



First United Church of Oak Park

Divine Anger

Psalm 90

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I'm going to talk today about anger, specifically God's anger.

I confess, I am not much of a fan of depictions of God as angry. When the Bible talks about angry God, my first instinct is to try to work around it — let's look at this passage in its literary context, or set it in context of other ancient near-east deities, let's find some ways to deal with angry God that make God not so very angry. But the anger of God is far too widespread in the Bible to be swept under the rug completely. Emotion — including anger — emotion is one of the defining characteristics of the God of the Bible. Far from being a detached or emotionless computer running in the background of the universe to make sure physics doesn't break, the Bible talks about a God who is full of emotion. Joy, sadness, love, exultation, grief, and yes, anger. Very often anger.

Psalm 90 — with all of its beauty speaking of time like an ever-rolling stream soon bearing us all away — Psalm 90 also does a quite remarkable job of teaching about the anger of God. Psalm 90 explains all about God's anger — what leads to God's anger, where does God's anger lead. Psalm 90 explains all about this with an economy of words only possible through poetry.

The first attribute of God's anger is that God's anger is justified — God only becomes angry for good reason. As the Psalm puts it, "You O God have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your countenance." And what makes God most angry of all is when we harm one another, when we prevent our human kindred from flourishing. God knows what makes for human flourishing, and God wants for all of humanity to flourish. But all too often, human beings are guilty of setting people against one another, of conditioning the flourishing of one people on the degradation of another, behaving as if some of God's children do not deserve the good things of life, a safe place to live, a warm home to raise children, enough food to eat, an unspoiled world in which to enjoy being alive. When people harm one another, denying to other people those things that make

for human flourishing, this makes God angry, justifiably so. That is the first attribute of God's anger: It is justified.

The second attribute of God's anger is that it always points toward repair. That is God's end goal in anger, repairing the damage that has been done that made God angry in the first place, restoring what has been lost. The Psalm puts it this way: "God, make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us, and as many years as we have seen evil." God is not angry for anger's own sake, nor does God allow anger to become destructive, tearing down further that which is already laid low. What God does with anger is turn that immense fiery energy toward repairing the harm that originally made God angry. When human beings harm one another, it makes God angry, and what finally cools God's anger down again is when what was wrong is put to right. Repair: that is where God's anger is pointing.

Why am I talking about this? Why spend the better part of ten minutes squinting at a few verses of a Psalm to talk about God's anger? Well, because we need to understand anger. Anger is too widespread in our country to be swept under the rug completely. Anger is one of the defining characteristics of the moment we find ourselves in as a people. Anger is a non-negotiable part of our life right now, and the question is, what do we do with it? What I offer to you is that we should look to God for how to understand anger. We should model our own anger after the anger of God we see revealed in the bible, our anger ought to be like God's. That is, our anger should be justified, and we should point our anger toward repair.

Yes, we ought to embrace our anger when it is justified. If there are conditions in the world that prevent some of our human kindred from flourishing, then we are right to be angry about that. We are justified in being angry when we are nine months into a deadly pandemic and there is still no national strategy beyond hoping it will just go away like magic. When millions struggle simply to be able to eat, when pollution means my grandchildren will not enjoy the same beautiful world I do. These are the things that ought to make us angry, because they make God angry, too.

And! We ought to turn the object of our anger to repair of the wrong that has been done. We should not allow anger to become destructive, to seek to return evil for evil or to tear down what has already been brought low. Instead, we ought to let our anger become fuel for doing the hard work needed to repair damage that has been done. Oafishness on the national level as regards this pandemic ought to fuel our fire to be responsible here on a local level. That people in the

richest country in history have no food to eat — that should make us angry. And we should channel that anger into making sure people don't go hungry here, not when we have something to say about it.

I have not in the past been a big fan of biblical depictions of God as angry. But I'm really coming around on it, I've got to say. We live in an era defined by anger. As Christians, we should not pretend as if that is not so. We cannot opt out of the spirit of the age.

But in our anger, we can model our anger after the anger of God. We can hone our anger, forging it inside of ourselves, discerning when our anger is justified. We can direct our anger, making it fuel to complete the work of repair that divine anger demands. Yes, Christians, there is much to be angry about. If we model our anger after God's anger, then we can turn that to good. May God help us.