



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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# **I Will Heal Them**

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*“I have seen their ways, but I will heal them; I will guide them and restore comfort to Israel's mourners, creating praise on their lips. Peace, peace, to those far and near,” says the Lord. “And I will heal them” (Isa. 57:18 NIV).*

We live in a time when there is a great deal of anger all around us, and within many of us as well.

Lots of people hold onto anger because someone hurt or offended them, either recently or a long time ago. I heard about an elderly woman the other day who is still mad at her sister after many years and won't talk to her, but now she can't remember why. The bitterness remains long after the reason has been forgotten. Many people carry anger inside them like a stone hanging from their heart. It serves no good purpose but they're unable or unwilling to let it go.

Some people cultivate anger in others for profit or personal gain. They make money by stoking resentments among their readers or viewers or contributors, or they conjure up animosity against opponents in order to get or keep some elected office. Pouring fuel on the fire of other people's anger is practically a business model for some organizations.

There's an awful lot of anger around us and within us, so I was struck this week when I came across some passages in the Bible that speak to all of that.

The prophet Isaiah, for example, talks about God's anger with his people, and what God does with it. When we talk about God's anger that's always metaphorical, of course, because God is not a human being, or driven by emotions in the way that we are. But still, anger can be an appropriate response when people do bad things, so it's not

wrong to think about the wrath of God as long as we remember that God is not irrational or excessive in the way that we so often are.

The prophet's job is to bring a word from God to God's people, especially when the people are going astray—which turns out to be a great deal of the time. Prophets tend not to be a popular lot because no one wants to hear bad news, particularly when the listeners themselves have been behaving badly. Frederick Buechner says that prophets are the sort of people who get invited to dinner only once. Nobody likes a party pooper.

So Isaiah reminds the people that they've turned away from the one true God to worship more congenial gods, gods that don't ask much of them or interfere with the way they want to live. Isaiah says that false worship goes along with false living: people go through the motions of liturgy and fasting but then they practice or acquiesce in all sorts of evil. They allow the poor to go hungry and neglect the homeless; they badmouth their neighbors and treat the most vulnerable among them with contempt. Don't expect God to be satisfied with your worship, Isaiah says, if your practice contradicts your piety, if the way you live does not reflect the love of God.

The Bible tells us that people behave badly and God gets angry. We sometimes imagine that love and anger are opposites, but in fact love itself can be a source of legitimate anger. If we care about other people—our own children, for example—we want them to do what's right, and we don't want them to suffer unfairly. If they're hitting one another, or stealing each other's things, or saying mean and hurtful things even after we've tried gently to redirect them, we get angry, and rightly so. When people treat other people badly,

our sense of justice is offended, and a kind of righteous anger motivates us to make things right. So we discipline our children because we don't want those who are being hurt to suffer, and we want the ones who are behaving badly to become better human beings.

What's true in our own families should also be true in the community and in the world at large. If we see people being abused or neglected, or left to suffer from hunger or sickness or anything else that might be prevented, but no one does anything about it, it's right to be mad about that.

Anger is the right response to injustice, especially if it motivates us to correct the situation. We get mad automatically when someone treats us unfairly. Being on the receiving end of injustice makes us angry, and compassionate people have a similar response when they see other people being treated badly. Anyone who remains indifferent to other people's suffering lacks the love that God expects from us. In fact, our indifference is one of the things that make God mad, as all the prophets remind us.

What's striking, though, is what God does with God's own anger. Here there seems to be a kind of development in the Bible, a deeper understanding as we move from the earliest books of the Old Testament to the later prophets and then on to Jesus.

In Genesis God gets angry at the people's sin and sends a flood to wipe them out, leaving Noah and his family to start all over. But even then, God promises not to destroy the people again and sets a rainbow in the sky as a sign of his mercy. By the time we get to prophets, sin still has its consequences and the people are hauled off to Babylon as a

result of their unfaithfulness, but still God's judgment is woven through with the promise of redemption.

