

WHERE GOD IS FOUND: THE FIRE OF ANGER

Eastertide

Ezekiel 22:18-22

A Sermon Preached by Loyce Ong'udi
With introduction by Catherine Foote
University Congregational Church of Christ
Seattle, Washington 98125
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Scripture:

Ezekiel 22:18-22 ¹

Mortal, the house of Israel has become dross to me; all of them, silver, bronze, tin, iron, and lead. In the smelter they have become dross. Therefore says the Lord God: "Because you have all become dross, I will gather you into the midst of Jerusalem. As one gathers silver, bronze, iron, lead, and tin into a smelter, to blow the fire upon them in order to melt them; so I will gather you in my anger and in my wrath, and I will put you in and melt you. I will gather you and blow upon you with the fire of my wrath, and you shall be melted within it. As silver is melted in a smelter, so you shall be melted in it; and you shall know that I the Lord have poured out my wrath upon you.

Catherine Foote

Prayer:

God,
In the words we speak together,
may the contents of our hearts
find a place in your sight and in your redemption.
Together we say: Amen.

When I was just a little kid I wandered into a Baptist church. Our family didn't go to church. And actually I didn't so much wander there as I was taken there by a friend of the family who was worried about the state of soul. So, while my family was sleeping in, even at that early age, sitting in church all by myself, adults all around me, listening to the preacher. And I have to tell you that I loved that church. There was just something about going to church with all the big people that made me feel surrounded by care. And I loved the little cups of grape juice we got, the little pieces of bread we got once a month. I loved the hymns, all of us singing together raising our voices. I loved standing up and sitting down and standing up again. I was *born* to be a preacher. I just loved it!

What I *didn't* love, what I couldn't understand, in fact, was all the talk about God's anger. I would sit in church – and in this church that had an altar call. Week after week I would listen to the preacher talk about hell and fire and how God was angry at all of us and we didn't stand a chance unless we gave our hearts to Jesus. I would just clench my fists on the front of the pew not knowing what to do. Those images of God were so real to me that once I locked myself in the bathroom waiting for God to come get me because of some childhood infraction I had done. That is a scary way to live – sure I could never be forgiven.

¹ Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), New Testament. 1989.

So I imagine I am not alone. I imagine there are others here who have heard stories about an angry God who is upset about one thing or another, serving the earth, ready to destroy someone or something. I have spent literally hours as a pastor sitting with people who are still wrestling with those images of God. And lest we think that belongs only to the Baptists, we only need to remember that we are, after all, the denomination of the 18th century preacher Jonathan Edwards, whose most famous sermon was titled “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.”

Today’s text doesn’t help.

You know, it was written at a time of war and terror. It was written at a time when the nation of Judah was crumbling. Jerusalem was being overrun. The elite of the country were being carried off into exile. Whooh ... Ezekiel is quite a book!

So, I have to tell you, when I first read these words and I knew it was my text, I found myself looking around for another scripture. I actually thought maybe we could preach on something else. I have come *too far* from those childhood images of an angry God to *ever* want to go back there. But then, I found myself thinking again: About anger. About how it functions in every relationship. About how it comes up in me. Anger is such a complex emotion. It might be called justified. It might be called righteous. It might be called destructive. It might be called something that deepens our relationship. Or it might be called the thing that swept everything away. So complex.

But here’s what I realized, if I imagine that God is relational and capable of something like love, I also need to look at what it means to talk about God’s anger. A lot of people who talk about anger say it is a secondary emotion, and underneath it you will find another feeling: hurt or disappointment, fear, grief. Anger is there to alert us that something is wrong. Maybe we call it anger because we have no other words to describe the fire that sweeps through us, or sweeps through our community, when it is clear that something is happening among us that is wrong and has to change. Maybe we’re talking about the energy that dismantles our callousness, takes apart systems of injustice, in the hope of creating something new.

Let me be clear: I am not talking about that out-of-control feeling that strikes out and does intentional harm to another and then justifies it. No, I am talking about that energy for the good that wells in us when we feel fear or know loss, or experience pain when we see injustice and long for change. The poet David White is talking about that kind of anger when he says, “Anger at its heart is the deepest form of compassion.” For another, for the world, for myself, for a life, for the body, for a family, for all our ideals, all our vulnerability, and all of that possibly about to be hurt.

Loyce Ong’udi

On April the 17th, Meghan Pritchard invited me to preach at Prospect, her UCC church on Capitol Hill. A week earlier she had sent me readings which were challenging to translate. I asked if I could change them. Meghan said yes. So I chose Psalm 13, a psalm of David. As you know, David is venting to God about the afflictions of his people. I can relate to that because that Psalm was my story. In early 2000, Rabour, my childhood village, lamented to God *over* and *over* again as they experienced one fire of death after another from HIV/AIDS tsunami.

After she sent last week ... Catherine Foote invited me to come and preach. After she sent me that reading that you just heard – [Chuckle.] You know where this is going, right? ... I called our Catherine and asked her, “Really, Catherine, can we change this reading as you have mentioned to something

relatable?” And Catherine’s response to me was, “Dear Sister Loyce, I hear you, but you have to go through the fire. So brothers and sisters in this church, let’s go through the fire together.

Friends: A lot of you are new to this church and new to me. So I want to give you a little bit of a background here. From 2002 to 2008 I was a full-time student, a single parent, and within that period I established a not-for-profit. *That* was my response to AIDS tsunami that I just mentioned. That AIDS tsunami was threatening to swallow my childhood village. As my work grew, I traveled a great deal locally and internationally as a keynote speaker on impacts of AIDS on rural communities.

