

Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Third Sunday after Pentecost, June 21, 2020
Ephesians 4:29–32
“Simon and the Big, Bad, Angry Beasts”
By Rev. Sue Trigger

Ephesians 4:29-32 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

29 Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. 30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. 31 Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, 32 and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

This morning I am introducing a sermon series I have been creating in my mind for a long time. Storybook sermons. One Sunday a month I will create a sermon based on a storybook. There are so many beautiful children’s books with important messages that can speak to all of us. For today’s story, I chose one that is perfect for Father’s Day. Take a look...

Show video – Simon and the Big Bad Angry Beasts by Ian DeHaes

Anger, one of the most effective ways a young child communicates with their parents. When Charlie was little his anger was a lot like Simon’s terrible lion. He could roar pretty loudly, but it was Kate who had the anger like the fire breathing dragon. She had a scream that was so loud and shrill that it made your ear drums rattle. The best way to survive was to leave the room until she was done venting.

Thankfully, neither of them are here to talk about my dragon. I imagine that all of you have big, bad, angry beast that comes to visit from time to time. We all do. Anger is normal and even good for us. You might be surprised to hear me say that. Christians often struggle with how we are supposed to handle anger. It may be that you were taught that anger is sinful and so you’ve learned to push your angry beasts back inside where they simmer and stew.

The Bible has a lot to say about anger, but it doesn’t say that it is sin. Anger is part of our humanity, it is also godly. Yes, God gets angry. The Bible is full of stories about the anger of God. God floods the earth out of anger with humanity. When the Israelites turned their back on all that God had done for them, his anger was

explosive. One of the most surprising outbursts from God is in the book of Amos 5:21. “I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.” Ouch! That is hard to hear.

We know that Jesus also had some angry beasts. Once when Peter was challenging Jesus, Jesus responded angrily, “Get behind me Satan.” When Jesus went to the Temple in Jerusalem to worship, he was overcome with anger at the injustice of the money changers who made it difficult or impossible for the poor to worship in the temple. His anger was so great that he threw over the tables and everything went flying. I think his anger sounds a little like Simon’s rhinoceros who cleared everyone away in its rage.

If God gets angry, and Jesus gets angry, why would we think that we can’t get angry? And yet we do. There has been a lot of anger in the world these last few weeks. There have been protests and battles brewing everywhere. India and China were throwing rocks at each other a few days ago. Rocks! Some peaceful protests dissolved into riots and vandalism, others were met with pepper spray, tear gas, and mounted police. Social media continues to chronicle hateful, angry speech about all kinds of issues. Even pastors and church members have been speaking out in anger. That one even sparked an angry conversation about whether Christians should ever act out in anger.

So what do we do with our anger? This is where the Bible is clear about anger. Proverbs 16: 32 “One who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and one whose temper is controlled than one who captures a city.” In today’s reading from Ephesians 4, verse 31 says something that helps us understand when anger becomes a problem. “Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice.” When your anger comes from bitterness and is combined with wrath and slander and malice – then your anger is a problem. Then you are acting in ways that damage people. Wrath is anger that is vengeful. Slander is anger that is dishonest. Malice is anger with the desire to do evil. That looks very different than anger that is fighting injustice, like Jesus did; or anger that leads us to more holy, heartfelt worship – like God desires.

Susan Hulen, Professor of New Testament at Emory University wrote about this passage in Ephesians saying, “The church has often had difficulty teaching about anger. While this passage and others sound an important cautionary note about the effects of anger on the community, too often the message has been that anger should be swallowed or ignored. The irony is that, in trying to act like “good Christians” who do not experience anger, anger that does exist often goes underground where it festers and creates more serious problems. The results can be easy to spot. In many congregations, what began as a small incident sometimes lingers for years because of the anger that exists on either side, anger that is never expressed. The situation applies to individuals within congregations as well as to conflicts between groups. Pastors and other leaders in

the church often exacerbate the problem by skirting around the issue in order to avoid conflict themselves. Yet the "peace" that results is not rightly called "peace."ⁱ

So how can we turn those angry beasts into beautiful butterflies? Ephesians 4:25 gives us an important answer. "Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body." If we back up to verse 15 we gain more insight, "Speaking the truth in love, let us grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ". Speak the truth in love. Anger and love are not polar opposites. When a child shouts in anger at you because she is frustrated, it doesn't mean that she loves any less. Setting the angry beasts free can be healing when we remember that truth and love what we value most. When Simon realized that he would have preferred a hug from his dad or a kiss from his mom or to play with his friends, he realized that love was what he most desired and so he began to focus on dealing with his anger. He closed his eyes and concentrated hard until calm spread through his whole body and the firey dragon exploded into a thousand butterflies carrying his anger away.

Love is always the answer, but that doesn't mean it can't exist alongside anger. Speaking the truth in love can be a healing strategy in a situation of anger. Speaking honestly with someone, naming a situation for what it is, calling others to account, giving voice to feelings, and confessing one's own participation in wrong-doing are pathways to justice and healing. When love is the framework for expressing whatever has made us angry, healing can result. Even situations that seem inexcusable are sometimes transformed from a dragon to a thousand butterflies by this approach. The challenge is always getting your anger under control enough to be able to speak the truth in love and not bitterness.

When you are angry, I encourage you to take a page from Simon and take some time to sit quietly and practice some mindfulness meditation. Focus on how your body feels, how rapidly your heart beats. Take some deep breathes and focus your mind on feeling calm, quiet and peaceful, then think about why something has made you angry. Where is the love in your anger? Is it love for others that has caused your anger? Is it love denied that has caused your anger or does your anger come from a selfish desire? I have included a butterfly pattern along with my sermon that you will find on the website today. Cut out some butterflies and write the things that make you angry on some and write how you can respond to your anger on others. Put them in front of you as you meditate. Instead of denying your feelings, take the time to peacefully meditate on them, and then you can begin to think about how you will respond. Will you respond with a big, bad, angry beast or will you respond by speaking the truth in love?

ⁱ Hylan, Susan, Preach This Week, Commentary on Ephesians 4: 25 – 5:2, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=374