

Day 12: Sunday, Introduction of Anger

Raging Against Loss

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”—Psalm 22:1

Strong emotions surface in grief, such as sadness, panic, hurt and loneliness. But anger is the strong emotion that is most important to name as natural and necessary, because it's the feeling we most often negate.

Anger can be scary, a raging fire that we fear will get out of control. As Kübler-Ross and Kessler write in *On Grief and Grieving*, anger “has no limits. It can extend not only to your friends, the doctors, your family, yourself, and your loved one who died, but also to God.” We often tell ourselves we shouldn't feel this anger, particularly when we turn our anger against our loved one who has died: How could you leave me? Or against God: How could you take this life? We also don't know how to respond to the dying when they express their anger.

In *On Death and Dying*, Kübler-Ross said a mistake people often make when caring for the dying is to take their anger personally. But a dying patient who lashes out at their caregiver or raises their voice and makes demands of their family is more likely angry over the fact that they are dying than they are at the people around her. Underneath anger lies pain, and a person's anger can serve them emotionally by giving them strength, a bridge over the sea of grief — a structure to the absence and nothingness of loss. Understanding the necessary role that anger plays in the stages of grief can lead caregivers to be more understanding and patient with the dying, and it can help the dying to be more patient and forgiving with themselves.

Prayer: *O God, our Alpha and Omega, our beginning and our end, hear our prayers for those who rage against the loss that comes with death. Grant them the comfort and strength of knowing that nothing – in life or death – can separate them from your love. Amen.*

Teri

Day 13: Monday

Melted and Molded by Love

“[These trials have come] so that the genuineness of your faith – being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.”—1 Peter 1:7

Years ago, I visited a shop in Bethlehem selling beautiful glass Christmas ornaments.

Their tags explained how the Israeli Defense Force's 2002 siege of the Church of the Nativity – located in Bethlehem in the West Bank – left a lot of shattered glass lying around.

A group of Bethlehem Lutherans decided to pick it up. They put the glass through a firing process that softened the jagged edges and refashioned the shards into Christmas ornaments.

What they envisioned was a day when these ornaments could go on trees as a symbol of surprising friendship among those who once shot bullets at each other. I myself now have one of these ornaments, and it serves as an annual reminder about a different kind of peace.

To be sure, ornament hanging is easy. With all that we currently hold and face, many of us may not be in a place where we can channel anger into creative redemption and hope.

At the same time – as we remember afresh where the road of long-harbored anger eventually leads – perhaps we can at least consider a few questions.

What if we chose to look afresh upon the Jesus who went to the cross to take jagged, rough-edged and broken people . . . and we forgave them?

What if we let ourselves receive afresh the embrace of this Jesus, who chooses to love us unto a surprising transformation?

How can we place our anger before God's refining fire?

One day yet, we may discover that our hands cannot help but fashion beauty from the rubble. For always – eventually – this is what the hands of Christ are about.

Prayer: Forgiving God, take my pain, my anger and all the hard places within. Let love melt me and mold me. May the fire that comes through my life be bold, redemptive and enemy-loving. In Christ's name I pray. Amen.

Bobby

Day 14: Tuesday

Meeting Anger with Empathy

"As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and he began to teach them many things."—Mark 6:34

One morning a congregant arrived at my office and demanded, "Who's in charge of that new sign out front?"

"Buildings and Grounds put it up to advertise our worship services," I said.

"Oh, pass the buck, huh!" he exclaimed, throwing up his hands. "Well, then you must have noticed it looks terrible."

He raised his voice for the entire office to hear. "Does no one here care how this church looks to other people? Apparently the pastor is too important to do lowly tasks like straightening a sign!"

He then left.

A young pastor at the time, I was deeply shaken. I went to a mentor of mine, and when I tried to tell the story I simply began sobbing. What had I done? What had I not done? What is wrong with our sign?

"Bobby," this mentor said as I eventually quieted. "Do you think he blew into your office with that level of anger . . . over one sign?"

The questions invited a new thought: What if the anger was really grief? What if this long-time member who had poured his heart into the church was wondering whether anyone would carry the church after he was gone? What if – with his ailing wife at home – he wondered whether anyone was noticing *him* any longer?

I reconciled with the congregant a week later. It was not easy. It was also quite powerful.

But reconciliation wouldn't have happened without my mentor drawing me from a place of stunned righteousness into a place of empathetic humility.

What if the anger is grief?

Prayer: Patient God, thank you for meeting my anger and frustration with love. Help me meet the anger and frustration of those around me with that same empathy and embrace. In Christ's name I pray. Amen.

Bobby

Day 15: Wednesday

"My complaint is bitter; his hand is heavy despite my groaning. Oh, that I knew where I might find him."—Job 23:2-3

In the back of Kate Bowler's book *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved*, she includes a helpful appendix listing things people shouldn't say to someone suffering with cancer or any other terminal disease.

"Everything happens for a reason" is at the top of Bowler's restricted list:

The only thing worse than saying this is pretending that you know the reason. I've had hundreds of people tell me the reason for my cancer. Because of my sin. Because of my unfaithfulness. Because God is fair. Because God is unfair. Because of my aversion to Brussels sprouts. . . . When someone is drowning, the only thing worse

than failing to throw them a life preserver is handing them a reason.

Oftentimes, when people say things like “everything happens for a reason” to someone who is dying or grieving, the idea arises out of their own discomfort with the other person’s suffering — and with the anger that suffering ignites.

Bowler’s honesty is refreshing and necessary. We trivialize suffering with shallow clichés. Only when we are honest about our pain, only when we give ourselves and others the freedom to feel all the emotions that come with pain — including anger — are we able to progress to acceptance.