And even during that period of great sadness, there was good news. In 2003 my daughter Audrey and I became United States citizens. *You*, our family in this church, stood by us as we swore our allegiance to our new country. And when I was on those many business trips that I have mentioned, whether they happened was during Seabeck or Monday through Friday during schooldays, you, my family members, picked Audrey from school and stayed with her over the weekend. *You are* the family that I have chosen. *You are* the family in the United States that I have.

A year later, in 2004, when my sister June died on her birthday from HIV/AIDS the chapel was full. It is also in this church that I founded Rabour Village Project (RVP) the not-for-profit that I mentioned earlier. So when the not-for-profit was founded, you embraced it as your own. You donated money. You volunteered for major fund-raising activity. I am, I was, and will forever be grateful. And I want you to know, because I have another chance to tell you this: that the members of Rabour Village are forever grateful for your support.

It is because of my personal experience, *my* personal experience with AIDS, that I left the Gates Foundation to go back to school, to study Public Health for my undergraduate, and for my graduate studies, studied at the Dan Evans School of Public Policy and Governance.

In 2008 immediately after I graduated or finished my course studies, I got into an aeroplane and went to Rabour for five months to work. I was excited because I knew that I was now going to grow my organization, my life’s work, to honor those communities that, because of you and myself, we made a great difference. We were balm in their Gilead. While in Kenya, my dreams disappeared as the vision of the organization took a different turn. Many friends of this church fought to save the organization. And I know without a doubt it required many of you and all of you to be involved, to help me, to support me.

But why do I tell you this sad story of what happened in 2009?

There is a quote from Desmond Tutu that I go to over and over again and that I love a lot. A person is only a person through other persons. You, I can’t be a human being in isolation. You are human only in relationships.²

It has been over six years and I feel the need to ask this question, what happened my family? There was a tiny of group who worked with me at this time. Why didn’t those of you, the many of you who filled rooms during my presentation ... donated ... What happened? Why didn’t you ask me what happened to RVP. RVP was born in this church. RVP was more of a stable name – for those of you

² Desmond Tutu (©1989). The words of Desmond Tutu. Edited by Naomi Tutu. NY, NY: Newmarket Press., p.73. See also www.goodreads.com/quotes/132842-a-person-is-a-person-through-other-persons-none-of.

who are new – more than Mwanzo has been. So in 2010 after deep despair and feeling like a stranger in my own home here, I left UCUC for six months.

Again, for anyone who is new to this information, this church was extremely supportive, as you continue to be today with Mwanzo and the organization. My new beginnings. “Mwanzo” is a Swahili word for new beginnings. I am, I will always be grateful for both your financial and your support for Mwanzo. I love you deeply. I love you my church family. I have no doubt whatsoever – this is not to say I have doubt – I have no doubt – but that you equally love me back. I was, though, on fire. I needed your human support. And for the most part I felt abandoned. But even in that difficult story I’ve just shared with you, there is hope ... Even as the fire of anger was threatening to consume me as I looked into your faces and you didn’t see me.

So I missed you so much, so I came back to church [after] six months. Nobody asked me where I’d been. But I came to Seabeck in 2010. Unbeknownst to many, my sisters here made it possible for me during Seabeck to travel back to Seattle, to Seattle for mediation to try and save my organization. Again I was among you. But I lost.

So again the question is why do I tell you this story?

I am telling you this story, so many of you who think that this is a continuation for work I have done for a long time. No, it isn’t. This is new. This is a new beginning.

My new beginning, I hope, is a bit _____ [ubuntu??], because I am opening myself today to ask for forgiveness from yourself for having been so angry for abandoning me. I know you *didn’t*; it felt that way.

I also wanted to take this opportunity which I haven’t done before to stand in front of all of you to say thank you. Thank you for helping me to get back my life and the life for my work. It is in this church that Mwanzo was reestablished.

And finally, during the quiet time as I sat on the lawn—during the break time after lunch as I sat on the lawn at Seabeck – a dear sister from this church came to me, and as I shared with her my deep sorrow and the fact that I had just come from Seattle to try to save the organization, she held me for a long time. And she cried deep tears with me, tears of pain. That tears of pain in 2010 and my return to Seabeck, and her genuine sorrow helped to reduce for me that anger. It is partly her gesture and your undying love for me that has made it possible for me to establish my Mwanzo. And that Mwanzo was established in 2011. The work started in 2012.

Brothers and Sisters, we covenant with you each Sunday “to care for and pray for each other in trials of the spirit and in times of joy.” And “to promote God’s reign of justice and peace, meeting the fire of hate with reconciling love.” May it be so.

Catherine Foote

Yes. Let’s go through the fire together. Ezekiel’s story begins in anger. It ends in reconnection. The prophet who speaks of Jerusalem’s destruction then speaks of a valley of dry bones that come to life in a given breath. The prophet, who saw God’s anger at the way injustice was rampant in the land, in the end describes God as a tender shepherd who gathers the people, who stands with the hungry flock, who carries the lambs. Maybe this is the good news of Ezekiel. Maybe this is the Good News

that Loyce brings us. We don't *have* to be afraid of the anger. It tells us something is wrong, gives us a way to stand.

We gather at this table with all that we are, with all that we understand of God. Like any family, sometimes we feel deep love, sometimes we feel deep disappointment, sometimes we feel deep anger. And we still insist on calling for the best in one another.

Again I quote the poet David Whyte: "Anger at its the center flame of being fully alive and being fully here. It is a quality to be followed to its source, to be prized, to be tended, to find a way of bringing ourselves fully into the world."³

UCUCC: LO-CA

Transcribed by Beth Bartholomew from www.universityucc.org/Sermons/2016/07/20/2016 rev. 10-12-2016

³ David Whyte (© 2015). *Consolations: The Solace, Nourishment and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words*.