



## CATHEDRAL *of the* INCARNATION

### *The Emotional Reality of Quarantine*

Sixth Sunday after Easter, *Year A*, May 17, 2020

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In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

There has been a lot of talk lately about grief as a way to describe quarantine's emotional reality. Certainly, grief is an experience with which we can all connect. Over these last two months, we have all needed to grieve the loss of friends, family, jobs, and our everyday lives. But in all this talk about quarantine grief, there is not much talk about all the emotions that tend to come with grief: shock, denial, anger, and depression. And often, these emotions do not come one after another, but in waves where you experience acceptance only to be greeted by a fresh wave of denial or depression. One of the most powerful emotions that comes with grief is anger. And right now, a lot of us are feeling angry when we're not feeling afraid or sad about what's happening around us. I like to call this anger quarantine rage...it's like road rage, but you don't have to leave your house! You know what I'm talking about – you're going about your business, and before you know it, you are losing your temper at your pet, or the television, or your housemates over something that doesn't matter that much. We might not ever act that way under ordinary circumstances, but when anger visits us these days, it can feel surprising and frightening...or it can feel powerful and productive. Either way, if you have experienced a bout of quarantine rage while you've been cooped up, know that you are not alone. In many ways, that experience of intense anger is just a part of what it feels like to live through this moment.

But if this is just a part of living through this moment, the question becomes then what do we as people of faith do with our anger? And that is a thorny

question because if there is one emotion that Christians don't do well, it's anger. That's not because our tradition does not speak to how to negotiate anger. It's just because most of us harbor an idealized version of what it means to be a "good Christian." After all, Christians don't get mad - they get nice! They forgive, turn the other cheek, and all that other stuff. That *is* true, but it is not a complete picture of anger reflected in our tradition and Scriptures. In our sacred stories, there is a lot of anger – God's anger, people's anger, and even Jesus' anger. Those passages may not be our favorite stories, but they are a reminder that faithfulness is not about being angry...it's about what we do when we are.

Before we talk about how we negotiate and use our anger as Christians, it's helpful to take a step back and remind ourselves what anger does for us as human beings. Looking into the neuroscience of emotion, we learn that anger can be beneficial to us. Anger is what researchers call an “activating emotion that leads to goal-directed behaviors.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, getting mad helps us act to accomplish a goal. Anger is triggered explicitly in situations where we feel pressed or trapped, where we need to move literally or figuratively to stop irritation or pain. Even infants feel anger – I'm sure you've heard a baby shriek in frustration about not being able to lift their heads or reach a toy. That anger will motivate them to do incredibly essential tasks for growth, like achieve goals, establish a sense of self-control, and differentiate between their emotional world and that of others.

Anger changes when we direct it towards other people, and it becomes rage. We usually experience rage before we reach the age of two. Over time, rage will stimulate emotions we know well, including hate, competition, resentment, and jealousy. Rage can serve us, helping us learn to protect ourselves or thrive in competitive environments. A healthy expression of anger or rage – one that

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<sup>1</sup> This and the following discussion of anger and rage are indebted to Riccardo Williams, *Anger as a Basic Emotion and Its Role in Personality Building and Pathological Growth: The Neuroscientific, Developmental, and Clinical Perspectives*, *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7, November 2017.

do not harm the self or others – is always tempered by empathy, respect for others, and the socially acceptable ways of expressing anger. But rage can also be misdirected or misattributed, leading us to act destructively. This is especially true when rage is mistaken as the *only* way to assert one's strength and sense of control.

Now, if this doesn't explain why quarantine rage is a thing, I don't know what does! In many ways, quarantine is tailor-made to provoke anger and rage in human beings. We are stuck in our homes, unable to alleviate our pain or frustration at not being able to work, interact, or send our kids to school. And because we are in quarantine, we have no obvious way of achieving the goal we long for the most: returning to our everyday lives. Once we get to a certain level of frustration, our anger can easily find a target in other people and become rage. And rage is tricky *because it feels good*. If we feel powerless, rage can make us feel powerful. If we feel vulnerable, rage can make us feel strong. Rage shared with others makes us feel less alone. Quarantine rage promises us that if individual people or whole groups just changed – or even eliminated - everything would return to normal, and we would be ok.

Once we've come to this point, friends, we need to be careful. Like all intense emotions, anger is a double-edged sword – it can help, or it can hurt. As people striving to live in all areas of our lives according to the teachings of Jesus Christ, we should turn to the guidance our tradition offers us. When speaking to the church at Ephesus, Paul tells them, *"so then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil."* (Ephesians 4: 25-27) Paul was concerned about unity in the body of Christ, but do you see how the practical advice here related to how healthy anger works for us? Paul is not saying we should never be angry. But when we do feel anger, especially towards others, Paul intuitively applies the brakes that slow anger, reminding the people of Ephesus, *"for we are members of one another."* He is asking people to respect the relationships that they have with

each other, temper their anger with empathy, and use that anger to negotiate conflict truthfully together.

Paul is, of course, worried about interpersonal conflict destabilizing the community at Ephesus. Still, the advice he offers is good for Christian people dealing with anger in all kinds of situations. Paul's advice helps us remember that as Christians, our primary work – with the grace of God and the guidance of the Holy Spirit – is to figure out how to live God's ways in every circumstance in which we find ourselves. In today's gospel, Jesus says, "*They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them*" (John 14:21). Our love for God is shown by following God's ways...and we already know what these ways entail. In Matthew's gospel, a teacher of the law asks Jesus which commandment in that law is the greatest. Jesus says, "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.*' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: '*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matthew 22: 37-40).

"*On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.*" Love God and love your neighbor as yourself – this is our task. If we do these things, we will see Christ and experience God's love – this is our reward. With God's grace, there is no circumstance where living in this way is not possible, not even the situation we are in today. The question of quarantine rage becomes this: is our anger motivating us to act in ways that serve God's purposes, that support our neighbors and allow us to see God and experience God's love? If it is, then so be it. But if what we read, and what we say, and what we do stokes our rage and draws us from this love of God and others, be wary. If we let our anger carry us too far from our task of loving God and neighbor, we also will lose the reward of being able to see Christ and sense God's love for us and the world. The trade-off is more than *not* worth it – it is foolish. The writer of Ecclesiastes tells us, "*do not be quick to anger, for anger lodges in the bosom of fools.*"

(Ecclesiastes 7:9). Don't let anger lodge in your hearts, friends, because if there is one thing that is counterproductive for you and the world during this crisis, it is being a fool.