Anger Turned to Comfort

Isaiah 12:1-6 (NIV)

1 In that day you will say: "I will praise you, LORD. Although you were angry with me, your anger has turned away and you have comforted me. 2 Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The LORD, the LORD himself, is my strength and my defense; he has become my salvation." 3 With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. 4 In that day you will say: "Give praise to the LORD, proclaim his name; make known among the nations what he has done, and proclaim that his name is exalted. 5 Sing to the LORD, for he has done glorious things; let this be known to all the world. 6 Shout aloud and sing for joy, people of Zion, for great is the Holy One of Israel among you."

"Love the sinner; hate the sin." If you search, you will not find this quote in the Bible. However, we paraphrase this to simplify two of God's attributes: his justice and his mercy. God is never okay with sin. He hates sin; it angers him. So, he is also angry at the person who commits the sin. He was angry with his people the Israelites for turning away from him to other gods, false gods. He was angry with the other nations who brought and reveled in the violence upon the Israelites. It was right for God to be angry at the sin and the sinner because they caused the sin.

We experience a similar righteous anger over blatantly, objectively wrong things. When someone goes to a place of worship and begins shooting people, this is wrong – whether in a Christian church or a Muslim mosque. For the parent on trial who pleads guilty to abusing their child, causing their child's death, this is wrong. When someone threatens you bodily harm while robbing you, this is wrong. We want justice. We want these people to be punished for the violence they commit. We hate their actions, and, honestly, we can't separate their actions from who they are. We are angry at the sin and the sinner.

Put yourself in the place of the father in the parable Jesus told in our Gospel reading today. Your youngest son comes up to you and asks for his inheritance – you know, that thing that he's not supposed to get until you die. He doesn't want your advice. He doesn't want your help. He wishes you were dead so that he can get your money – the money you earned and saved to provide for your family after you were gone. You give it to him, since you were saving it for him anyway. Then he goes and wastes all of it in wild living. It's not just that he bought whatever he wanted on Amazon. No, you've heard the reports. He spent it on binge drinking parties, on prostitutes, and God only knows what else. Now destitute and poor, this son comes back and wants you to provide for him again?? How could this father not be angry with his son – a sinner who did such sinful things?

If we can be rightfully angry when someone does what is wrong, how much more so God? God rightly hates the sin and the sinner. One side of us says, "Yeah! You give that sinner what he deserves!" Then you realize, "But, wait, I do what is wrong. I have put things in life – family, work, pleasure, leisure – ahead of God like the Israelites did. These are my idols. I have hurt people – maybe not with bullets, but with lies, with insults, with a cold shoulder. I'm a sinner. Does God hate me?"

That's a scary thought: "Does God hate me because I'm a sinner?" We immediately start to make excuses or explanations as to why God doesn't hate me. My sins aren't so bad. Sometimes they are just accidental. Sometimes I don't even know that I'm doing them. And who really is getting hurt. I mean, maybe someone's feelings get hurt a bit, but they'll get over it. I didn't open fire and kill anyone. I didn't abuse a child. I'm not a criminal. We try to skew justice to favor us, to turn a blind eye to what we are doing, to make us the exception to God hating sin and the sinner.

Our sins are not little indiscretions or harmless mistakes. They are active and passive breaking of God's commands, his will for our lives. If God is angry with my sins, with me, then what is he going to do to me? I remember when I did wrong things (sinned) growing up. I would wonder and worry about when my parents would find out. What would they do when they did? I remember the anger. It was scary, but they were right to be angry. I did what was wrong. I deliberately disobeyed. I deserved punishment. I just hoped I could endure it and reminded myself that the anger would eventually subside.

We've all at one point been the wayward / prodigal son in the parable that Jesus told. We all like sheep have gone astray at some point in our lives – whether we have physically wandered away from God or mentally and emotionally checked out while physically going through the motions of attending church, praying, etc. We have given priority to other things in life over God. We have hurt those who hurt us. We have hurt people in anger. And we have made that long walk "home" to God with our head hung low. We realized our sins, been put in our place recognizing of our arrogant sinfulness. We've had that apology speech practiced and memorized. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants." (Luke 15:18-19) We hope that the rightful anger against us doesn't last too long.

