

## “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”

### Psalm 30

Gordon Wiersma 2/15/09

On July 8, 1741, in Enfield, Connecticut – Puritan & Reformed theologian Jonathan Edwards preached a sermon entitled “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” – this sermon was delivered in the midst of a time of religious revival in American history known as the Great Awakening – and this sermon by Jonathan Edwards is known as one of the great Protestant sermons of that generation – here are some highlights:

*‘You are the object of that very same **anger** and wrath of God, that is expressed in the torments of hell. Yea, God is a great deal more angry with great numbers that are now on earth: yea, doubtless, with many that are now in this congregation, who it may be are at ease, than he is with many of those who are now in the flames of hell.*

*The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times more abominable in his eyes, than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours.*

*O sinner! You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder.’*

In case that isn’t quite clear to you – preacher Edwards says God is angry – angry with you! And you should be very afraid of this very angry God. Do you think ever or often about that? – about God’s anger? I wonder how you feel as you hear that...

I wonder how you felt as you heard Psalm 30 as I read it this morning... I appreciate Psalm 30 – over the years I’ve become particularly familiar with and fond of some of the phrases in it: ‘weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning’; ‘God has turned my mourning into dancing’ – beautiful, renewing, promises of hope and healing. And there’s another often referred to phrase there in Psalm 30 – ‘God’s

anger is but for a moment; God's favor for a lifetime' – it's a phrase also referred to as a promise of hope, that favor, not anger, is our lasting place in God's heart. But as I encountered Psalm 30 this past week, it seemed to me important that I, that we, not only hear the promise of God's favor, but also the presence of God's anger. The Psalmist says that God's anger does not last while God's favor does – but that does not take away the reality of God's anger. Psalm 30 says that part of who God is, is that God is angry – let's stop there – deal with that. Do you think ever, often, of God's anger and what that means for you – to you? God angry with you, with me, with the world? What is God angry about? What does that mean, or matter?

Anger is a tough thing to talk about – all of us are familiar with it – we've all felt anger ourselves and we've all received anger from others. And in general anger doesn't get good reviews: not in most cultures – not in most religions – not in the Bible, at least not when it comes to people. And that's because anger is an emotion that can lead to great harm – the history of humanity is witness to anger as a feeling that expresses itself in great violence - whether it is between individuals or nations, whether it is within families or between strangers. Anger is an emotion that takes shape in violence of every kind – the obvious violence of physical harm and the more subtle violence of emotional harm inflicted. Human beings have found anger to be a dangerous substance – useful perhaps to mold people to a cause, but difficult to control or contain; and there are many admonitions of wisdom to avoid anger, to suppress it – anger is too dangerous to allow.

I find anger a difficult thing to deal with – a challenge both within myself and from others. When I receive anger from others I can be defensive or diminutive, but seldom constructive – someone gets angry at me and I get angry about that! - or scared, appeasing – or wanting to avoid the situation all-together. When I get angry, it can consume me and I am sure I must inflict my wrath on whoever is the object; or my own anger can scare me – and I push it away. As I've tried to be reflective, a bit, about anger, I realize that for there to be anger from someone or to someone, and not have it mushroom into destruction or be

choked off in avoidance – what there needs to be present is actually a great deal of trust – a trust that the relationship is greater than any anger expressed. It's hard for me to deal with anger from someone, or express it, unless I trust that person – otherwise it's too uncertain, too volatile, too scary, too controlling.

And all of that connects, I think, to anger when we talk about God – about who God is and our faith in God. You know, when I asked earlier about if you think ever, or often about God's anger, that is a question that itself says something about our time and culture and faith and even our congregation – there has been in the history of biblical faith and Christian faith many times when there would be no question that God's anger – the wrath of God – was a fixture in the forefront of faith; and there are traditions and churches today where that is still the case. That's not true though in most churches today – it's not a focus in this congregation - it's not a theme of my preaching – I haven't heard a lot of hellfire and brimstone from Jill as of yet...

