ill will between us came to an end.

I don't think my mother knew that she was paraphrasing from the letter to the Ephesians, but I have little doubt that the person who first told her not to go to bed angry or the person who told that person not to go to bed angry was thinking of the 26<sup>th</sup> verse of the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of that letter: "Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger and do not make room for the devil." "Don't go to bed angry!" is surely a gloss on this text.

The writer of the letter to the Ephesians—who, parenthetically, was almost certainly not the Apostle Paul himself—approaches anger in a remarkably nuanced and sophisticated fashion. The writer understands that, practically speaking, anger cannot be effectively squelched; it must be expressed—hence, the writer's exhortation to "be angry." Yet, in warning us not to sin and to not let the sun go down on our anger, the writer implies that anger is only useful when it is expressed in circumscribed ways—ways that steer clear of wrongdoing and of long-term resentment.

Ephesians walks an awfully fine line between the acceptance and the renunciation of anger, and we should be careful about how enthusiastically we embrace the awkward compromise it proposes. The excerpt we read this morning is located in close proximity to passages that articulate a pointed suspicion of human sexuality. This morning's excerpt is also not far from the so-called "household code," which orders wives to obey their husbands and slaves to obey their masters. When read in conjunction with these problematic passages, the letter's qualified support for anger easily can be twisted into an instrument of social control that excuses the petty outbursts of the powerful but stifles the righteous indignation of the powerless.

Still, in simultaneously tolerating anger and hesitating to endorse it, the letter to the Ephesians reflects the approach of Scripture as a whole. The Hebrew Bible seems unable to make up its mind about anger: it routinely describes God as "slow to anger" and warns readers to refrain from anger whenever possible. At the same time, it depicts God as a "jealous" deity who claims his right to take "vengeance" and exercise "wrath." God's anger routinely results in destruction and in the death of human beings.

The anger of God shows up in the New Testament, too. In the Book of Revelation, the seven bowls of God's wrath are poured out on the enemies of Christ and the Church. In the Gospels, Jesus demonstrates anger by turning over the tables in the temple and by rebuking, at various times, both the Pharisees and the disciples. Yet many of the New Testament letters, both those written by Paul and those, like Ephesians, which were written by others, condemn anger; and, in the antitheses section of his famous Sermon on the Mount, Jesus himself likens anger to murder: "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire."

In examining all of this contradictory evidence, the relevant question appears to be not whether anger is acceptable but when and how anger can be legitimately expressed. Evading anger entirely is apparently impossible, at least for God. But all exclamations of dissatisfaction are not justified simply because some anger is inevitable.

Indeed, our readings for today suggest as much. The extreme level of upset that Elijah feels at being lost for one single day in the wilderness seems unreasonable when viewed in light of how much favor God has shown him up to this point in his story and of how promptly the angel of God provides him with the nourishment he needs. Elijah's excessive consternation in the form of a death wish is echoed in the yet more curious exasperation of Jonah, who tells God that he is angry enough to die because God has dared to save the repentant people of Nineveh. The self-absorption that both Elijah and Jonah display deludes them into thinking that they have been slighted and overlooked when they are actually the beneficiaries of privilege, protection, and care.

Jesus' interlocutors, for their part, convey frustration at being presented with a strange concept that challenges their assumptions about what is possible. Their discontent, like the discontent of Elijah and the discontent of Jonah, stems from their inability to transcend their own perspectives and view their world with a wider lens. Jesus tells them to stop complaining, and he similarly admonishes those of us whose irritation derives from the limits of our own minds.

The appropriate handling of anger requires us to step outside of our own circumstances and concerns and consider what is true and best for the larger body. The letter to the Ephesians makes clear that speech that is critical of others is acceptable, perhaps even desired—but only when that speech results in an improvement of an entire community's wellbeing. "We are members of one another," the letter maintains. Our attention should be concentrated on affirming what builds us up and rejecting all that tears us down.

In 1981, the black feminist activist Audre Lorde offered a keynote address to the National Women's Studies Association titled "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism." In the years preceding the address, white feminists had repeatedly accused Lorde of being too angry and of harming the women's movement in the process. The address allowed Lorde to explain why her anger was necessary and how anger like hers can be an asset rather than a liability in the struggle for justice. But Lorde clarified that she did not believe that anger was an unqualified good. Rather, she explained, it must be harnessed and carefully directed if it is going to achieve its aims.

"Focused with precision," she declared, anger "can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change...women of color in America have grown up within a symphony of anger at being silenced, at being unchosen, at knowing that when we survive, it is in spite of a world that takes for granted our lack of humanness, and which hates our very existence outside of its service. And I say *symphony* rather than *cacophony*," she added, "because we have had to learn to orchestrate those furies so that they do not tear us apart. We have had to learn to move through them and use them for strength and force and insight within our daily lives."<sup>1</sup>

Contemporary American society would gain much from an intentional reflection on these thoughts of Audre Lorde. Presently, our anger is spilling over, uncontrollably, into every aspect of our lives, infecting our homes and our workplaces, our streets and modes of transport, our religion and politics, our inboxes and social media feeds. Our anger is not focused with precision; it is not, with some notable exceptions, directed at progress and change; it is not orchestrated to prevent us from tearing ourselves apart. The problem is not that we are angry; the problem is that often we don't know why we're angry; the problem is that we would rather stew in our own self-centeredness and sense of entitlement, spewing our anger indiscriminately in all sorts of directions, than channel our anger into fuel for making the world a better place.

There's a reason they call it anger management. Our anger must be examined and reassessed, cultivated and pruned, supervised and guided—if we are to put it to use for the benefit of the greater whole. Our anger can be a gift to others and to ourselves, but first we must learn to steward it well.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Brittney Cooper's *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower* for directing me to Lorde's speech.