

Terminal Anger

sermon digest

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Jonah 3:10-4:5; James 1:16-21

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Walter Wink calls violence, “the spirituality of the modern world.” Violence has been accorded the status of a religion demanding obedience to death. Wink calls it “the myth of redemptive violence.” He targets the entertainment industry that has made a business of inciting public anger toward mythical characters representing darkness. Children are subjected repeatedly to cartoons, movies, and television dramas that arouse anger at the villains and allow vicarious revenge as the hero rises to the occasion and batters, shoots, stabs, blows up, humiliates, mutilates, and obliterates the devil enemy. By the age of eighteen, the average child has logged 36,000 hours of television including 15,000 murders. The audience is more than casual observer. We and our children are drawn into the act and repeatedly pass through the cycle of fear, anger, and violent revenge in doing battle with evil. Wink observes the bland comparison of the children’s sermon in worship with the sixteen acts of violence observed by our children every evening on TV. And, we wonder why domestic violence appears to be rising, or what could possibly possess a child to hide his father’s gun in a backpack and use it to kill an offending classmate in cold blood?

Anger is volatile. Phyllis Tribble observes that the Hebrew word for anger is the graphic picture of burning nostrils, breathing fire. The reference to God’s being “slow to anger” is literally, “having long nostrils.” In the Old Testament anger is usually kindled, suggesting a fire with the potential to destroy a forest.

Yale University has a Jonathon Edwards Center that houses the sermons and papers of the 18th century Congregational Pastor identified with the Great Awakening in early U.S. history. Edwards was well-educated, a dignified pastor who always wore a wig in the pulpit. He was educated at Yale and shortly before his death instated as president of the College of New Jersey, later to become Princeton University. His famous sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” was required reading in my high school. I was particularly shocked by the description of sinners dangled over the fires of hell like a spider and a description of a God whose “wrath towards you burns like fire.” Although the nearsighted preacher read from a manuscript, people cried aloud during his sermons and women fainted. Although Edwards was best known for his angry God sermon, critics note that it does not represent all of his preaching.

The 1949 Los Angeles Billy Graham crusade launched Graham into the public light and laid the foundation for his long career. As the story goes, William Randolph Hearst heard Graham bash communism in a sermon and sent a note to his newspapers to “puff Graham.” Toward the end of the LA crusade, Graham chose to read Jonathon Edwards’ famous sermon on the July 8th anniversary of its original presentation and apply the message to the current situation in Los Angeles. The commentary from the Yale Center noted that Graham soft-peddled some of Edwards’ strongest language and described a God of grace and patience that could not be found in the original. Biographer of Billy Graham, Ralph Martin, cited Graham’s key belief in the God of the second chance, a God of grace and forgiveness.

One of my mentors at Southern Seminary was Dale Moody. He came out of Texas and one of the most rigid Fundamentalist schools in the country to graduate from Southern and eventually to complete a Ph.D. at Oxford in England. Like most of us, he always carried a piece of his past around with him. This eloquent professor, scholarly author of numerous works in theology, who studied with some of the greatest minds of the 20th century, seemed always to have a bit of the fire and brimstone from his youth whenever he stepped into the pulpit. In class or in public, he relished a good scrap over a question of doctrine and would never leave an accusation or misrepresentation of his faith unanswered. Our seminar on the theology of God had turned to the angry God of Jonathon Edwards. Moody told about an experience at Oxford. One of his classmates was late to class. As he fumbled to get his notebook open, he whispered to Moody in a strong British accent, “Has he gotten to the wrath?” Moody laughed about the popular subject of divine wrath that skirted the edges of sadism among some of the English students.

In *When Religion Becomes Evil*, Charles Kimball identifies the declaration of holy war as one of five signs of corrupt religion. Until a few years ago, most of us had never heard of an Islamic *jihad*. It is an Arabic word identified with “holy war.” *Jihad* actually means “to struggle” or “striving in the way of God.” For the majority of Muslims, *jihad* applies to a personal struggle of the heart, the hand, and the tongue and has nothing to do with acts of violence against others. Since September 11, 2001, the word has been identified with the worst kind of evil. In our time, terrorism and acts of violence against innocent victims has created a global fear of religion as a primary cause of violence. Can violence ever be justified by one person or by one group against another? Certainly violence in the name of God is beyond comprehension to anyone who believes in the God of love and peace.

