

OPENING HYMN

“Canticle of the Turning,” *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 723

THEME VERSES

Psalms 44, 51, 69, 137

OPENING PRAYER

Gracious God, thank you for gathering us here in this space and this time. Bring your Spirit of welcome, trust and justice to our time together, opening our minds and our hearts to your words of courage, comfort and community. Amen.

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV preferred)
- Hymnals (*ELW*)

No hard feelings?

Session one

The angst of anger

BY ANNA MADSEN

INTRODUCTION (10 minutes)

Ephesians 4:26 reads: “Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger...”

Housekeeping Hints, by Phyllis Diller, chapter 7, page 98 says: “Never go to bed mad. Stay up and fight.” Diller followed up this quip with another along the same lines: “Remember—never go to bed mad. [My husband] Fang and I never did. However, one year we were up for nine months.”

While we might want to emulate Ephesians, we may actually follow Phyllis!

When you think about it, it’s remarkable that thousands of years and differences in cultures don’t erase the common experience of anger—even if we’ve discovered any number of very different takes on how to address it. The emotion of anger is fundamental and all too familiar in human relationships.

The fact is, a mess of mixed messages complicate how to think about and process anger, especially for women. Are we compelled to let it go at the end of the day, per Ephesians? Is it really sinful to be angry? If so, how exactly do we make sense of Jesus’ turning over the tables at the temple? Where is the line between being “angry” and that other word that can’t be printed in this magazine? And why don’t men have to ask themselves similar questions?

In this first session of our Bible study, with the aid of the Psalms, we’ll think about this common but complicated emotion. These ancient hymns offer sometimes surprising ways to express and contend with anger from God toward humanity, from humanity toward God, and from person to person. Within

these texts we discover that anger was hardly taboo to the Hebrew people. They recognized both anger's righteousness and its risk. By venting anger in prayer and communal liturgy, they staved off toxic, dangerous manifestations of it in their personal lives.

Share aloud or reflect:

1. It is said that anger isn't a primary emotion, but a response to another emotion. Do you agree? What emotions inspire

anger? How might detecting the core emotion(s) help us to re-imagine and thereby address or steward anger?

📖 **Read:** 1 Peter 4:7-11

Time, talents and treasures. Who hasn't heard this trifecta of personal offerings on a Stewardship Sunday or during a stewardship drive? Yet stewardship encompasses far more than these three expressions of personal giving. We are also called to steward

STEWARDSHIP OF EMOTION (Optional, 8 minutes)

How are we called to steward anger? Theologian Douglas John Hall writes in *The Stewardship of Life in the Kingdom of Death* that Christians have a tradition of discomfort with expressing anger. Hall believes that's because we are uncomfortable with acknowledging the realities (and the darkness) of human capacities. According to Hall, a deep dive into the First Testament can help us rediscover "a reason to be—to be involved, to care, to assume the posture of steward in God's world..." Hall adds: "Recovering these depths, we are enabled to be truthful about the world's wickedness without concluding in our hearts that wickedness is the last word to be uttered about this world" (p. 116).

Hidden in his observation are these gems:

1. Acknowledging wickedness denies it power. Imagine a time when you had ambiguous, awful, abdominal pain. After Googling your symptoms, maybe your heart raced, you couldn't focus, or you gave yourself a week to live. But perhaps, when you mustered the courage to go to the doctor, you sheepishly realized, thanks to some probing questions, that you'd recently ingested more than your fair share of beans, cauliflower and onions, but not nearly enough water. By naming something, we have control over it, instead of it having control over us.

2. Because the well-being of the world matters to God, it matters to us as God's stewards. One cannot observe wickedness without being outraged, precisely on behalf of the Creator who wills goodness and not evil. The reformer Martin Luther, in his "Heidelberg Disputation," coined the phrase "calling a thing what it is." He did this in the context of identifying a theologian of glory versus a theologian of the cross. The former, he said, calls evil good and good evil. The latter "calls a thing what it is." The temptation, Luther said, is to calibrate God to our understanding of what is Good, rather than to our understanding of what is Good to God. As stewards, we are called to align our understanding with God's understanding of what is just and unjust. Then we are called to represent God's indignation in and to the world, as we seek to right the wrong.

