

3rd Sunday in Lent, Year B
March 3, 2024
St. Charles Ave Presbyterian Church
Rev. Sarah Chancellor-Watson
John 2:13-22

“You Need To Calm Down”

Tell me if something like this has ever happened to you – you’re driving home, it’s been a long day, the line of cars getting on the interstate is starting to pile up, but you patiently wait your turn to merge into traffic, when some jack wagon zips past everyone on the shoulder, cuts you off, and nearly causes a wreck as they go speeding through the busy highway, as you let a few choice words fly, honk your horn, and give the one fingered salute.

Or maybe you’re just having one of those weeks, you and your spouse cannot get on the same page, you aren’t communicating much save for rolled eyes and huffy little sighs, the kids are whining and there are melt downs seemingly every five minutes. You go to get breakfast ready and reach for green cereal bowl from the dishwasher, because this week your kid will eat out of the green cereal bowl, and you notice that all the dishes are still dirty and it was your spouse’s job to make sure the dishwasher got started the night before. You stomp your feet and storm out the room with tears welling up in your eyes.

Whether or not you have experienced one of these specific scenarios, the emotional reaction of anger that follows them is something that we can all relate to. In her book, *Atlas of the Heart*, researcher and author Brene Brown gives us this definition of anger - it “is an emotion that we feel when something gets in the way of a desired outcome or when we believe there’s a violation of the way things should be.” Anger is an emotion that we often don’t have a lot of control over, in that we can’t help but to *feel* deeply and with our whole bodies. Anger

triggers our nervous system, activates our flight or fight response, floods our bodies with adrenaline and other stress hormones, elevates our blood pressure and increases our heart rate, and yes literally makes us red in the face.

In our lives we receive many messages from our families growing up and from the wider culture about anger and the ways we can or can't show it. Perhaps you were told that "you need to calm down" or "why you gotta be so mean." – Shout out to Taylor Swift for those catchy lyrics - and you were not taught the distinction between your feelings of anger and the behavior that flows from it. "It's ok to be mad. It's not ok to hit your sister." Or maybe the messages you received about anger was that it was *the* only appropriate big emotion for you to express – the rest are far too soft and vulnerable. Now if you want to be reminded of what anger looks before we are conditioned to express it in one way or another may I suggest you just hang out with a small child for even a short amount of time. It won't take long before something happens that will trigger their pure, raw, unadulterated emotions. They cannot help but to express their anger outwardly in tears and in fits of rage as they navigate the disappointments and injustices of life, from grown-ups not allowing them to play in the middle of the street to the unfairness of bedtime. For those of you who are new around here and don't know me and my family, I have a 3 year old, so this is my daily lived experience – we deal with a lot of BIG FEELINGS in my house and we are doing our best to help make room for them all without shame or judgment.

Anger is one of the primary or core emotions identified by psychologists, but it is an emotion that never shows up alone. Anger often acts as our psyche's first line of defense against more complex or vulnerable emotions such as sadness and loss, disappointment, fear

and anxiety. If we think of Anger like a iceberg, there is always more happening below the surface. And anger is a normal thing for us to experience, and despite what we've been taught about anger it can be a healthy part of our lives and an important force for change – in ourselves and in our world.

Now I'm not sure if Jesus' actions in today's passage can be lifted up as the healthiest expression of anger – if you're mad about something in church, please don't start chucking pews – but is a prime example of how Jesus did indeed experience the full range of human emotions. It can be quite jarring for us to see Jesus be so “reactive.” This scene is certainly at odds with the image many of us conjure up of a serene and peaceful Jesus. But Jesus was not just some Son of God robot who was unaffected by the world around him. He was not this wholly other, calm, wise, sage of a person, devoid of strong emotions. This story is important to the whole of the Jesus' story, for many reasons, but one I think we tend to overlook is that it helps give us a fuller picture of this man, who was indeed human like us.

