

Anger: What Lies Beneath

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Exodus 2:11-15; 21-
22

Sermon Series:
Seven Greatest
Virtues and Vices:
Anger and Patience

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Yesterday I woke up early and turned on the news to see what was happening with the hurricane. I learned that the Ocean City newspaper headlines announced in red and bold letters: ANGRY IRENE.

Because so many power outages were expected, the power company was imploring all customers to be patient. How appropriate that we are addressing the deadly sin of anger and the lively virtue of patience this day after the hurricane. It's not just hurricanes that rip through our lives. We experience many kinds of storms that often leave a trail of devastation and destruction. Anger is a common response, but what is needed is patience. Our passage for today reminds us of that very truth. Listen for God's word to you.

"One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and saw their forced labor. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsfolk. He looked this way and that, and seeing no one, he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. When he went out the next day, he saw two Hebrews fighting, and he said to the one who was in the wrong, 'Why do you strike

your fellow Hebrew?' He answered, 'Who made you a ruler and judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?' Then Moses was afraid and thought, 'Surely the thing is known.' When Pharaoh heard of it, he sought to kill Moses. But Moses fled from Pharaoh. He settled in the land of Midian, and sat down by a well."

The sermon title for today is taken from Ruth Haley Barton's book, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership*. In it, she tells the story of a trip to Florida. While she was swimming in the surf, a man came running down the beach yelling, "Get out of the water! Get out of the water!" She swam as hard as she could toward shore and then ran—heart pounding—the rest of the way. When she turned around and looked toward the water she saw a long, black shadow about six to eight feet long gliding under the surface of the water where she had just emerged. She wondered if it was a shark but was told it was a saltwater crocodile—one of the most dangerous creatures in the ocean. And while there had never been a saltwater crocodile reported in that area before, there it was.

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Ruth shares that the moral of the story is this: what lies beneath the surface—of the ocean or our lives—really matters. “Whether I know something is there or not is in some ways irrelevant. My awareness of it or lack of awareness doesn’t make it any less real. It doesn’t much matter whether I have ever heard of what is lurking beneath the surface or whether I believe that such things exist. The point is that there are things lurking under the surface, and it could even be that others are seeing these things though I am not. If, by God’s grace, we become aware of the dark creatures lurking below, the best thing we can do is to get out of the water—fast!”

We are in a sermon series on the seven deadly sins and seven lively virtues. The deadly sins are what are lurking under the surface of our lives, whether we want to admit it or not. But God wants us to transform our lives so that we can lay aside these deadly sins so that we can more and more reflect the lively virtues or fruit of the Spirit.

Our passage today is about Moses—one of the great heroes of our faith, and his story is one of the most familiar to children and adults alike. You may recall that his mother hid him in the bulrushes to save him from the murderous instructions to kill all boy babies born to Hebrews. An Egyptian princess finds him and has pity on him. Moses’ sister, who has been

watching all this, comes out of hiding and offers to help find someone to nurse him. Moses ends up being nursed by his own mother, and then, when he was old enough, she brings him to the princess, who raises him as her son.

This may seem like a happy ending to a very terrible situation, and while there is evidence of God’s grace, it is still worth considering the traumatic circumstances of Moses’ young life. He had a chaotic childhood that was volatile and even unsafe. Though saved by the efforts of his sister and mother, he still must have experienced a sense of abandonment. He was raised in a pagan environment that was fundamentally different from that of his early years. In essence, he lived between two worlds and yet was not fully at home in either place, which probably meant he struggled everyday with issues of identity and belonging. Undoubtedly, there had to be a lot going on beneath the surface for Moses.

In the book *Overcoming the Dark Side of Leadership*, Gary McIntosh and Samuel Rima write, “The dark side is actually a natural result of human development. It is the inner urges, compulsions, and dysfunctions of our personality that often go unexamined or remain unknown to us until we experience an emotional explosion or some other significant problem that causes us to search for a reason why. At times the dark

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side seems to leap on us unexpectedly but in reality it has slowly crept up on us...it has been a lifetime in the making.”

Our passage for today reveals both an emotional explosion and the reality of Moses’ dark side that had been a lifetime in the making. What lies beneath comes to the surface in an outburst of the deadly sin of anger.

Let’s explore what anger is. In his book *Respectable Sins: Confronting the Sins We Tolerate*, Jerry Bridges writes, “Anger is a strong feeling of displeasure, and usually of antagonism. I would add that it’s often accompanied by sinful emotions, words, and actions hurtful to those who are the objects of our anger.”

