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Readings: [Jeremiah 23:1-6](http://bible.oremus.org?passage=Jeremiah+23:1-6) & Canticle [16](http://satucket.com/lectionary/Canticle16.htm) ;[Colossians 1:11-20](http://bible.oremus.org?passage=Colossians+1:11-20); [Luke 23:33-43](http://bible.oremus.org?passage=Luke+23:35-43)

**“Holy Anger”**

So, the readings this week. This Sunday before Thanksgiving, well-deserved time off, big family gatherings, joyous thanks-giving…we have the crucifixion scene. We see Jesus, hung on the cross. We hear him, as he hangs, bolts in his hands and feet, requesting that God forgive those who have put him there, as they still taunt him from below. We wonder, alongside the crowd, if he is who he says he is, why didn’t he save himself? And, in the letter to the Colossians, we are asked to “endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father.”

In preparation for Advent, where we will await the birth of the innocent, holy infant by whom the entire world will be saved, these readings seem to build an image of Christ as humble, forgiving, radically accepting. Most certainly, I stand by this image of our Christ.

Yet, what I think we may also come away with by the humble death and birth of Christ, is an image of Jesus as meek and passive, perhaps even submissive. This is the dichotomy we often make, isn’t it, between the Old Testament and the New? The violent, wrathful God of the Old Testament vs. the gentle, loving God, Jesus, of the New? This is what the tradition, in some ways, has encouraged us to, as we take up the cross, right? Take up the cross obediently, joyously, without complaint, we are told.

I grew up as the middle child of three, and the role that I came to play in our family system was that of peacemaker and nurturer. I was the “middle-man” between angry siblings, or sometimes between angry parents and angry siblings…But, I, myself, did not get angry. Further, I was the “good” kid. Both my sister and brother were somewhat challenging to their teachers, but I was “good.” Perfect attendance. Well-behaved. Conscientious about my assignments.

In keeping with this role, my understanding of Jesus grew over time to be, by adolescence, this meek and mild Jesus…the forgiving Jesus…the radically welcoming Jesus…and yes, the passive, naïve, submissive, “good” Jesus who “turns the other cheek” and “endures everything with patience, joyfully giving thanks to the Father.”

So, when my parents divorced during my teenage years, although anger is among the important steps to grieving, I could not get angry. Patient, loving, forgiving, “good” people don’t get angry.

Everyone around me was falling apart, and I had the image of this Jesus on the cross guiding me! Like a good Christian adolescent of the late 80’s, I asked myself, what would Jesus do? WWJD? The acceptable answer to WWJD was not “yell and scream! tear stuff up! Bust in a door!” The answer was that Jesus would nurture…Jesus would forgive…Jesus would endure, as joyfully as possible. I did not get angry.

But angry got me! Although I didn’t express my anger, it was there. Oh, it was there.

This anger, when unexpressed by me, turned inward—I developed anorexia. Unable to allow myself to be angry, I submitted to the pain around me—my parents’ pain, my siblings’ pain, my own pain—and exacted the price on my body. I slowly wasted away—unable to BE fully. As my internal self was diminished, so was my physical self.

Unexpressed anger manifests differently for each of us—for me it was anorexia…for others it is depression or anxiety, or hopelessness, or disengagement, or the desire to numb oneself.

But, is anger really “unholy?” Do only “mean people” get angry? Most certainly not. Anger is not unholy—quite the opposite. Much of our anger is divinely given. Anger can signify to us that an injustice is occurring, either against ourselves, or against another. In a situation where something is wrong and needs to change, anger can move us out of complacency, out of feeling overwhelmed or exhausted, to action. Anger can liberate.

Anger can not only liberate, but can also be a deep expression of love. Rosemarie Buxton in her theology of anger points out that the very fact of our anger indicates that passionate love is present. For, as she says, we do not feel passionate about things we don’t care about. Anger’s companion is most often NOT hatred, as we usually assume, but love. On a similar note, scholar of Christian ethics Beverly Wildung Harrison has said of anger that anger expressed directly is a mode of taking the other seriously, of caring.

This holy anger—anger as liberating, passionate love—is just as much part of the Jesus story as are his humble birth and death. WWJD? Well, according to much of the Gospels, he would get angry! We have the story of Jesus’ cleansing of the temple, where he throws over the tables of the money changers and drives out those selling livestock, wounded at seeing what the entire Temple system has become—an opportunity to squeeze more money out of the peasant class and enhance the link between God and the monarchy. Out of love for his people, out of his experience of the oppression they are suffering at the hands of the Temple elite and the monarchy—his anger seeks to liberate! We have substantial further evidence of his holy anger. There are the numerous confrontations between Jesus and the Scribes and Pharisees, where Jesus’ anger at the transformation of God’s covenantal law, the beloved Torah, from a gift of God to enable His people’s loving relationship with Him and each other to a rulebook to be followed by the head, but not engaged by the heart, is very clear. Jesus, wholly good, radically accepting, forgiving, gets angry.

So, how do we, we who may feel that loving, “good” people don’t get angry, or we, who have gotten angry in the past but may have been taken over by its force and been driven to use it to hurt—how do we learn to speak our anger out of love? How do we follow in the footsteps of our Christ, and utilize anger constructively, rather than destructively? As Carroll Saussy has framed it in her work on the faithful use of anger, how do we use the power of our anger for the sake of just relations?

Certainly, not all of our anger is holy. I, for sure, get angry out of pettiness, fatigue, self-centeredness. The task is to discern when our anger is holy anger, anger stemming from passionate love, and when our anger is small-minded anger. Saussy suggests three steps:

The 1st is to “hear the call” of our anger—for this, we need to spend time with our experience of anger to understand ourselves and the situation. We need to retreat, and reflect. We can only do this once we have recognized that we are angry, though. So, we need to begin to pay attention to what “angry” feels like to us—each of our bodies has its own way of feeling anger. For some it will be a faster heartbeat, a rush of energy—for others, it may be the opposite; it may be a sudden tiredness and urge to leave the situation.

Once we have spent some time noticing, and then trying to understand the situation, Saussy says we need to “determine whether this is a call to action or a call to surrender.” Is it liberating, passionate anger that needs to be harnessed into action, or is it small-minded anger that needs to be let go of?

Once we know that, we need to figure out a response. If we need to let go of it, how will we do that? For as we have seen, anger unexpressed will eat us up.

If it is anger that is yearning to liberate, what is the next step that we need to take with it?

In addition to asking each of us, personally, to explore our deep places for signs of that holy anger, I ask us a community to do the same. What are we, the St. Paul’s community, angry about, and can we express it? I have already experienced St. Paul’s to be a place where we love radically through acceptance, generosity, forgiveness. But, is this place also a place where we can be angry? Where are we called to deepen our relationships—with each other and with those of our wider community--through passionately felt, and respectfully and carefully expressed anger? What or who are we called to liberate?

May we, when we are so called, walk humbly, and angrily, with our God. AMEN.