This scene in John's gospel of Jesus' anger at the vendors and money changers in the Temple of Jerusalem is one that is also in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, although those three gospels have Jesus cleansing the Temple during the events of Holy Week, soon after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. John, however, has placed this story at the beginning of his gospel, right here in the 2nd chapter and his version is what I would characterize as the most detailed of these accounts and the most “violent” with this image of Jesus making the whip out of the cords to drive out these vendors and money changers. So why does John do it this way and just what is Jesus so angry about?

Some scholars have speculated that the money being exchanged and the animals for sale were an exploitation of the people coming to the temple to worship God. Kind of like the exchange rate on currency you get from the airport kiosk verses going to a bank, or the price of hot dogs at a professional baseball game, or what they charge for ice cold water at Jazz Fest. Now this could be part of what is going on, but more likely and because we don't have a ton of evidence to suggest that is the case here, Jesus, particularly here in John's version of events, is more upset that the commerce is happening at all. Perhaps what has really aggravated Jesus is that the people are focused on the institution of the Temple and these things that support and build up that rather than the worship and glory of God. Biblical scholar and professor Karoline Lewis notes that, "For the temple system to survive... the ordered transactions of a marketplace were essential. The temple had to function as a place of exchange for maintaining and supporting the sacrificial structures. Jesus is not quibbling about maleficence or mismanagement but calls for a complete dismantling of the entire system. Underneath this critique lies also the intimation that the temple itself is not necessary. At the center of such theological statements is the fundamental question of God's location."

Ultimately for John, what this boils down to, and why I think he places this story at the beginning of his gospel is that this is about the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ - God with us - no longer bound and contained in a temple system, but living and breathing among the people. "And the Word became flesh and dwelled among us..." The location of God is now enfleshed in humanity itself and released into the world. And what seems to anger Jesus, and by extension anger God, is any kind of separation from us - all those things that can get in the way of the

relationship between us and our Creator. Jesus' life, his humanity, his death and resurrection means that there is nowhere where God can't reach us - even in our anger.

Not only can God relate to us in our anger, but God is very much with us in our moments of anger. God is even with us when we are angry at God. We only need to look at the Psalms to see the this truth played out again and again in words of deep lament expressed there. God can handle our anger. God can use our anger to help shape and transform us. Going back to Brene Brown for a minute here, in her book, *Braving the Wilderness*, she writes that "Anger is a catalyst. Holding on to it will make us exhausted and sick. Internalizing anger will take away our joy and spirit; externalizing anger will make us less effective in our attempts to create change and forge connection. It's an emotion we need to transform into something life-giving: courage, love, change, compassion, justice.

Or sometimes anger can mask a far more difficult emotion like grief, regret, or shame, and we need to use it to dig into what we're really feeling. Either way, anger is a powerful catalyst but a life-sucking companion."

So where can God connect to you in your moments of anger? Showing up for you with the same passion as Jesus in our story today. Is God showing you the ways that your anger is out of control and you need help managing it so that you don't continue in patterns of hurt and shame in your relationships? Is God nudging you to pay better attention to those triggering emotions that lay below the surface of your anger? To confront those soft spots and meet those needs within you? Is God igniting a passion within you? A passion for justice in the face of injustice? A righteous anger to change not only ourselves, but the world around us to better

reflect the way things should be. If anger is the spark, then may God turn that spark into fuel for love, connection, empathy, courage, righteousness, and justice. Amen.

i

ⁱ Sources Consulted –

- Karoline Lewis on Working Preacher - <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-in-lent-2/commentary-on-john-213-22-3>
- The Gottman Institute. <https://www.gottman.com/blog/the-anger-iceberg/>
- American Psychological Association. <https://www.apa.org/topics/anger/control#:~:text=The%20nature%20of%20anger&text=Like%20other%20emotions%2C%20it%20is,both%20external%20and%20internal%20events>.
- Brown, Brené. *Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience*. 2021.