

Psalm 12 Common English Bible

Help, LORD, because the godly are all gone; the faithful have completely disappeared from the human race. Everyone tells lies to everyone else; they talk with slick speech and divided hearts. Let the LORD cut off all slick-talking lips and every tongue that brags and brags, that says, “We’re unbeatable with our tongues! Who could get the best of us with lips like ours?” But the LORD says, “Because the poor are oppressed, because of the groans of the needy, I’m now standing up. I will provide the help they are gasping for.” The LORD’s promises are pure, like silver that’s been refined in an oven, purified seven times over. You, LORD, will keep us, protecting us from this generation forever. The wicked roam all over the place, while depravity is praised by human beings.

Last week we talked about the songs of Lament. We watched a video of Bono, the lead singer of U2, talking to Eugene Peterson about the Psalms. They talked about the honesty of the Psalms, and Peterson remarks how hard it is for our culture to be honest. Bono reflected back that he’d like to see more honesty in church music. He said something like “There are all these beautiful gospel songs, I want someone to write a song about their *bad* marriage!” Later my husband said to me “I think that music is called “country music!” What happens when you play country music backwards? You get your wife back, you get your truck back, and you get your dog back!

This summer we are on a journey through the book you find smack dab in the middle of the Bible: the Psalms. We are looking to the Psalms — that prayer book and hymn book of the people of God for thousands of generations— to better understand God and to better understand ourselves and how we are called to live as we seek to follow Jesus. You can check out the other sermons on this theme, but this week we move from the Psalms of lament and sadness to the imprecatory Psalms — the Psalms of anger and calling on God’s revenge.

I had a chat with a congregation member a couple of weeks ago who was concerned for those who have taken up the challenge to read the Psalms this summer. Her concern was that people may have been expecting an uplifting experience reading the Psalms and that that is probably not what they are finding. I get their concern. And it’s partly my fault — not just my fault. We have a tendency to use selected portions of the scripture, for good reason. When you are presiding over a funeral or if you are at someone’s sick bed, you’re not going to use the end of Psalm 139:19 “*O that you would kill the wicked, O God, and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me— those who speak of you maliciously.*” Even on Sundays, when it comes to scripture readings you tend to get “the greatest hits!”

But when you actually read through the Psalms it’s like hanging out with a toddler: happy and laughing one minute, afraid and crying sad tears another, and then before you finish thinking how sweet they are, they are stealing another kid’s truck and bashing said kid over the head

with the truck while they are at it! I am not suggesting that the Psalms are childish, but back to last week's theme — they are honest.

Anger is a sentiment that is expressed in the book of Psalms.

Anger is a natural response to a hurt, a threat, a betrayal, a shaming or an injustice. Feeling anger is natural and normal.

Anger is not a sin. What we do with our anger can very definitely be sin.

Some desperately try to control and deny their anger. I'd be in that category. I've said before that I have anger issues, and my issue is I'm not comfortable with anger. I've learned I need to name it — "I am angry!" Why? Because denying doesn't make it magically go away. It tends to make it come out in harmful ways, like control, anxiety etc. You may not be able to fix the situation that made you angry, but you still need to name and process your anger.

Reading the imprecatory Psalms can help us to process anger in a way that doesn't cause more pain and injury. The Psalms remind us that there is a place for our anger at things that have happened to us and at injustice happening to others.

Some deny and repress anger. But on the flip side, there is an increasing culture of rage in our society. There is a glorification of angry outbursts. You see it on social media. You see it grocery stores and hospitals and just about everywhere. You sure see it in politics!

I think I'm still processing the attempted assassination of Donald Trump. One person was killed, and others wounded at a political event. And there's that image which has already become iconic of Trump with the bloody ear standing up and raising his fist in the air and shouting "Fight, fight, fight!" with the American flag waving in the background. The image is already emblazoned on T-shirts and has become a rallying point and cry. I am grateful that there was a level of trying to reduce the heat and to bring some calm to the situation, but mostly images like that serve to give permission to ordinary people to respond with aggression and violence towards people and situations they consider to be the enemy.

In the wake of the attack Marjorie Taylor Greene, who is a U.S. representative and major Trump supporter, said on X: "May God have mercy on our enemies because we will NOT!"
<https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/trump-shooting-analysis-1.7263185>

Who is the enemy? Is it the 20-year-old white male with his father's legally acquired assault rifle? Is it the woke left? Is it the millions of migrants and immigrants that Trump plans to deport?

