

Sermon for Sunday, Nov. 15, 2020
St. Mark's Episcopal Church
By Laura Kozminski

Today, I want to talk about anger. Rage. It's a feeling we're all likely familiar with. By way of an example, I want to tell you a story that happened just earlier this week. On Wednesday, my son Danny, who is seven, got off his bus, and as I took his hand to walk home, he yanked my arm to pull me down to him and said, "Something happened on the bus." I was immediately on high alert.

But what he shared with me wasn't something that happened to him. On his bus that day, two white second graders bullied and belittled two little bi-racial Kindergartners--hitting them, pulling their masks and taunting them with racial slurs that I won't even repeat here. Danny was crying as he told me this.

I was so surprised at the words these white children used -- these racial taunts. Where had they heard this? How can this happen here, now?

But the surprise was quickly replaced by fury. I pulled Danny back to the bus stop to find these boys. Instead, I found the little kindergartners with their mother, an immigrant from Kenya. Her children were crying, and she couldn't understand them through their tears. I had to stammer out an explanation of what took place, what Danny told me. I could barely get the words out. How do you tell another mother that her children were attacked because of the color of their skin? In 2020!

I walked with her to confront the bus driver. He claimed he didn't hear or see any of this. The other mother remained surprisingly calm. I wondered if perhaps that calm came from experience with this sort of thing before. It was new to me. I was shaking and trying not to shout. *How could he not see this happening?* I seethed. *My son just*

witnessed real racism! These kindergartners are traumatized! I wanted swift justice and maybe a little retribution.

When I got home I paced around my kitchen for a few minutes, texted my friends the story, then shot off a red-hot email to the principal. Then I got sneaky and hunted up the email addresses of the white boys' parents. I drafted a raging, demanding email. Then deleted it. I drafted a slightly less demanding email. Should I send it?

Have you ever been in this situation? Not this exact situation. I mean, have you ever been so worked up about something you feel you absolutely must respond? The angry text or email or social media post practically writes itself. The words fly out of your mouth without a moment's thought? Typically, for me, my rage isn't even based on something as real or serious as racism. Somehow my anger ignites over little things, too. We are tempted at every moment to vent our feelings. Our culture provides a permission structure for rage. We tell ourselves it's a form of honesty, that the world needs this.

This has been such a tumultuous, chaotic, frightening and painful year -- it feels sometimes like we live inside a pressure cooker. Each of us is just waiting to be [snap] triggered.

It's why, when we read these Bible passages from today's lectionary, which are all about anticipating end-times, that they feel uncomfortably familiar. The images presented in these readings, the suffering they depict feel like they were written for our time. When I read in Zephaniah's prophecy that all will be laid waste, brought to devastation, and "neither their silver nor their gold will save them," I look around in 2020, as we are in the midst of a surge in the coronavirus, when rich and poor alike are

brought low, and all of us have already lost so much and so many, and I think *we're there*.

When I read in the Psalm that destruction will come to us suddenly and without warning, "like labor pains come upon a woman and there will be no escape," I think about that Friday, March 13th when everything, even schools, were suddenly shut down, and I think *we're there*.

It's easy to take these readings and project them onto our current situation. Our more fundamentalist Christian brothers and sisters actually see our current political crises and pandemic-related suffering as a kind of fulfillment of Biblical prophecy. But I think that's overly simple.

This kind of chaos is the historical reality that many generations have experienced *and* which existed during the time our Bible readings were recorded. Zephaniah lived over 2600 years ago in the Kingdom of Judah in what is now the Middle East. That kingdom was constantly being invaded. Foreign people, with their different gods and ways of living were disrupting their traditions. The young people of Judah were being tempted away from monotheism. This sort of change was terrifying to the elders. *The future of their faith and culture were uncertain*.

The Epistle and the Gospel were written after Jesus' death, as Jesus' followers were shunned by established religious leaders and faced violent persecution from Roman rulers. For these early disciples, *the future was uncertain*.

It is no wonder, then, that their writings reflect a need for certainty. These prophets and psalmists, letter and gospel writers, wrote the God *they needed* -- a God of firm boundaries and exacting justice. A God that would protect the faithful and

violently exterminate their enemies (which were many). A God that was wrathful and just frightening enough to keep the community in line -- to keep them bonded together in opposition to outsiders and ensure their survival.

What we learn from these readings is, I think, less about God's true nature, and more about ours.

We, like our Biblical ancestors, are in the midst of political chaos, threats to our community, painful personal losses and deep, deep fear of the future. Yet at the very moment when we most need to bind ourselves together, we are falling apart. Anger, cruelty and suspicion are everywhere. We feel free to give vent to it. But Paul writes in that letter to the Thessalonians, "God has destined us NOT for wrath but for obtaining salvation."

Wrath and anger, vengeance and hatefulness -- these are feelings and actions that destroy the fabric of community. *That's* why Paul warns us against it.

But for the people of the Bible, and even for us today, this is *unsatisfying*. We want retribution! We want the satisfaction of the sent email! The writers of today's Bible passages solve that human need for vengeance by giving that right to God. *Not us*. God has the power of vengeance, not human beings.

So what can we do with our frightening dread and anger?

I would point you to the last line of the Psalm: "teach us to number our days so that we might apply our hearts to wisdom." In other words, we ask God to help us be aware of the end of life, so that our hearts are focused on wise thought and action. And as the Epistle says, we must "keep awake... put on the breastplate of faith and love and

a helmet of hope..." That last line of the Epistle urges us, "encourage one another and build up each other."

This is how the community survives.

Back to my story about the bus. I drafted several emails to those parents, but never hit send. *Thank goodness*. I took a breath and went for a walk.

On that walk I was engaged in a kind of prayer. Why am I so angry? I wanted to know. Is my anger righteous? Is any anger righteous? Would sending my emails really help this situation? Would shaming these parents really lead to change? No. I didn't need to put more anger and hot temper out into the world. It's 2020 -- we've all had enough of that.

Instead, I decided, better to arrive at the bus stop early the next day and talk with that immigrant mother. Better to use my emotional energy to make sure she was doing okay, to let her know I cared about this situation. The solution was healing, not rage.

Like the good servants of Matthew's Gospel, we must assess what God has given us. Invest our talents -- our money, our skills, our love, our labor, and even our emotions in *healing* and *building* something new.

Don't hide your talents in the ground.

Reject anger, rage and wrath. Give those to God.

Amen.