

PASTOR'S NOTES. Fear and an Angry God, Part 4

I really did think that I was done with this series... but a couple of further thoughts occurred to me regarding the matter of God's anger. First is, what is it that makes God the angriest? I would propose this parable Jesus tells in Matthew 18 to be the best example. A slave owes an enormous debt to his master, but the master forgives it. But then this slave has a person in debt to him and he will not forgive that debt, so...

"Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?'

And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So My heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."
(Matthew 18:32-35, NRSV)

Notice that here the master is so angry he actually un-forgives the debt and Jesus says that this is the way our God is. We don't hear people talk about God forgiving us and then un-forgiving later, and perhaps Jesus is purposely overstating, and this doesn't actually happen. But He is emphatic that there are few things worse than not forgiving your brother or sister. After all, He mentions this in another place:

"For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

(Matthew 6:14-15, NRSV)

As a parent, this makes sense to me. I could think of nothing more infuriating than for one of my children acting (or even thinking) that they are better than the others, or the others don't matter. Yet to the God for whom all of us are meant to be His children, this has been the norm over the centuries. It is easy to imagine God being angry all the time.

But then I am reminded of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35), and Jesus joins them just as if He were a stranger, and pretends to know nothing about this Jesus who was crucified. It seems like the Lord is deliberately messing with these guys, just for fun. When they finally recognize Him, He vanishes. Later when a group of disciples are out in a boat (John 21:1-14) He again pretends to be a stranger offering unsolicited advice. And while the disciples went from no fish to too many fish, when they get back to the shore, Jesus has already has other fish cooking.

I see a similar playfulness in the way God relates to Abraham, much earlier:

When Abram was ninety-nine years old the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before Me, and be blameless, that I may make My covenant between Me and you, and may multiply you greatly."

Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him,

"Behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations."
(Genesis 17:1-5, ESV)

One thing we miss when we read Bible passages with proper names is that in English most of our names are foreign. Unless your daughter is named “Faith” or “Heaven,” our names usually came from another language and you can look up what they mean. So English translators of the Bible usually do not translate people’s names. But this is a mistake. If I were to fully translate verse 5 above, it reads like this:

“Behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called ‘Exalted Father’, but your name shall be ‘Father of a multitude’, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.”

(Genesis 17:5, ESV, fully translated)

Imagine this 99-year-old man who has been called ‘Exalted Father’ all his life (even when he was a child), and had one child when he was 87 years old. Now he is to tell people they should call him by his new name, ‘Father of a multitude.’ It would have been interesting to see the reactions of the people. It gets worse when he explains to all the men who work for him the words of Genesis 17:9-13.

‘Father of a multitude’ names his son ‘Laughter’ (Isaac), because both mother and father laughed when they heard they were having a child at 90 and 99. But that means that poor ‘Laughter’ had to live with that name all his life, while others had names like ‘King,’ ‘God’s servant’ and so on.

Maybe that’s why Jesus used nicknames for His closest disciples. The scriptures say He called James and John ‘Sons of Thunder’ (Mark 3:17) and He called Simon ‘Rock’ (that is, Peter – Mark 3:16; Luke 6:14; Matthew 16:18). We can only guess at what these were supposed to mean, but usually nicknames like these are playful. This doesn’t sound like someone who is angry all the time.

From a creation that He calls good in Genesis 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 31, to the final image in Revelation:

“See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be His peoples, and God himself will be with them; He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”

(Revelation 21:3-4, NRSV)

What I see is a God Who has every reason to be angry, by our human sense, because we neither give Him the respect He deserves, nor do we respect His image in other people and the rest of His creation. Yet that we are able to continue to exist in a beautiful world and able to build beautiful friendships in spite of the unfairness and injustice bears witness to a God Who is Love (1 John 4:8, 16). So my intent in this series of articles has been, not that we don’t take God’s anger seriously, but that we marvel at how NOT angry God is most of the time, and because of that our lives don’t have to be dominated by anger and fear.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'Ken' written in a cursive style.