Psalm 139 has been a favourite scripture reading since my teenage years. I always found it odd (& bordering on funny) that it ends: "*Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?* (Notice the parallelism here.) *I hate them with perfect*

hatred; I count them my enemies.” I just think it’s funny that the writer gives himself a gold star for hatred!

The writer seeks to love what God loves and to hate what God hates, which sounds like a reasonable goal. But you have to be very careful if you think you know who God’s enemy is. Be very careful if you think you know what God hates, and therefore where you should direct your anger and your hatred. So, so much harm and evil has been done in the past and continues to be done today in the name of God.

Someone who wanted to speak with me called and left a message on the church phone. He said God chose him to give me a message. I didn’t even need spidey senses to tell me that meeting with him would not be worth my while. I gave a heads-up to Karen in the office in case he came in, and sure enough he did come in. He wanted an appointment to tell me that we were all going to hell because of our stance on being inclusive to the 2SLGBTQ+ community — and I was doubly going to hell because I was a woman pastor! Then he asked how he might make an appointment with me, and Karen told him he would not be getting an appointment. (And of course she said it in her British *don’t-mess-with-me* accent! I’ve been blessed with wonderful gatekeepers in the office!)

As much as I shake my head, and I do, I need to be aware of my own sense of superiority, my own confidence that I am right. The Psalmist says: “*Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies.*” But then immediately he says: “*Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*”

It’s that old saying “When you point a finger at someone else, be aware of the four fingers pointed back at you!”

C.S. Lewis has a great line in his book “Reflections on the Psalms”. He says “If the Divine Call does not make us better, it will make us very much worse. Of all bad men, religious bad men are the worst.” (*Reflections on the Psalms*, C.S. Lewis p. 32)

Our call is to be more like God. To love what God loves and to hate what God hates. Anger is a quality of God. It’s not the angry God some of you grew up with, it’s simply that God hates injustice.

Jesus showed anger towards a system that was turning the temple into a marketplace — and one that restricted how people, especially poor people, were able to approach the temple and offer their gifts or make a sacrifice. There are really two kinds of anger — good anger and bad anger. Some people would say righteous anger and unrighteous anger. I’m not sure I like the word ‘righteous’ because it just sounds so righteous — maybe faithful anger!

If so many get it wrong, how do we know if we are getting it right? A spirit of humility is

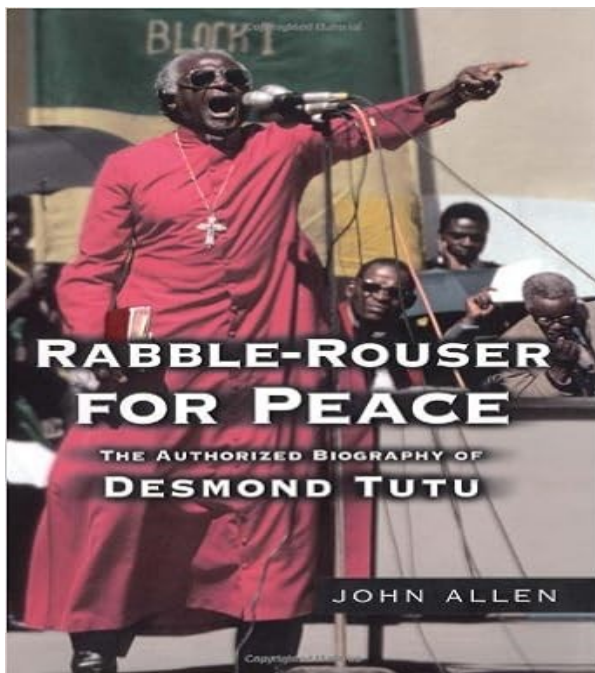
needed. As much as that Psalmist boasts about hating with a perfect hatred, he also steps back and says, “but search me”. There’s a confidence, but then a self-questioning and a checking in. We need a spirit of humility. And one that isn’t afraid to ask and double check ‘Am I on the right path?’ That in itself is the big difference. Reflection and interior prayer work make all the difference.

For the most part, faithful anger sees injustice happening to someone else. It’s natural to be angry when you are the victim — but be very careful with calling your anger faithful or righteous. Absolutely advocate for yourself and get help dealing with situation where you have been harmed or experienced trauma. But the interior work we need to do with our own hurt is the work of forgiveness: telling the story of our hurt to someone; naming the pain, the betrayal, the loss; offering forgiveness which sets us free; and then renewing or releasing the relationship. Forgiveness is never easy, but it has the power to set you free from destructive anger. There is a book in our library called the *Fourfold Path to Forgiveness* written by Mpho and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and it is excellent.