It’s important to clarify that the emotion of anger is not a sin. We all experience it, but the problem is that, for most of us, anger moves from an involuntary emotional reaction to voluntary, willful choice. More often than not, anger leads to sinful thoughts, words and deeds.

Now some might say that in this situation Moses had a righteous anger, but was it? Jerry Bridges gives two criteria for evaluating: “Righteous anger arises from an accurate perception of true evil—that is, as violations of God’s moral law. It focuses on God and His will, not on me and my will.” Moses’ situation does meet this criterion. The oppressive

slavery of the Hebrews was wrong, and the beating of this particular kinsman was a true injustice. Upon witnessing this, Moses has strong feelings of displeasure, even anger, and he wants to do something about it. Those impulses in Moses are good and tell us something about who he is and foreshadows how God will use him in His redemptive plan.

But Moses’ anger does not meet the second criterion. “Righteous anger is always self-controlled. It never causes one to lose his temper or retaliate in some vengeful way.” What lies beneath for Moses is not righteous anger but unrefined anger that explodes and leads him to take matters into his own hands. His impulse to fight is acted on in a way that is deeply destructive and illustrates why anger is a deadly sin.

Not only do we see Moses’ anger, but we see the reactive nature of anger as well in a chain of events. There is an injustice, to be sure, but Moses reacts and takes matters into his own hands in a deadly manner. When he later seeks to help in settling a dispute between two Hebrews, they are clearly skeptical and even afraid of how he might “help” them. That results in Moses’ being afraid because he has been found out. Now Pharaoh is angry and wants to kill him. The irony of this story, this chain of reactions, begins with Moses’ deadly sin of anger and

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ends with his fleeing Egypt in order to save his own life from the deadly anger of Pharaoh.

This circumstance in Moses' life is an extreme one to be sure, but it couldn't be more relevant to us today. In the last few weeks, I have read many stories in the paper about violent, even murderous, reactions of people who are taking matters into their own hands to "solve their problems" in destructive, often deadly ways. But we don't have to look out there to see the reality of anger. We can witness it every day in road rage, outbursts at sales clerks in stores, and at sporting events.

Robert Jones writes in *Uprooting Anger*, "Anger is a universal problem, prevalent in every culture, experienced by every generation. No one is isolated from its presence or immune from its poison. It permeates each person and spoils our most intimate relationships. Anger is a given part of our fallen human fabric. Sadly this is true even in our Christian homes and churches."

All of us get angry, and, while the emotion of anger is not a sin, it often results in sin. And let us be clear, no one *makes* us angry. People or circumstances may trigger the emotion of anger, but we are responsible for how we willfully choose to deal with it. While many express anger in external, emotional explosions of word or deed, others tend to internalize their emotions and

reflect what Jerry Bridges refers to as the weeds of anger. These, too, grieve the heart of God and often lead to a destructive chain reaction.

Holding on to anger and nursing our wounds rather than letting them go leads to resentment, which can grow into bitterness that poisons others with a spirit of enmity and hostility that can cause strife or open conflict. If not acknowledged or dealt with, these weeds of anger are also deadly and *will* destroy relationships, families, communities and even churches.

So, what is the alternative to anger? Patience. Patience is a characteristic of God and a fruit of the Spirit. And patience denotes the self-restraint that enables us to bear injury and insult without resorting to hasty retaliation.

In his book *The Deeper Journey*, Robert Mulholland, Jr. writes, "Patience, or longsuffering, is the virtue that attacks the root of our false self's need to advance its own agenda... Frustration, anger, outrage and coercion are merely some of the consequences of our impatience. Patience is not a tense waiting for others to come around to our agenda but a willingness to allow God to work in God's way and in God's time to bring everyone, ourselves included, to God's agenda for the situation."

You would think we would want patience as much as love, joy and peace, but we don't. I

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think that is because the fruit of patience is primarily cultivated through the act of waiting. Because we are busy people doing important things, we simply don't have the desire or the time to wait. We want to take action. If we can't do something, we beg God to do something because doing *something* feels so much better than doing *nothing*. But waiting is not doing "nothing." And waiting is often much better than doing something.

Adele Calhoun writes in *Invitation from God*: "Waiting is one of God's immensely sweeping invitations. To wait expectantly and with open hands requires a relinquishment of control that gets at the roots of our motivations, fears and idolatries. It is where we learn that God isn't a genie and that happiness is not a matter of God meeting our expectations. While we wait, we can sense the naked vulnerability of trust."

Waiting is what enables us to turn our attention from ourselves and our circumstances to God as we trust Him to do what only He can do. Waiting is an important aspect of the spiritual life, and we see how it had a transformative impact on the life of Moses. The time for doing something was over for Moses. His doing didn't turn out so well, so, in an unfamiliar, foreign land far away from Egypt, Moses had to wait.

