

Wilderness: Angry With God

John 11:28-37

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March 21, 2021

Mary and Martha and their brother, Lazarus, were all good friends of Jesus. We see them with him at different points in the gospels, and Jesus seems to care for them quite deeply. So, when Lazarus became gravely ill, the sisters sent word to Jesus hoping he would come right away to heal him. But, Jesus didn't come. In fact, he didn't show up until four days after Lazarus died.

When he did arrive on the scene, Mary and Martha and their friends and family are all grieving. Martha greeted him first with these words, "*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.*" And then Mary, "*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.*" In fact, those gathered around Mary and Martha, too, say, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

You can hear pain in their words and underneath it, the anger, disappointment, and disbelief. It's as if the subtext, the words they don't say, is "So, where were you when we needed you? "How could you not come?"

At some point in our lives, I think many of us reach a time when we turn to God with anger - anger and a lot of questions. God, if you are all-powerful and all-knowing, why do you allow people to suffer? Why don't you heal the ones we love and answer our prayers? Why don't you intervene to stop natural disasters like hurricanes and earthquakes? Why have you allowed Covid-19 to ravage our country and world leading to millions of deaths? These are not just philosophical questions. They are born of our real pain, our very real anger.

With two weeks left until Easter, we are nearing the end of our sermon series entitled "Wilderness". Like Jesus entered the wilderness for forty days after his baptism, we have taken the forty days of Lent as an opportunity to follow him there and explore what we might encounter when we do. Of course, time spent in the wilderness can lead us to all sorts of questions, regrets, fears or worries, but, like Jesus, we have focused primarily on what we might learn about ourselves in relationship to God. We've talked about doubting God, testing God, feeling exiled from God, and this week we'll explore being angry with God.

So, what leads us to feeling angry with God? Oftentimes, it is suffering - our own or that of someone we care about. We see this clearly in the Book of Job as Job loses everything - his wealth, his children, his own health. Job knows that he is a good person and faithful to God, so why would God let this happen to him?

This leads to another source of anger for us - the feeling that something is unfair. Why did I have to lose my job? Why did my spouse have to get cancer? Why should children be starving in places around the world? What did we do to deserve this? It's not fair.

And somehow in all of this emotional turmoil, we begin to feel that God has broken a promise or forgotten us or, possibly, that God doesn't even exist. This leads to what might be the

most painful question of all, the question Mary and Martha must be asking, “Why didn’t you do something?”

What could feel more like being in the wilderness than to feel that God has chosen not to answer your prayers, chosen to let people suffer, chosen for people to die in typhoons and pandemics, chosen for you to lose your spouse or child or marriage or job or home or health? It is agonizing and infuriating and heart-breaking and can leave us feeling completely lost. And, on top of it all, we may find ourselves worrying whether it’s okay to be angry with God. Is it sinful to yell at God and pour out our anger?

Yet, what if the problem isn’t God’s choices or even our expectations of God, but how we conceive of God, the characteristics we assign to God? Most of us have grown up with a picture of God that is rooted in early Christian thought. We have learned that God has certain attributes - God is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent. God is eternal, transcendent, and unchanging.

To some degree, these ideas about God come from scripture directly. Hebrews 13:8 tells us “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever”, reinforcing the idea that God is unchanging, and in the King James version, Revelation 19:6 states “the Lord God omnipotent reigneth” meaning that God is all-powerful. Yet, much of how we describe and understand God comes from early Jewish and then Christian interpretations of scripture, mostly the stories of the Old Testament, rather than from scripture itself.

How would our expectations of God, and therefore our anger or disappointment in God, change if we considered these attributes to be more nuanced than absolute? For example, what if God were powerful, wise, and present with us but also does change. There are certainly plenty of examples in scripture of God changing. The story of Noah and the ark is one. God is fed up with humanity and, according to Genesis 6, “The Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled.” Already we see God changing. So, God decides to destroy all living things except one faithful family of humans and one pair of every animal by flooding the earth. Yet, when the flood is over, God makes a new covenant with Noah saying, “I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth”. Again, God feels regret, this time about God’s own actions, and changes God’s mind.

We see this again in Exodus when Moses is with God on the top of Mount Sinai. God is angry with the people of Israel for their disobedience (again) and is ready to destroy them. Yet, Moses intervenes saying, “Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people. **13** Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self saying: ‘I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever.’” The next verse tells us, “Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.” Again, God responds to Moses and changes the plan.

If God changes, then God can evolve, which helps us make sense of the huge difference we see between God in the Old Testament and God in the New Testament. If God changes, God can’t be distant and all-powerful because God can be influenced by situations and people outside God’s self, like Moses. And, perhaps most importantly, if God changes, God can be in a truly

loving and reciprocal relationship with humanity because God can respond to humanity just as humanity responds to God.

Much of this way of thinking about God comes from a contemporary school of theology called Process Theology, which is largely based on the work of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne. They see God as evolving in response to human need and, therefore, not yet perfect. If God isn't perfect, God could not create a perfect universe. Therefore, we have natural evil. And God could not create perfect humans, and so we have moral evil. For some of us, this way of conceiving of God is unacceptable, but for others, it is freeing. If God isn't all-powerful, then we can let go of our expectation that God can stop acts of nature or acts of human cruelty. And if we let go of that expectation, we don't have a reason to be angry with God.

Now, I know from personal experience that when we are angry with God, when we blame God, it's because we desperately need someone to blame for the pain and suffering we are living through. We need to understand why this terrible thing has happened, and it's difficult to accept the idea that bad things just do. Letting God off the hook can leave us even deeper in the wilderness.

Except it also frees us to seek out God's comfort, to see God as suffering with us, caring for us, and seeking out what is best for us.

This way of thinking about God and suffering is the basis behind much of Harold S. Kushner's well-known and well-loved book, "When Bad Things Happen To Good People". Kushner says, "God does not cause our misfortunes. Some are caused by bad luck, some are caused by bad people, and some are simply an inevitable consequence of our being human and being mortal, living in a world of inflexible natural laws. The painful things that happen to us are not punishments for our misbehavior, nor are they in any way part of some grand design on God's part. Because the tragedy is not God's will, we need not feel hurt or betrayed by God when tragedy strikes. We can turn to Him for help in overcoming it, precisely because we can tell ourselves that God is as outraged by it as we are."

So, yes, it is okay to be angry with God. God can certainly handle it. Pray about your anger. Tell God all about it. And recognize that in God's immense love for you, God is hurting for you and is waiting to walk in the wilderness with you.

Which brings us back to Mary and Martha and Jesus. When Jesus sees the grief of Mary and Martha, when he hears the bewilderment and hurt of their neighbors, John tells us he was "deeply moved in spirit and troubled" and he, too, wept. God is not up in the sky heartlessly manipulating our lives like pieces on a chess board. God weeps, too. God responds to our pain and our losses.

And then, eventually, God acts. Just as Jesus resurrected Lazarus, God acts to resurrect us, to bring us out of grief and anger and into new life. But, that's a story for two weeks from now.

Thanks be to God! Amen!