Prof of English at Northwestern University Regina M. Schwartz wrote *The Curse of Cain* suggesting that an exclusive, intolerant monotheism may be behind the legacy of violence in our time. There is anger, then there

is ANGER. The potential for violence in religion is terrorizing the world, and we have to ask why the worst of the worst seems to come out of the monotheistic religions of Abraham.

Anger raises a question of justice. The Old Testament pulls back the curtain on Wink's myth of redemptive violence in primitive biblical cultures without any assistance from the modern media. The drive to get revenge, the burning anger at someone or some group that we deem to be the enemy, and determination to see the enemy destroyed seems to come with being human. Terminal anger has been around a long time. It was not invented by TV and movies, but virulent anger is certainly exacerbated by the media. If terminal anger is just doing what comes naturally, perhaps we ought to work on the control side of anger.

Jonah has accepted annihilation as God's punishment for his defiant anger toward God. The issue comes to rest on a questions directed to Jonah twice in the last chapter of the book: "Is it right for you to be angry?" The NIV translates this passage: "Have you any right to be angry?" The question is rhetorical; the answer is contained in the question. But it also puts the spotlight on the right issue. Is this anger justified? Anger is not evil in and of itself. Jonah has plenty of biblical precedence to demand God's wrath to bring justice to bear against the Ninevites. But Jonah is not dealing here with the common understanding of God. Jonah's description of God, "a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing," does not really fit with the God who brought down fire on Sodom and Gomorrah. James' counsel to Christians of the first century, "be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness," seems incongruent with the righteous indignation of Jesus in cleansing the Temple or his anger at the Pharisees. The problem is not that Jonah is angry. The problem is anger that is not right, unrighteous anger.

The Jonah story runs like a scene from the 1950's sitcom, "Father Knows Best." God is the Robert Young-type wise parent offering calm counsel, while Jonah is the pouting child demanding his own way. Like a child, *Jonah is angry at God for not being angry with Nineveh*. Jonah's anger goes all the way back to the beginning when God called Jonah to warn Nineveh and Jonah set out to escape to Tarshish. From the beginning, Jonah preferred to let fire and brimstone rain down on this evil city without any warning. According to Jonah, some people do not deserve advance warning or an opportunity to repent. For Nineveh it was strike three—no place left for grace.

Finally Jonah's anger at Nineveh is redirected toward God. Like a child, Jonah demands justice, and justice demands destruction. Someone has to go. If not Nineveh, then it must be Jonah. Jonah prefers a God of holy intolerance, who has zero-tolerance for Assyrians, thus, zero-tolerance for one like Jonah who defies orders. Jonah prays, "O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." Perhaps the most infuriating action of God in the whole story is not just the grace shown toward the enemy, Nineveh; God demonstrated grace toward Jonah.

Andy Lester was a classmate in seminary and later a professor of pastoral care at Southern Seminary and Brite Divinity School. Driving home from a speaking engagement, Andy was caught in a traffic jam and noticed in his mirror a red Cherokee cutting across lanes to rush ahead of the slowing traffic. Then, the Cherokee landed directly behind Andy. He immediately felt a surge of heat in his body and the hair raised on his neck. He reacted to the injustice of cutting in line and to the wanton endangerment involved in reckless driving. Finally the competitive male spirit took over as he thought, "that fool is trying to beat me to Forth Worth." He painted the man in the red Cherokee as immature, dangerous, and competitive—sufficient justification for anger.

When the traffic came to a complete stop and Andy sat in his car waiting for the traffic to move, he remembered the time that his daughter was rushed into emergency surgery, and he was called to the hospital. Then he thought, "maybe the guy in the red Cherokee is on an emergency." As he adjusted his story, he pulled over to the side and allowed the driver to move past him in line.

In order to break the cycle of violence that threatens to destroy the world, we need to listen to the word of Christ to find a better way to deal with enemies than anger. James, perhaps the brother of Jesus, recognized the volatile nature of uncontrolled anger and called for stewardship of emotions in the church. It comes down to a simple word taken from the pages of public education. We need to have zero-tolerance for zero-tolerance.