So God says through the prophet Isaiah, "Because of their wicked covetousness I was angry; I struck them, I hid and was angry; but they kept turning back to their own ways." Notice that the sin God focuses on is not only private, personal matters, but also covetousness or greed that neglects the needs of others. These are the kinds of things that make God angry, precisely because God loves us. God cares about all people, so God wants those who suffer to be delivered from suffering, and God wants those who cause or acquiesce in suffering to be better human beings. Indifference to evil is simply unworthy of those who are made in the image of God.

But now hear the word about God's promises. "I have seen their ways, but I will heal them," God says. "Peace, peace to the far and the near, and I will heal them." The Hebrew word translated "peace" is *shalom*, that marvelous image of wholeness and wellbeing for individuals, and peace and justice for the entire community. "Shalom, shalom to those far and near, and I will heal them," says the Lord. Sin and indifference to the suffering of others reflect a hardness of heart, a shriveling of the soul. God is angry about all that, and yet God's response is not only wrath but also redemption. "I will heal them," God says. I will heal their sin-sick souls, and in their healing they will find peace—peace within their own hearts, and peace with one another.

We Christians believe that what we see in Jesus Christ is the Word of God made flesh, and on the move among us. It's an echo of Isaiah's promise, then, when Jesus comes along one day and sees Zacchaeus up in a tree, trying to catch a glimpse of the teacher, since

Zacchaeus is a small man in more ways than one. He's a tax collector, and very rich, but he may have become rich by taking advantage of his position and padding his own purse. That's the sort of greed that makes God mad, too, but here comes Jesus, calling up to the little man in the tree, "Come down, Zacchaeus. I need to stay at your house tonight."

Now the religious folk who resent the tax collector and like to cultivate their anger are not happy with Jesus. They start to grumble: "What kind of teacher is this, who goes to the house of sinners?" They think a righteous man should only be seen with decent people like themselves.

But Jesus goes to Zacchaeus's house, and something about the spirit of Jesus makes the tax collector come clean. He says, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." He does all this voluntarily. Jesus doesn't make him do it. But somehow Jesus has managed to come not only into Zacchaeus's home but all the way into his heart. Just being in Jesus' presence cuts through all the greed and selfishness, and the rationalizations he's used to justify them.

Zacchaeus doesn't want to be that old acquisitive self any more, the one who had all kinds of excuses for why he was entitled to everything he had and didn't owe anybody anything. Just meeting Jesus makes Zacchaeus want to be better than that. His old self-justifying ways seem shabby and unworthy now, and oddly enough, giving much of his wealth away actually makes him feel free. He always thought it would be a hardship, but it turns out to be kind of liberation. He's no longer captive to his cravings. His heart isn't hard any more, which is why Jesus says, "Today salvation has come to this house." It sounds for all the world like Isaiah's



word of God to the Israelites: “I have seen their ways, but I will heal them.”

And to those who are still fussing about why Jesus keeps such bad company instead of sticking with the good people like themselves, Jesus says, “The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” Maybe they’ll hear the irony one day, when they come to see their own hearts more clearly.

A couple decades later the apostle Paul, if he was indeed the one who wrote that letter to the Ephesians, warns church folk about the dangers of clinging to their anger and the need to turn it in the direction of reconciliation and redemption.

Paul says, let us speak the truth to our neighbors, because we’re all members of one another and we owe each other the truth, even when the truth is hard to hear. Be angry when it’s right to be angry, but don’t let the sun go down on your anger. Don’t dwell on it because then it will become a place where the devil can dwell inside of you. Don’t speak evil of one another, but let your words be gracious and build each other up. Put away all bitterness and wrath and wrangling. Be kind to one another, and forgive as Christ has forgiven you.

Be imitators of God, Paul says. Follow the model you’ve found in Christ. Don’t be satisfied with sin, or indifferent to suffering. Be angry enough to do something about it, but treat others the way God has treated you. Remember your Creator, the one who says, “I have seen their ways, but I will heal them.” Then go and do likewise, by the grace of God.



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