

Bringing our anger into conversation with Jesus

Series: Keeping Hearts Alive For The Long Run

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Mental health, Anger

Jonah 4

So Jesus made this bold invitation. 'Come to me all who are weary and tired of the heavy burdens you carry and I will give you rest'. We started a journey, taking him seriously to keep our hearts alive in this season. This season that has been heavy for all of us and even crushing for others. A heavy season; spiritually, economically, physically, socially and also on our mental health.

How do we keep our hearts alive in this season? But not just for this season but for the long run. I started with the baseline that we are as alive as the conversations about our reality that we are having with Jesus. He is inviting us to be present to our reality and bring it into conversation with him. Not deny it, not sugar coat it, bring it into conversation with him. Today we will talk about anger.

Anger has been quite a commonplace for people in this season. Some people are finding themselves more irritable or facing anger that had been bottled up for a long time unaddressed. And quite so.

There is a lot of grief to be dealt with both communal and personal. There is a lot of uncertainty. There is a lot of time to be at home and become aware of all the things we had not paid attention to. We are home longer, some with people with whom we had not invested in our relationship and we are being irritable more.

To keep our hearts alive in this season, we have to bring anger whenever it shows up into conversation with God. Anger has a way of destroying our bodies as the stress hormones and cortisol builds up and become a threat to our hearts. It is a threat to relationships and communities and even our spiritual life. We see that as Jesus even says it is as bad as murder.

I want to invite you into the story of another character in the Bible who got so angry with God. So angry he wanted to die. Here is a bit of the background: This guy was sent to preach to a city called Nineveh but he did not like the idea. He chooses to go a different direction running away from God. He can't get too far and is swallowed up by a big fish. We often get stuck there and miss the story. The story is about a merciful God. This guy, on the other hand, had to get to the lowest depths to even obey God. Nothing new to many of us.

He goes and preaches the shortest sermon to this city. He Does not seem to invest much. Then he sits outside the city and waits to see God's judgement fall on the city. Instead, the

inhabitants of this city repent and turn back to God and He forgives them. And our character is not happy at all.

You're now all caught up. Here is the where we pick the story from in Jonah 4.

But to Jonah, this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. 2 He prayed to the Lord, "Isn't this what I said, Lord when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. 3 Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."

4 But the Lord replied, "Is it right for you to be angry?"

5 Jonah had gone out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. 6 Then the Lord God provided a leafy plant[a] and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the plant. 7 But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered. 8 When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, "It would be better for me to die than to live."

9 But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?"

"It is," he said. "And I'm so angry I wish I were dead."

10 But the Lord said, "You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. 11 And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?"

Really Jonah? Now you want to die? But isn't that what anger does? It makes us have a disproportionate response. Anger is expressed in different ways. There is the explosive anger that can even turn violent.

There is anger that has been turned inward. Cold anger is hidden behind a smile and a shake of hands. Covering very bitter conversations in the mind and even violent thoughts.

So Jonah is right there. Very angry. But why is Jonah really angry? At first, he says he is angry at God for being merciful then he is angry at God for what he thinks was God lacking mercy for a plant.

The real problem is not God's mercy, the real problem is how Jonah feels about the people of this city. Chances are if it were any other city, he would have been begging God to show mercy. You see the people of this city had been ruling Jonah's people. And they had been very unkind to them. Jonah thinks that he and his people have been more righteous. Jonah wants vindication.

Anger is a secondary emotion. It is always indicating that there is something else. A primary reason that needs attention.

A few years back I was doing baptisms for the first time. That Sunday morning had a bit of excitement and expectation. But also nerves. It was quite an important Sunday. I had officially taken over the leadership of this church.

It was also such an odd Sunday. The pastors I was taking over from were such great friends of mine and I loved them so much. AT this point they only had two weeks left in Kenya. That morning, however, there was just this weird tension between Melody and myself from the start.

When we got to the baptisms I was going into the water and someone stopped me. I was still wired with my microphone, my phone and wallets still in my pockets. I am amazed that I had remembered to take off my shoes. And the thing is when I focusing on really small things I become very forgetful. So I guess this was the nerves.

So Adam, her husband and then lead pastor, notices that I had not carried a towel and asks her to get it. And she was like, “No, he should’ve been better prepared.” So the whole church is in full celebration but the 3 of us are just caught up in this thing.

We lived in the same compound and used to hang out together sometimes in the evenings. Especially for a single guy that is always advantageous coz you get free food and drink. But we just did this thing where we avoid each other. Coz we were angry at each other.

But a man can only stay too long without free food. So I snuck in for a quick plate but just wanted to serve on a plate and get out of their house. She was wise and very mature. She said, “Hey, I think there is something not right between us and we need to talk.”

I was and still am so immature in so many ways. That day I said, “No we are fine!”. Just did not wanna deal with it. But she said something very true. She apologised for taking her anger out on me. But this is what she said that stuck with me.

“In dealing with all the emotions that come with saying goodbye, it is sometimes easier to become angry than deal with them. We are going to miss you and that is what I really should be saying.”

She had noticed that her anger towards me was a secondary emotion. It was really about the grief of leaving and both of not knowing how to talk about it.

You know, often it is easier to just be angry at people you love when you have emotions that are overwhelming or inexplicable. It is like little children. They cry when they are hungry, cry when they are sleepy and can’t go to sleep. They cry when they are tired. They cry when they don’t like someone. They cry when they feel lonely.

The weird thing is, adults are so similar. When we do not know what to do we become quite irritable. When we are hungry we become angry, when we are lonely, we are angry. When we miss people we love we shout at them when they get home.