Then we read the father's reaction. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him." (Luke 15:20) No anger at all. The father does not stay at a distance waiting for the apology that he rightfully deserves. In fact, it's pretty much the exact opposite reaction. Compassion. Love. Embrace. He lavishes riches on his sinful son. The father clothes his son, calls for a feast to be prepared, calls for celebration. Why? "For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." (Luke 15:24)

This is the picture that Isaiah paints for us in his prophecy. In that day you will say: "I will praise you, LORD. Although you were angry with me, your anger has turned away and you have comforted me." (verse 1) It's a complete change. The rightful anger against the sin and the sinner is turned away. Why? Because his anger against me for the sins that I committed was turned to someone else.

God took out his anger over my sins on himself. This is what Jesus did when he suffered and died on the cross. In that moment when Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" he was experiencing the full righteous anger that our sins deserved. Jesus willingly took on this suffering and the consequent separation from God to take care of and get rid of our sins. With God's anger over our sins having been dealt with, he turns toward us with a complete joyful comfort just like this father who embraced his formerly wayward sinful son. The father did not hold the son's sins against him just as God the Father no longer holds his anger against us and our sins because it was taken out on Christ. Justice has been satisfied. God's anger is turned away. Our sins are paid for. God comforts us with forgiveness. God joyfully accepts us because of Jesus' payment. We are saved!

Although my love pales in comparison to God the Father's love for us, I get it – this turning anger away to comfort. I've been rightfully angry at my kids because of the things that they have done wrong. My kids have seen that anger and cry, "I'm sorry! Forgive me!" That's where a shift happens when you recall how God's anger was turned away from you. You want to hold on to that anger until your child, your friend, your coworker, whoever has wronged you, has properly apologized and made some sort of recompense for the wrong that they have done. But that's not how God has treated you. He turned his anger away from you and instead comforted you with forgiveness. Part of you wants to angrily shout, "I forgive you," but that doesn't bring comfort when said in anger. We know we should say it. We know that we have no right anymore to hold on to anger because God's anger was turned away from me and them and instead turned to Jesus. So, in the moment, remembering how God has turned his anger away from me and remembering that Jesus took the full force of that anger in my place on the cross, I cannot do anything but forgive and change my attitude. The anger drops. I put my arm around my son, and I say with full confidence and assurance, "You are forgiven. I forgive you, and, more importantly, God forgives you." The anger is turned away, and we comfort with the salvation that comes from God.

Whenever we are scared that God is angry with us because of what we have done wrong, we go back to this well of salvation, to the God who tells us in no uncertain terms that his anger has turned away from us. We are forgiven. With joy, we can sing the praises, "Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The LORD, the LORD himself, is my strength and my defense; he has become my salvation." (verse 2) Sounds pretty much like the song of joy we sung after we confessed our sins today and then heard that God has forgiven us. "Surely, it is God who save me; I will trust in him and not be afraid. For the Lord is my stronghold and my sure defense, and he will be my Savior." (CW Psalm 31 refrain) This is why we keep music in church. These are the times worth singing about - even if you don't come in on the right note or the right beat. God is my salvation! We sing it with joy!

With the comfort God has comforted us with, we comfort others. Yes, we can be rightly angry over sins as God is, but we call people to repentance. When they repent, when they express sorrow over their sins, when they turn back to God, when they ask for forgiveness, our anger has to drop. We turn away from our anger because God turned his away from us. Then we announce that God is their salvation just as he is ours.

Is there someone who needs to hear this forgiveness from you? Is there someone with whom you have stayed angry? Do you know someone who beats themselves up over what they have done in the past, that they feel God's anger every day for their sins? Can you be the voice of the LORD telling them that the LORD's anger has turned away from them? Can you tell them that they are forgiven, that they are saved? As you look around church, who needs to hear these words today? Who struggles with the idea that God is hating on them, punishing them? Because you can share the comfort that the Lord's anger has turned away from them.

Yes, God rightly gets angry with us for our sins. He hates the sin and the sinner. But he took care of his anger by punishing Jesus for our sins. This is how he has turned his anger away from us. God is not angry with you. He loves you. He forgives you completely. He embraces you just like the father embraced his formerly wayward son. Comfort people with the same comfort you have received from God. Amen.

March 31, 2019
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