Sunday, January 19, 1986
ON BEING ANGRY WITH GOD
Psalm 22:1-5; Ephesians 4:25-27,31-32; Luke 6:27-31

Is there more anger in people these days? More rage? Or is it that people are expressing their anger and rage in increasingly violent ways? Reports of severe child abuse are up, as are incidents of spouse abuse and rape. Rape is primarily a crime of hate, anger, and violence.

As I mentioned last fall in a sermon, I see more incidents of anger and rage in drivers. There's a "get out of my way or I'll smash you" mentality among some. Movies like Rambo illustrate how anger and rage are expressed in violence toward others whom we consider our enemies. I am concerned because of the popularity of such movies which glorify violence as a way to solve problems.

Stories of terrorism in various parts of the world are frequently in the news. Terrorism is rage turned into violence on anyone who is at hand. The terrorist is so angry that he doesn't mind giving his life in order to get revenge by killing others in the process. It's his way of trying to solve a problem.

Why there seems to be more anger in people, I'm not completely sure. Maybe more people are afraid of losing what they have. Maybe some feel they've lost control of their lives and are frustrated in being able to do anything constructive about it, so they turn to destruction.

We can understand the anger of farmers who feel that their lives are being dominated by forces beyond their control. We can understand the anger and even rage that comes to us when a devastating illness hits someone we love who is close to us. We didn't cause the illness, nor did the person afflicted, and we are convinced it's unfair.

We can understand the anger and even rage of the parents when someone broke into their home in the middle of the night and murdered their daughter. We can understand the anger when reputations are ruined, careers broken, and friendships destroyed by forces which are beyond our control.

Last week, I attended a minister's meeting, and in listening to the stories of some of my colleagues, I could understand their anger. One story, in particular, told by a friend of mine, was the story of his going blind and of his anger with God because of it.

In 1970, he was happy. He had become the editor of a religious magazine after spending a number of years in the parish. It was the fulfillment of a lifelong dream. The threads of his life had come together in a beautiful pattern. He and his wife and children had never been closer. They moved to Chicago to take up his new job.

Then in December 1971, he started having double vision. Soon he could no longer see what he had written, and if he could not read, then he was certain he could not edit or write or even work. He could no longer drive or play tennis. He could not even play catch with his son. A strange disease had struck his eyes, first one and then the other. Something had caused the back centers of his eyeballs to hemorrhage, scar tissue had built over the hemorrhaging tissue, and it was opaque to light. He had two blind centers. He was not totally blind, but he had only peripheral vision. He was legally blind. His little home and family were in jeopardy and disarray. His wife and children were confused and frightened, and his moods ranged between

despair and anger. “What happened? What have I done to deserve this? Oh God, what is to become of us?” The physician said it was permanent, irreparable, irrevocable.

My friend has learned to live with his blindness. I’ve seen him at meetings at least once each year now since 1971. He has learned also how to handle his anger. His story is, in fact, filled with hope. His story is about lost eyesight. And it could have been you or me. In fact, it is each one of us. We all lose something precious to us, and it happens more than once in this life, and we do not always know how to cope with it. We are often not in control of what happens to us and what we lose, and it makes us angry.

But I don’t want it to sound easy — this getting over our anger. It was not easy for my friend, and it is not easy for us. To take the easy way out is to use violence, or to cover up our anger — but that’s not helpful to us or to others.

The months immediately following his blindness were not easy for my friend or his family. Outwardly, his rehabilitation seemed to be progressing, but inwardly he was carrying a heavy load of anger. He was trying to follow a normal routine, but that normal routine was interrupted constantly by his anger at other people and circumstances that were a part of it. He was trying to do what he used to do, but he always seemed angry about what he did.

Listening to one of his angry tirades over some trivial matter, his seven-year-old daughter asked her mother one day, “Why is daddy so angry?” During these months, my friend asked himself all the questions that most religious people ask. Was God punishing him for some wrongdoing? Why did it happen to him? He knew that repentance is healthy, and he also knew that the search for punitive explanations is not healthy and that it is bad biblical theology.

The anger and soul-searching were but part of the story in those days. There were some other wonderful and gracious events happening to him too. He said that it did not come clear to him until some time later, but even in his time of desperation, he was the beneficiary of some powerful help. His children did not love him for his eyes. They accepted with remarkable equanimity that he no longer played catch with them after school and that he could not see them in a play at school, or that mom had to drive the family where they wanted to go.

And as for God, that great benefactor of life to whom he had been thankful; that God with whom he was angry — now he could understand some of the psalms of anger and lament. “How long, O God? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day?” (Psalm 13)

Or Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day but you do not answer and by night, but find no rest.”

