

PASTOR'S NOTES. Fear and an Angry God, Part 3

Does God get angry? I suppose the first time this random thought popped in my head I dismissed it as silly... of course God gets angry. People have told me, preachers have preached it, all my life I heard that God is angry. And without even looking I could think of several passages in the Bible that talk about God's anger or the "wrath of God" (that phrase actually occurs 9 times in the New Testament, 5 in Revelation, 3 in the letters of Paul, and once in John). So it seemed like a silly thought.

But then I thought about how we project human attributes onto God – or for that matter, how humans have always projected onto the Gods:

Since you saw no form when the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire, take care and watch yourselves closely, so that you do not act corruptly by making an idol for yourselves, in the form of any figure... (Deuteronomy 4:15-16a, NRSV)

Throughout the Bible, you will find words like "the hand of God," "the eyes of God," "the bosom of God," "the heart of God," "the face of God," even "the backside of God (Exodus 33:23)." I have heard persons say that God has none of these things. That's not quite accurate – it would be better to say that we don't know, since we can only experience God through our human senses. But it is still true that these are projections from us – our attempts to describe God in ways that make Him (even the "Him") more understandable to us.

So what about God being jealous (Exodus 20:5), sorry (Genesis 6:6), or angry? Are these also just attempts to make Him more understandable, to be able to better identify with Him?

The definition I prefer for anger is "a violation of our sense of justice." (This from Gary Chapman's book, *Anger*.) We can certainly agree that God has a sense of justice, and that human beings have violated it time and time again. So from our perspective, it makes perfect sense that God would be angry. In fact, it is not hard to imagine that He would be angry just about all the time, considering that every second in thousands of places people are unjust.

There has been a tradition of this view of God, especially in this country. When people talk about the Great Awakening, the religious revival in America, they point to the signature sermon of Jonathan Edwards in 1741, "Sinners in the hands of an angry God." Most of you reading this are well aware of your own guilt and sin, and so you would have no trouble thinking that if God doesn't *feel* angry, at least He *should*.

See, the name of the LORD comes from far away, burning with His anger, and in thick rising smoke; His lips are full of indignation, and His tongue is like a devouring fire... (Isaiah 30:27, NRSV)

Still, there is a problem with this characterization of God. God has had ample opportunity to act on this anger. Surely He must have known when giving human beings the freedom of choice that they would behave this way. Throughout the Bible story, even after their unfaithfulness, God never gives up on Israel. But the biggest problem with this idea of God being consumed with anger against us is that it denies even the plausibility of God coming to us in Jesus Christ.

You see the problem here, right? God can't be angry at us in the way we get angry at each other, because no one ever loves unselfishly out of anger. And He certainly does not come and die in the flesh.

Even in the Old Testament this is acknowledged. God is often described as "slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" (Exodus 34:6; Numbers 14:18; Nehemiah 9:17; Psalm 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2).

If you searched in the King James Bible for "fear not," you would find 63 verses. Of those, 26 of those are spoken by God, either directly or through a prophet or angel. Additionally, 6 are words of reassurance from Jesus. If you were to read those verses (hint, hint), you probably would not get the sense that God is mostly angry at us.

[Jesus says] "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."
(Luke 12:32, NRSV)

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because He first loved us.
(1 John 4:18-19, NRSV)

So what does this tell us about "the fear of the Lord?" I can say that "God would rather die than for any of us to end up in Hell," and technically you cannot disagree, because that is the story of Christ. But still most of us, especially my fellow pastors, would hesitate a bit, and want to say, "yes, but..." We have been so conditioned to think that God needs to be feared because of His anger and because we deserve punishment. And I share some of that hesitation, since I as well don't want to fall into taking God for granted or thinking of Him as "just a friend" and less than Who He is.

I think this is why it has always been good advice to begin our prayers by turning our focus on God. This is the model given to us in the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13; also Luke 11:2-4). When we start our prayer by turning from ourselves and try to grasp the One so far above and beyond us, and yet so near to us... for me, anyway, it does inspire wonder and awe (which is a healthy form of fear). And as I continue by praying for me, I do see my sin, guilt, and unworthiness, and my need for forgiveness, but I also see that I and my issues are pretty insignificant in His universe, and yet here He is, listening to my prayer, whether or not I am listening to Him.

Perhaps for many of us, fear of an angry God is what shocked us into becoming Christian in the first place. But I believe the scripture is clear that this is not where God wants any of us to stay. So my prayer for all of us is that we continue to ask for and seek that perfect love that casts out fear. Our lives might not get easier as far as the outward circumstances, but our experience of life will be all the more one of adventure and wonder.

Yours in Christ,