3. It is not pre-ordained that wickedness will prevail. Rather, as Old Testament theologian Walter Brueggemann says, people of faith help to "constitute" the world. In *Israel's Praise: Doxology Against Idolatry and Ideology*, Brueggemann writes: "God is still operative and exercises choices along the way... the world is still open and we are not fated...human agents, as creatures in God's image, share in God's imagining activity" (p. 12). 🌿

emotions and the experiences behind them.

Stewardship orients us toward God and toward the world, in everything we do (or don't do), say (or don't say), and believe (or don't believe). This foundational notion about the call of faith ripples throughout Scripture. The meaning of stewardship in both Greek (*oikonomia*) and English is "to manage the household." Managers (as anyone who has worked for a company or factory knows) do not own the house/company/store, but represent the hopes, intentions and agenda of the one who called them into service.

ANGER TOWARD GOD (20 minutes)

A simple Internet search using keywords like "anger toward God," reveals pervasive Christian ambivalence about the topic. Titles like "It's a sin to be angry at God" and "Anger at God as a spiritual struggle" and "Anger toward God is a sign of unfaith" leap off the screen. Scrolling through the results, one can feel guilty and maybe even the subject of the search—angry!

I can't help but wonder if the authors of these webpages have really read their psalter.

All sorts of psalms reveal that for the ancients, the experience of being angry at God was not only reasonable, but a powerful act of faith. Psalm 44 is a case in point.

📖 Read: Psalm 44

Now it's one thing to be upset with someone who has given us no reason to expect anything but mean-spirited behavior. In those instances, we are angry at them and at ourselves for cueing up another predictable instance of being hurt. It's entirely something else when we believe someone deserves our trust, loyalty and love, and we feel they've betrayed it all.

That's precisely what the psalmist is making abundantly clear to God in verses 1-8: We know of your long-standing love of your people, God, who are

our people, because our people have told us of your steadfast protection and graciousness and strength that courses through you and therefore through us.

Given that, the psalmist's community is asks at the end of Psalm 44: Are you asleep, God? Because we are not. We remain faithful; you would know if we had become disloyal. Remember who you are, because we do, and we are dying because of it.

Share aloud or reflect:

2. Have you ever had an experience when you could have identified with the community offering up this psalm?
3. Is it possible to regain trust in a situation like the one the psalmist writes about?

Scholars are not certain about the precise occasion underlying the authorship of this psalm. However, since it is not the cry of an individual, but rather that of a collective nation, some speculate that the context for its creation may have been the horrific trials of the Jewish rebels called the Maccabees, persecuted by Hellenistic Greek king Antiochus Epiphanes, who ruled from 175-164 B.C. So terrible was the persecution that the word 'macabre' actually stems from the sufferings of these people—pious Jews who refused to succumb to Greek influence (called Hellenization) and paid the price with their blood.

The apostle Paul references this psalm when he writes to persecuted Christians that: "As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered'" (Romans 8:36).

Behind both the psalm and Paul's choice to quote it rests a belief that suffering for God's sake is faithful service to God. But the psalmist was not down with God's apparent abdication of duty: "You have sold your people for a trifle, demanding no high price for them." The people felt their suffering was for naught, making it even more indefensible.

Angry at God, they grounded their fury in the very nature of the relationship that God established.

But it is worth noting that the people do cry out. You don't cry out if you believe no one will hear

or care. For example, as I've sometimes said to my children: "I love you so much that I am really angry! If I didn't care about you, I wouldn't be angry with you. But I do, so I am!"

REFINING FIRE (Optional, 8 minutes)

 **Read:** Proverbs 25:21-22

"Heap coals on his head." Most of us have probably heard this familiar phrase, taken from Proverbs 25:21-22, but what on earth does it *mean*? Scholars themselves aren't always so sure, but they suggest several options:

1. It may reflect our human tendency, as in Psalm 140 (see verse 10), to want retribution, judgment and lasting pain on one who harms us. Many people of faith gravitate to the image of fire as lasting punishment: eternal hellfire and brimstone, and all of that.