We read, "But He settled in the land of Midian, and sat down by a well." Certainly he sat down by a real well, but the well has long been a metaphor for the soul. As Moses settled in this new land, he also had to settle down in his soul, into his life in God. Moses' waiting led to finding solitude. He could no longer keep busy and distracted. He could no longer keep fighting or fleeing. Beside this well in the land of Median, in solitude, Moses began to wake up what lay beneath.

Waiting also led to receiving the gift of community. Like many people with difficult, chaotic home backgrounds, Moses didn't feel he had a place to belong, but God gifted him with a new family, and in this new place and in this new community, his life began to change.

We see evidence of that change in verses 21-22: "Moses agreed to stay with the man, and he gave Moses his daughter Zipporah in marriage. She bore a son, and he named him Gershom; for he said, 'I have been an alien residing in a foreign land.'"

His waiting in solitude and the gift of this new community allowed Moses' struggle to come to the surface so that in naming his son he also names his lifelong struggle with issues of identity and belonging. When he says, "I have been an alien residing in a foreign land," he is naming what lies

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beneath—the pain of being an outsider. Naming what lay beneath was a significant step in healing and transformation for Moses as it is for many who struggle with addictions or pain or problems or anger.

Moses was in Midian for 40 years. It was a long season of waiting, and though very little is said about this period, we know it involved letting go. We know Moses let go of his life and community in Egypt. He let go of the confusion about his identity. He let go of the compulsion in life to want to fix things, to work on things out there—people and circumstances. He learned that fixing was not what was needed. What was needed? To let go and to let God do what only God could do.

Most of all, this time of waiting led to preparing Moses for leadership. Moses had the impulse to want to do something about the injustice of the Hebrew people who were enslaved in Egypt. God saw it, too. God cared deeply, and God had a plan to redeem His people. And remarkably, that plan would involve using Moses as a leader. But Moses had to wait on God and be transformed before he was ready. Moses had to learn to trust God and let God do what only God could do. Only God could deliver His people from bondage of slavery to freedom in the Promised Land.

Moses had to experience God leading him from the

bondage of his anger to a new kind of freedom before he would be ready to lead others. This would require a deep and abiding confidence in God, and what virtue? Patience, patience, patience. It would require unusual patience to lead people who were so broken because of being enslaved for so long. Chuck Swindoll said it well: “It took 40 days to get Israel out of Egypt, but it took 40 years to get Egypt out of Israel.” The process of transformation took 40 years of wandering and waiting in the wilderness. Moses had his own wilderness experience in Midian for 40 years that transformed his anger to patience so he could be prepared to lead others on their journey of transformation. Henri Nouwen writes, “The great illusion of leadership is to think that we can be led out of the desert by someone who has never been there.”

I remember the first time I woke up to the truth that I was in the desert. It was a stressful period, both personally and professionally. I began the process of paying attention—not simply to the external circumstances and challenges of my life but also to what lay beneath. It was an emotional and spiritual earthquake to wake up to how much I needed to change in order to let go of control and trust God and to wait on Him to do what only He could do. Attending to what lies beneath was absolutely necessary for my own journey

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of transformation, and also for my responsibilities as a leader.

But the journey of transformation is ongoing, and I can never stop paying attention to what lies beneath. Even this week, I found myself feeling angry and responding to others with impatience. It would have been so easy to rationalize my sin and blame other people or the busyness of this time of year. Hey, I had the additional stress of an earthquake and hurricane that I could blame it on. But the truth is that I have to take responsibility for what lies beneath—my feelings, my words, my actions.

Maybe you, too, are waking up to what lies beneath. It's been an unusual year. Not only have we weathered these recent natural disasters, we are living in a world that is changing dramatically and in a country struggling with a fragile economy. We have also been through a very difficult year in our church. You may have strong feelings about that as many do. Having feelings is not wrong or bad, but we need to be careful how we respond. Are we taking things into our own hands by fighting or fleeing or keeping so busy that we cannot attend to what lies beneath? In this fall season, it would be easy to just push down what may be coming to the surface or to run away from it and simply keep on going.

But my hope and prayer is that each of us will attend to what lies beneath and allow God to transform us. God is here, and He is working in us individually and collectively. Our calling is to wait patiently on God to do what only He can do. But let us not miss the opportunities to be led by Him and to cooperate with what He is doing. Again, many opportunities are listed in your bulletin. These are invitations to arrange our lives to Live in Christ Together for the World. Let's do it!