And I'm good with that – there's lots of good reasons for that which we could go into, but we should realize that our reasons usually do have something to do with reactions as well – and for us there has been a theological and cultural reaction to what happens when God's anger is too much the focus. When I hear that sermon from Jonathan Edwards, I can in some ways be bemused, just finding it too extreme to take seriously – I can even appreciate some of the theology of it in some much broader scope, and I don't want to belittle Edwards as a theologian or caricature him just for this; but deeper down I am shocked at that expression of God – and aware of the persistent ways in which anger, violence, hell, judgment, punishment have been used to induce fear in the hearts of the faithful. But in a reaction to taking away God's anger and our fear at the center of faith – is there anything lost in ignoring God's anger completely?

There is – there is when we realize that we can trust God's anger because we trust God – I believe we can trust God to teach us about anger – and find how anger can be a way to express not violence and fear, but a need for restoration, connection, fullness. I've

asked myself this week, if I would really have respect for God if God were not angry about some things in this world – when God’s children are treated unjustly, when they suffer hunger and homelessness, when there is war and destruction, when there is violence of the powerful over the weak, when creation is violated – yes God’s heart is broken and God grieves, but yes too God is angry – because what God desires is justice and peace, is community and love – and there is a righteous furor that burns in God’s heart at the brokenness of this world. I’ve asked myself this week, doesn’t it have to be true that God is angry about some things in the church – in our church? – when the church continues to divide rather than unite; when people are excluded rather than welcomed; when races are separated rather than connected; when convenience reigns over commitment. Yes, God’s Spirit is alive and active to empower and transform, but yes too God is angry at the brokenness of Christ’s body. I have asked myself this week, doesn’t it have to be true that God is angry about some things in my life? – that yes, God is the source of grace and forgiveness, hope and healing in my life, but that yes too God cares enough about me to be angry at the choices I sometimes make as well – angered by choices that diminish others and myself, by the waste of the gifts and blessings given to me.

And how about you? – God’s anger, God angry at, you? Perhaps you think way too much about that already, God’s anger – or you are right now in a particular place of suffering – and it is really just about God’s grace that you need to hear today- then I urge you, please, ignore this sermon right now. But most of us today in some place in our lives – and all of us will, at some point in our lives – need to deal with God’s anger. We will need to face it, and trust it – not as sinners in the hands of angry God who dangles us like a spider above the flames of hell; but as sinners, which we are, in the hands of angry God, which God is, that have faith that God’s anger in this moment is meant to point us to God’s favor for a lifetime – for eternity- and for this moment too. If we have the faith to see God’s anger about this world and our church and our lives, then we will have the faith also to see the path of God’s grace to bring us into forgiveness and mercy and justice.

There's a wonderful little book called "Your God is Too Small" by J.B. Phillips which has been around for awhile now – and I'm sure I've referred to it before in sermons and will again – the book describes how our conceptions of God often limit who God is and keep us from the fullness of God. A God of anger and wrath – a God in whose eyes you are abominable – is too small a God. And I'm afraid the church still has a lot of repairing to do for the angry God that has often been presented. But what Psalm 30 says to us is that a God without anger is too small as well – God's anger points us to part of the fullness of who God is and the fullness of life that God is about.

There's plenty about God's anger – about the wrath of God – that I don't have figured out; I'm not sure what it all means in the Bible or this world or my life. But I do believe that I, that we, can trust God's anger – that we do not have to be afraid of it – and in fact need to listen to it – need to find ways for us and our world to respond to the anger of God with repentance and renewal. It is the anger of the God of grace – the anger of the God of love – the anger of the God of life; and I believe that the more we can put together God's anger with the grace and love and life with which God embraces us and this world in Jesus Christ, the more we will be able to have anger in our lives and our world not be about violence and fear, rage and destruction- but about pointing us to the need for restoration, connection and fullness. 'God's anger is but for a moment' ...this moment too – listen to God's anger– our God is too small without it; 'God's favor is for a lifetime' ...this time too and always – God's grace beyond our imagination. The fullness of God which leads us to join in the words of the Psalmist: 'O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you forever.'  
AMEN.