Suffering is on full display in the book of Job, suffering and anger. Job rails against God and against his unjust suffering. He demands an audience with God to answer all his questions about why. God doesn’t answer Job’s questions, but neither does God back away from his anger. Job is not placated or denied — which in itself is healing. This biblical text gives us permission to be honest with God. Job reveals a God who doesn’t back off, grow uncomfortable or seek to avoid. God loves us, no matter what.

Prayer: O God who hears our complaints and cries, we praise you for the ways you show up for us in love, guiding us to healing and hope. Amen.

Teri

Day 16: Thursday

God Hears Our Cries

“I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish.”—Philippians 3:8

When my friend Elizabeth’s cancer returned, she was angry — so upset by the news and the battle against a disease that just wouldn’t stop taking so much from her . . . her energy, her breath, the morning walks she cherished with her dog, Pepper. In the face of her rage, I struggled to find ways to respond. Elizabeth’s anger was completely understandable, but also uncomfortable. It felt like a raging house fire that I instinctively wanted to put out, douse with water, to save my friend from this inferno.

I fought this instinct. I held back the platitudes rising to my lips: *There, there, Elizabeth, don’t be angry, everything will be okay.*

Everything was not going to be okay.

Elizabeth, an Episcopal priest, was a champion curser. Better than a sailor. When I invited her to join my writing group of women ministers, she asked, “Would this group be okay with a little cursing?” I laughed and said yes. Little did I know what “a little cursing” actually meant.

As Elizabeth’s cancer progressed, and with it her anger over her approaching death, our writer’s group accompanied our friend in her cursing. What the cancer, go to and leave our friend alone. Our text threads and emails turned into litanies of foul, angry curses against the disease that was stealing our friend.

I remember my New Testament professor’s mischievous grin as he taught us that the Greek word in Philippians 3:8 that is usually translated as “rubbish” would more accurately be translated as the stronger, less polite “crap” or worse. Paul’s call to follow Christ cost him economically, socially, politically—even physically, as he was imprisoned and beaten. I imagine Paul grieved these losses angrily, cursing them as rubbish. But no loss could surpass all he gained through Christ.

My dear friend Elizabeth’s cancer was rubbish. But God did not abandon her in her pain. And I can’t imagine God, angered by all injustice, put off by my friend’s cursing of cancer. Now she rests in Christ’s embrace, a gift of unsurpassed value.

Prayer: God who rages against unjust suffering, hear the angry cries and cursing of your grieving people. In the warmth of Christ’s embrace, help us heal from loss. Amen.

Teri

Day 17: Friday

Sitting with Discomfort

"[Job's friends] sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great."—Job 2:13

When I lost my first pregnancy, well-meaning people said all sorts of horrible things:

"Don't worry, you can have more children."

"It's for the best, something was obviously wrong with it."

"God had another plan for that baby."

"Lots of people live meaningful lives without children."

"I guess it wasn't meant to be."

And of course, the classic: "Everything happens for a reason." (If you have seriously never read Kate Bowler's *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved*, see Teri's reflection from this past Wednesday.)

Listening to one of my many rants about the things people say, a friend pointed me to Job, chapter 2. "You know," she said, "Job's friends got it right, for the first seven days. And then they opened their mouths."

It's true. We are uncomfortable with silence, especially silence in the face of unfathomable loss. Witnessing the suffering of someone we love makes us uncomfortable, so we open our mouths and try to resolve the discomfort. Spoiler alert: Trying to resolve someone's discomfort when they are in the thick of grief is always a bad decision.

Job's expression of anger at God is what made his friends feel compelled to speak. For me, it was my people's responses to my loss that propelled me into my anger phase. In both cases – all cases – the righteous protest against God unsettles our collective emotional equilibrium. Grief disabuses us of our illusions of control.

We need great courage to sit in the silence of discomfort and let anger be. Our anger, our loved one's anger, God's anger. Let's give it a try.

Prayer: God who accepts us just as we are, help me hold and bear witness to anger — my own and that of the people around me. Free me from the compulsion to justify and fix. Help me listen to what anger might teach me. Amen.

Ginna

Day 18: Saturday

Channeling Anger

"Hear this, you who trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, . . . buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals."—Amos 8:4, 6

Sometimes our anger is just there to be felt. At other times, anger is a message about what God is calling us to do.

I am uncomfortable with how often Scripture talks about God's anger, but I cannot deny its presence. In the biblical tradition, God's anger is an energetic force, responding to injustice and drawing the world today ever closer to the world God intended.

My miscarriage was not simple, medically speaking. Few are. For me, follow-up care required multiple surgical and medical interventions. Even as the medical process prolonged the grief, I was profoundly grateful to live in New Mexico, a state where I could receive the care I needed without legal limitations or repercussions.

Then my gratitude turned to anger. Anger that I had access to health care that my friends in other states did not. Anger that women's reproductive health has been turned into a political talking point rather than the sacred process of creat-

ing new life that it always has been. Anger because I could not stop the suffering.

Sometimes God speaks to us through our anger. On one of those nights when my anger woke me at 3 a.m., I remembered a faith-based nonprofit in New Mexico that offers rides and accompaniment to people who come from out of state to receive emergency reproductive health care. The organization is always looking for drivers, volunteers and ministers to offer support.

Here was my opportunity. My grief and trauma uniquely equipped me for this work. God reached me through my anger and issued me a call.

What in your life and community has you riled up? Feel that energy, teeming within you. What in it is holy? Where might it be channeled?

Prayer: "Spirit, Spirit of restlessness, stir me from placidness, wind, wind on the sea" (Glory to God, no. 291).

Ginna