My friend could also understand Job’s anger with God. Job expressed it openly. “Today also my complaint is bitter. God’s hand is heavy in spite of my groaning. Oh, that I knew where I might find God. I would lay my case before God and fill my mouth with arguments. Behold I go forward and God is not there; and backward, but I cannot perceive God.”

But the psalmist also said something about the valley of the shadow of death! That is where God is also!

He discovered in those months that effort alone would not solve the problem. If his problem was blindness, then effort might be the best solution. But if his problem was the pain of loss, then effort alone would not do it.

Thus when he was offered the position as senior minister of the congregation where he was a member, he at first turned it down. Listen to his own words. “I told the congregation no because I had not yet confronted the truth. I did not need help with my eyes. I had that. I needed inward healing. I needed grace and I needed God. I would not be healed by my own effort.”

After working through his pain of loss, he did accept the position as senior minister and even today continues to serve in that place with distinction.

What did my friend learn through his pain of loss and his anger? And what does it have to do with us?

First, we can admit that anger is a normal human emotion because we do lose things, and it is not bad unless it leads us to do violent things to ourselves or others. As I mentioned earlier, extreme examples of anger gone wild are child abuse, spouse abuse, abuse of women, including rape, and most of the other crimes of violence which are so prevalent in our society. On the other hand, anger turned inward and repressed becomes self-pity, and it leads to depression and feeling sorry for ourselves.
Anger needs to be openly expressed and faced and not disguised — otherwise, it will land in the wrong place.

Secondly, as my friend discovered and as we discover, much of our anger comes from the fact that we are not in control of everything that happens to us. It will help us simply to recognize this. The Bible says, “God makes rain to fall on the just and the unjust.” We cannot always be in control of what happens to us, or to others. The world is not made that way. It’s a hard lesson for us to learn, and it’s a hard lesson for our country and other countries to learn. There are times when things do not go our way! Life can be very frustrating.

There’s a cartoon strip from Peanuts which illustrates that frustration. In the cartoon, Lucy is explaining to Charlie Brown that on cruise ships, some people unfold their deck chairs and place them on the deck near the stern of the ship so they can look backward to where they have been; while others take their deck chairs and unfold them and place them on the bow of the ship so they can look forward to where they are going. This, says Lucy, is a metaphor for life — some people always look backward, while others look forward. Then she asks Charlie Brown, “What kind of person are you? One who unfolds your chair and takes it to the stern of the ship or one who unfolds the chair on the bow?” And Charlie Brown replies, “I’m the kind of individual who can’t even get my chair unfolded.”

It’s when we can’t get our chair unfolded that we get angry. We get angry with our limitations. We think we should be in control all the time. We do not like to fail or make mistakes. We do not like the thought of dying. We get upset when we get sick or have an accident or can’t do what we used to do because we are getting older. Or like my friend, we get angry when we lose something precious we have taken for granted like our eyesight.

All of this is to say that oftentimes we get angry with life itself, with the way the world is running, which is another way of saying we get angry with God.

And this leads to our third point. The first point was: It's okay to be angry because it's a normal human emotion and arises out of our human condition. The second point was: Much of our anger comes from the fact that we are not always in control and cannot be.

It's okay to be angry with God. God can take and handle our anger better than any human being. In fact, as the people of God in the Bible discovered, being openly and honestly angry with God can lead us through our anger to healing. And that's what my friend who lost his eyesight discovered.
In her book, "To Bend Without Breaking," Mary Ella Stuart tells how her anger with God led her to healing. She had had a mental breakdown and was slowly recovering. However, she seemed to be able to get so far and no farther, and then one day she noticed especially what her distress was doing to her family. She said in her own words, "I had noticed my husband's feet dragging, and that was most unusual for such a proverbial enthusiast. Also, my son's teacher at school sent home a note to us that our seven-year-old was refusing to play games that the other children played. This I knew as a distress signal, and I was deeply troubled. All of a sudden, out of the despair of my depression, I cried out in great anger to God and said, 'Okay God, go ahead and send me to hell if you want to; but please, oh please don't let me drag my husband and son there with me.'"

She said, "I amazed myself, but I cleared the atmosphere; and after that outburst, I slowly began to get better. I had dared show my anger to God! That would have been blasphemy in my growing-up years."

Do not be afraid to express your anger to God. God knows what is within you, and nothing is achieved by hiding it. On the contrary, a frank expression of what you are feeling, even if you have to use bitter and hard words to express those feelings, will help to clear the atmosphere and will bring you closer to God.

It is significant that Job in his suffering said some very hard things to God while his scandalized companions chided him and urged him to blame himself; but when God finally appeared, God exonerated Job and expressed displeasure with Job's well-meaning, but insincere, friends.

You can trust God even with your anger. Amen.