

OK, so those aren't the readings I would have chosen for "bring-a-friend Sunday," but I've found that when readings feel off-putting, that often means they have something especially important to teach us. The image of Jesus getting angry and attacking people can be especially difficult to reconcile with what we've been taught about Jesus, that he is universally and unconditionally loving. But that image becomes more complex when we read the passage carefully. The original Greek suggests that Jesus only used his whip on the sheep and cattle, not any human beings, although he did disrupt their property. And nowhere does it say that Jesus was angry. The word "zeal" comes to the disciples' minds. This incident isn't a spontaneous outburst, it's a great example of the prophetic tradition of using dramatic actions to convey a message.

We need prophetic messages because humanity tends to project our most dangerous and troublesome traits onto God, including anger and vindictiveness. Some people were brought up in traditions that emphasized the anger of God at sins, at sinners, or at humanity in general, and many of those people feel deeply wounded by that experience, even decades later. If that's you, first of all, I am so sorry that happened. Secondly, I would hope you can make a distinction between the complex but ultimately gracious portrayal of God in scripture and the way some people abuse the text, taking phrases out of context and twisting them into a terrifying, hideous caricature of God which the authors never intended.

For example, though that was not my upbringing, even I cringe when I hear about "punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me." But then I breathe, and I remember what I was taught. Namely, that this is an ancient way of expressing an insight into the injustice made possible by simple cause and effect, reminding us of the responsibility we all bear to be gracious and wise. You've probably heard people say that the consequence someone suffers from their bad decision is "punishment enough," and that's kind of the idea here, but taken a step further.

Because when we fail to be gracious and wise, and make terrible decisions, often it's other people who suffer the consequences — sometimes many other people, over many years. When, say, a few people at Boeing decide to cut corners, many others are harmed. Or to think on the scale of three and four generations, we are still living with the consequences of decisions like allowing the South to go from Reconstruction to Jim Crow; making Germany suffer after World War I; and failing to build a robust, comprehensive public health infrastructure after the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918. The troubles of today didn't come out of nowhere.

Just thinking of those terrible decisions makes me angry, which brings me to another point. While some are obsessed with divine anger, others simply dismiss the idea that God could ever become angry. While there's much truth in the ancient warning that anger gives the devil a powerful foothold, it's also true that God can use anything for good. Anger can be holy. Anger at injustice, for example, especially when we

channel that anger toward righting the injustice. I can certainly imagine God becoming angry at the suffering humans cause other humans, not because God is inherently angry, but because God cares so deeply for us, with “steadfast love to the thousandth generation.”

That profound statement of the grace of God should guide our relationship with God and our interpretation of scripture. So hopefully we are ready now to engage with the story of Jesus driving out the merchants and money-changers long enough to ask, “why?” Why was it so important to Jesus that this market be moved elsewhere? So important that a proponent of peace would engage in violence, and risk arrest? So important that Jesus would allow this incident to be his introduction to the general public of Jerusalem?

The context is a clue. St. John begins the story by telling us it’s almost Passover, the great Jewish feast of liberation. Then, in describing the aftermath, the first thing St. John tells us is that a light flickers on for the disciples, remembering part of Psalm 69, “Zeal for your house will consume me.” That Psalm is written from the point of view of a person who is being terribly oppressed for being faithful to God. It would only be natural to be angry for being punished for trying to do the right thing, but instead, in the Psalm, the person seeks out God, expressing faith that God will give justice and deliverance all over the world and praising God even though they’re still in trouble.

That’s a huge clue, and then Jesus drops another when he cryptically predicts his resurrection, in terms of raising up the Jerusalem Temple from its ruins. Between his action and his words, Jesus is making a claim of authority over the Temple, a claim that only God could make, and that would have seemed preposterous.

Everything in this story points to an imminent, radical change in the relationship between God and humanity, the availability of an intimate relationship with God that Jesus’s resurrection would make available to all people. And this relationship would be one of grace, not of anger; love and joy, not fear and punishment. Although sinful humanity would kill the sinless Son of God, God would not be moved to anger, but rather move through grief to the joy of being reconciled to all Creation.

Now that Jesus has completed this transcendent work of grace for us, we are right to give him our utmost thanks and praise. And the best way we can do that begins with remembering that our bodies are temples, too; our humble hearts are sanctuaries where the Almighty is pleased to dwell. That is why the Church begins Lent by reminding us to cleanse our hearts. Advent Church is celebrating 65 years of worship today, and we are right to see our buildings as a sacred blessing, for Scripture makes clear that such places should be set apart in many ways. But the point of having sacred places is to achieve what God truly cherishes, setting ourselves apart as sacred to God and a blessing to the world. We aren’t meant to imitate Jesus’s stunt, but rather to imitate the profound love that drove everything Jesus said and did, even if the secular world finds our ways strange or foolish. Just our being here in church today gives God

great joy, and I hope and pray that what we do when we go out from this place gives even greater joy, to God, to us, and to the world.