When it comes to people who get it and have a healthy relationship with anger and who lived with righteous anger, Archbishop Desmond Tutu was one. He had so much to be bitter about. The number of times he personally experienced racism growing up in South Africa with apartheid — a government sanctioned system of racism— was legion. He experienced little things, like being denied service to get ice cream for his family on a hot drive, to bigger things — like the President ensuring he had his passport revoked so he couldn’t travel to receive awards in other countries, and to horrendous things like witnessing police brutality and even murder during peaceful protests.

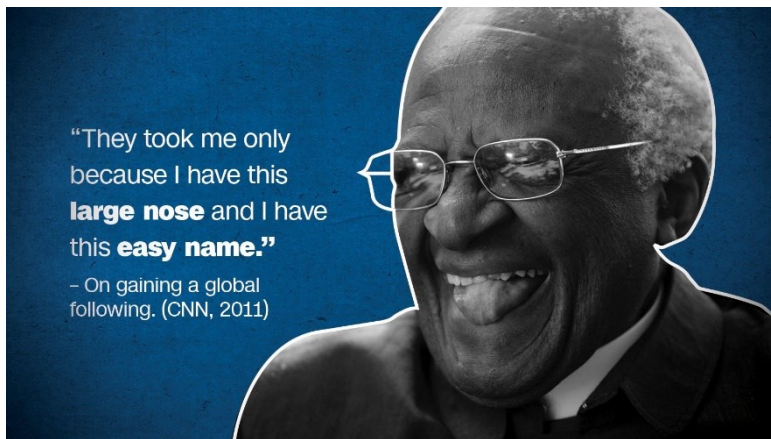
What I love about Tutu was that he openly displayed emotions — all of them. I sometimes think that in order to have more joy I need less sadness and less fear and less anger. I want to separate myself from the negative emotions — that’s what pushes many into numbing the pain. But the

truth is if you want to be healthy and whole, you need to feel and face the emotions — the hard and “negative ones” and the good ones. You’ll feel them, but they won’t control you.



Tutu didn’t numb the pain. He faced it. He was the chairperson for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. (Canada’s was modelled after South Africa’s). This was the framework South Africa used to bring healing after the years of apartheid and violence from white South Africans towards blacks, but also from the resistance movement. There was so much healing needed. I remember Tutu talking about how he felt like he wasn’t the right person to chair the session. He remembered the first person sharing their story of the

brutality and injustice they had experienced, and at one point the person couldn't go on speaking and then burst into tears and wept and wept. Tutu said he joined him and wept with him. And then he said to someone "You see I'm not the right person." His friend told him that was exactly why he *was* the right person! Similarly, he wasn't afraid to express his anger which he saw as a tool of justice and scythe of compassion. Anger was for him was ***not a reaction but a chosen response*** to injustice. His authorized autobiography is called *A Rabble Rouser for Peace* and has an image of him holding up his fist and pointing a finger, shouting against injustice. (I can't help but contrast this image to the image this week with Donald Trump!) He wasn't afraid to name and call out injustice where he saw it in his own country and around the



world. In the early 2000's he was often calling out Israel for the occupation of Palestine. If he were alive today, he would be leading the charge of calling for an end to the genocide.

Tutu could get angry, but he was so far from bitter. He was one of the most joyful people. I don't know if you ever heard him speak but he was so often giggling and had an infectious and genuine laugh.

Sad naturally leads to mad, but it doesn't have to lead to bad. It can lead to good.

God loves all. When some are put down, oppressed, abused, our response should be anger. Not an anger that leads to violence or destruction, but an anger that leads to justice and to making the world a better place.

Thanks be to God.

"Perfect Hatred" – Discussion questions

- 1. Imprecatory Psalms:**
 - What are your thoughts on the imprecatory Psalms, which express anger and call for God's justice? How do you reconcile these intense emotions with your understanding of God's love?
- 2. Anger in Society:**
 - The sermon highlighted the increasing culture of rage in our society, including social media and politics. How do you see this impacting our communities, and what can we do to promote a healthier way of expressing and dealing with anger?
- 3. Role Models of Faithful Anger:**
 - Archbishop Desmond Tutu was mentioned as someone who used his anger for justice and compassion. Who are other role models you admire for how they handle anger and advocate for justice?