This season has brought to the surface many other emotions that some of us have translated into anger. And in reality, it is the fear and anxiety we talked about last weekend. It is the grief of what we have lost both as a society and as individuals. It is the feelings of insufficiency, it is the desire to express to people around you how they matter and how you want to matter to them. It is the uncertainty and everything we do not know how to deal with. Our minds are translating them into anger, frustration, irritability.

This is misplaced anger. The problem with misplaced anger is that it often comes from a place where we feel this is how God deals with us and so we want to deal with the world in the same way.

Either from family or from the church or our centres of spirituality. We were made to feel that our parents were very disappointed in us when we would make mistakes.

We would then mirror that on God and decide that the first thing God feels about us when he thinks about us is anger or disappointment. So we then mirror that on other people and when we see them we only see ways in which they are wrong for us, themselves and the world and we hold on with no compassion.

And this will be expressed by some as explode-anger and by others as cold anger.

The other way anger is expressed is indifference. Or No anger at all. But this not quite healthy either. It is not quite an expression of God's character anyway. Anger is a legitimate human emotion.

Some preacher from old said, 'to be angry where there is no reason is a sin but to be angry where there is a reason is just as bad a sin.'

Some things in this world and in life should make you angry. For us to look at injustice and not be angry is a sin. For us to see people in sin and it does not make us angry, is a problem. If the corruption in our country does not make you angry, there is a problem.

Every time Jesus met sick people or people oppressed by evils spirits, it made him angry. When he went to the temple and found corruption, it made him angry.

Pastor Tim Keller says, "The uncorrupted anger is the expression of love and compassion when something or someone we love is threatened."

So indifference is no anger is not the goal either. There are things that should make us angry. Here is something, Jonah had a good reason to be angry. This city was mistreating his people. Injustice is a very good reason to be angry. Racism should make us angry. Corruption should make us angry. The raging pandemic should make us angry, people losing jobs should make us angry.

But misplaced anger will make us miss what God is doing in the world around us. We become more preoccupied with ourselves and our own anger than what God is doing.

Jonah loved his people so much he could no longer see that God was calling him to be a blessing to other people.

Are we too consumed with anger that we are losing sight of God's move? Have our priorities gone wrong and we love a vine a bit more than we love God and his move and his vision for the world? Have we loved our freedom to move about and sing freely a bit more than the people around us?

The point is not cold anger or violent anger or no anger, but like God be slow to anger and rich in love. Can we slow down enough for our love for the people around us to overtake the crowding anger? Can we slow down enough for the anger that is blinding us to dissipate and lift and we can again see how much we are loved by this we are angry at? How much we love them? And how much we love what God is doing in them? We will find that we have acted out of love, we will find that we have not said things we cannot take back.

God is so slow to anger and rich in love that over and over again, mercy triumphs over judgement and the slightest show of repentance he forgives completely and forgets all our wrongs. That is where we are invited to.

And how do you know your anger is misplaced? When you are more angry over the vine than over people's fate. When you love your political party over people. When you love your job over your colleagues. When you love being married more than you love your spouse. When you love then church programs over people. When we love our economy over the suffering of people.

So, what do we do when we get angry, not if, what can we do?

Anger is secondary. It is like red lights on a dashboard. Calling your attention to something else. Something that if not dealt with will crash. We are better off identifying and dealing with the primary reason.

Anger is also a transitional emotion, which means it moves us to something. And we have control over where it moves us. Can you pause long enough to be sure what action it should lead you to? That is what will determine whether or not you regret the outcomes when you are no longer angry. This is why Paul encouragement to the church was,

"In Your anger, do not sin."

Do not let it fester. Deal with the primary issue as soon as you see anger. Again Paul encourages,

"Don't let the sun set on your anger"

And some things inside us take more than 24 hours to resolve. I guess the point here is to not let something fester into the next season. Don't enter the next season of your life still angry. Don't get into the next marriage still very angry from the last one. Don't go to the next church still angry with your pastor from where you left. Don't get to the next job still angry at your old boss. Don't start the next season of life as a couple with unresolved issues from the one you are leaving. Do not start the new day with unresolved anger. This may require a difficult conversation with someone else or that being resolved inside you. Either way, deal with it quickly.

And here is a little tip, before you act when angry bring it into conversation with Jesus. Don't deny it. If someone hurts you and you get angry and you deny it, that's worse. You are telling them that they are not worth your passion.

It is what we feel there is a legitimate hurt from people we love. It is what we feel when the world is nothing like it should be. It is what we feel when we have prayed and the answer seems delayed. It is what we feel when we have invested in a relationship and the love is not returned. It is what we feel a pandemic turns our world upside down and it is happening to you personally. So bring it into conversation with Jesus.

That is what Jonah and God are doing. If Jonah got anything right, is that he could talk to God about it. One of the ways to do that is through writing a psalm.

Before you act, write a Psalm. As the band plays I will read over you a psalm from someone very angry, he even had very violent thoughts. But had the raw conversation with God.

***God, my enemies are many, too many to count.
Now they have taken a stand against me!
Right to my face, they say,
"God will not save you!"***

[pause]

***But You, O God, wrap around me like an impenetrable shield.
You give me glory and lift my eyes up to the heavens.
I lift my voice to You, Eternal One,
and You answer me from Your sacred heights.***

[pause]

I lie down at night and fall asleep.

*I awake in the morning—healthy, strong, vibrant—because the Eternal supports me.
No longer will I fear my tens of thousands of enemies
who have surrounded me!*

*Rise up, O Eternal One!
Rescue me, O God!
For You have dealt my enemies a strong blow to the jaw!
You have shattered their teeth! Do so again.*

*Liberation truly comes from the Eternal.
Let Your blessings shower down upon Your people.*

Your heart will be as alive as you are having a conversation about why you are angry with Jesus. Alive as the conversation about our reality that we are having with Jesus.