

Nothing More, Nothing Less Lent 2B

I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me. Yes, the Lord thy god is a jealous god, and by hate, he means disobey. So whoever disobeys, according to this threat in Exodus, will bring punishment upon unborn offspring he will never even meet. When we look at the ten commandments, we can't help but notice that half of them have to do with God's jealousy and the other half with ours. We do what we know is wrong in the attempt to make or keep the World the way we want it. Like God, we are angry when the World isn't the way we want it

Last week we had a chance to hear again the story of God overdoing the anger thing -- drowning almost everybody -- overdoing it so much that he had to go on the (no-more-water) wagon -- make the pledge-- swear off deluging...for good. Now we say we are made in the image and likeness of this god, so it stands to reason that we would do well to take a very close look at our anger too, wherever it may be hiding, and wherever it may be directed. As the sayings go, jealousy is a green-eyed

monster; self-righteous anger is a luxury we cannot afford. It's destructive, dangerous, deleterious.

And yet our scriptural history is full of God's anger, at us and at others. Again and again, people in the Bible are threatened and "smoten" and destroyed in God's anger and we are stuck with trying to make sense of it. Of course part of the answer is that "Judgement belongs to the Lord." So if God is angry at somebody, there must be a good reason, they must deserve it, and our big priority in life should be to not be like them. We get that.

But we all have anger in us, from the moment of birth, when we are rudely expelled or yanked out of a perfect environment, Mom's tummy, where all our desires are fulfilled and all our needs met instantly, and anything we don't get that we might like doesn't matter because we don't know about it. Suddenly everybody starts withholding food from us and leaving us in our tangled bedclothes and messy diapers for what seems like ever. We are angry! Look at the face of a crying baby if you don't believe me; the younger, the angrier. Those newborns – first the lip comes out, then the eyes screw shut and the mouth goes wide and it's pure rage – outrage!

Especially when they start shaking, juddering with it. Our whole lives sometimes seem to be an exercise in anger management from the start.

So we look closely at God's example and make of it what we can. Because our salvation history, as chronicled in the scriptures, is really a history of God's attempts at anger management. Every parent knows that telling your kids, "Do what I say, not what I do" is about as effective as the US telling other countries to disarm. It's just not going to happen. We see God act angrily, and we at least consider acting angrily ourselves. To escape, we have to look deeper, at how God develops, at whom God becomes, despite the anger.

God has a picture of a perfect world, just like we do. And when humankind develops oh so imperfectly, God is oh so disappointed. There is only one attribute of God that can overpower the anger, and that is the love, love that comes to life as benefit of the doubt, forgiveness, new beginnings, leeway. Perhaps that will have to be our antidote too. Eve and Adam and Cain had to live outside the garden after their sins, but they are not destroyed. Noah was a pretty unsavory fellow by any standards, boat or no boat, but God stayed with him. Likewise David and Jacob and many others. These are our

spiritual ancestors; in a real sense, they are us. And God stuck with them, steadily moving away from threats and acts of violent rage towards forgiveness, encouragement and loving example, culminating in the Life of Christ. Most of us look pretty good by comparison with these characters, sinwise. God will stick with us too.

What can we make of Abraham? Some of the shenanigans he got up to are enough to curl your hair if it isn't already, straighten it out if it is. Lying about his marriage in order to save his own skin -- twice? Taking his son up a mountain to kill because he thinks God wants him to? Getting his wife's slave pregnant? We know that Abraham's offspring by Hagar are not one tiny bit less valuable to God than the ones who came by Sarah, but Hagar and her son are just discarded by Abraham. Surely God could have found a more virtuous guy in Chaldea, or at least in the near suburbs, than him. What could God have been thinking?

What if God wasn't thinking? What if God picked Abraham at random? Out of a hat, so to speak? After all, this is the way we ourselves are picked. What if this whole story is about God's experiment on God's self-imaged creation, whoever they

may be? “What will happen,” God asks, “if I take no action to change this fellow except give him faith, faith enough to become willing, to involve himself, flaws and all, in my agenda? It may be messy, but it may just work. And oh what a thing it would be to have the experiment work; because if Abraham can do it, anybody can!”

So God started to work on Abraham, gave him a load of faith to go with his many character flaws, made him a permanent promise, a covenant that continues true to this day. It was messy then. It still is messy now. Because Sarah and Abraham and Hagar are still us. And the children of Hagar and the children of Sarah are still around. And all of them, all of us have flaws, jealousy, anger, rationalizations. And each of us has equal access to forgiveness, the benefit of the doubt and encouragement if only we will listen to God and learn. Each of us has access to the cure if only we will accept it. Each of us has the same potential for offspring more numerous than the stars – as loving acts multiply from ours – a potential just as wondrous and inexplicable as Sarah’s and Hagar’s and Abraham’s. Not a bit more. Not a bit less.