2. The passage may use images of the refiners' vocation to say that fire destroys that which is impure; and it retains, cleanses, perfects and beautifies that which is left behind. If you are into refining, you know that a hot fire is needed to make your creation breathtaking. The point of the fire and brimstone in this scripture is to condemn evil and restore good. If we read Proverbs 25:21-22, not as vengeful, but as righteous wrath, we acknowledge that this hot blaze leaves the created thing as it was meant to be.

3. The passage may refer to calling a completely reckless person back to the right path, by showering such a person with love, gentleness and mercy. Now, one could argue that this would potentially be passive-aggressive, manipulative, bordering on cheap grace, and dangerous. Dangerous, because it places the onus of the healing responsibility on someone who has already been hurt, who is already vulnerable. Yet there is something to be said for offering kindness to people who do harmful things. Depending on the

circumstances, when it is safe to do so and there is some confidence that a hurt will be acknowledged, this approach can indeed be reconciling and healing.

4. The most interesting interpretation of Proverbs 25:21-22 is that it refers to a well-known practice in some parts of the ancient Near East. Anyone foolish or distracted enough to forget to keep their own coals burning would see their fires go out. They would then be forced to go to a neighbor for help. If they'd taken it for granted that their family's fire would always burn, they would be forced to admit that now they, too, needed help. Without other people intervening (despite the inconvenience to themselves), this person would (admittedly by their own fault) be hungry and cold. But in addition to being called out, the individual equally needs help and kindness. In response, the compassionate neighbor would place hot coals in a bowl fashioned to fit atop one's head, then set this bowl on the noggin of the impossible neighbor—just so she or he would have a shot at rewarming their fire. Because as people of faith know, no one should be left out in the cold without help to again find and maintain the fire necessary to live.

So perhaps the best interpretation isn't an either/or, but an all-of-the-above. God wants our flames to never die out. God is committed to restoration, mercy and grace. But that does not mean that God doesn't get righteously angry—nor that we don't whip up reasons for God to be so! God's anger is hot—righteously hot—yet it never burns our essence. Even when everyone else would say otherwise, our essence is good—breathtakingly beautiful when restored, worthy of being refined. God's intent is to let everyone rediscover the goodness that has been hidden. 🌸

This psalm expresses not just anger, but fidelity and love for God, and trust that God will remember what God's people have not forgotten.

Share aloud or reflect:

4. Why are Christians uncomfortable with expressing anger toward God?
5. Can you recall feeling upset with God, maybe even betrayed?
6. Have you ever felt as if God was absent? What faith resources have you used to attend to this feeling of abandonment?
7. Psalm 44 and many other psalms expressing displeasure at God aren't in the Revised Common Lectionary. How might we help people to access this tradition for their own spiritual use?

ANGER FROM GOD TOWARD US (15 minutes)

It's been said that modern people have lost the fear of God. We have insulated ourselves from a raw experience of trepidation and awe before God, buffered by gadgets and distractions, and for many in the West, relative ease of life. In eras past, people feared death and finally facing God. Today many people fear the process of dying more than death itself.

Some point out that, as far as church traditions and architecture go, Orthodox Christians have best held onto awe. In contrast to the sense of welcome and coziness at many Protestant churches, Orthodox churches confront you straightaway with the Pantocrator (the creator of all things) in iconography, scents, lofty spaces and echoing music.

Psalm 51 invites us to that sort of sanctuary space where we become fully aware of our mortality,

our sinfulness, and God's power and willingness to address both.

Read: Psalm 51

This psalm is attributed to David, pleading for mercy after he raped Bathsheba and killed her husband, Uriah. Worshippers, both individually and corporately, use this text to speak on their own behalf, when facing God after a mighty transgression.

Many psalms begging for God's reprieve speak about external, unjust trauma or sins of the ancestors which may (unjustly) continue to befall the living faithful. But Psalm 51 is somewhat unique, because it has absolutely no illusions about the reason for the plea: the psalmist committed horrific offenses against others, and therefore against God. It's entirely the psalmist's fault, and now God's impending, just wrath must be addressed and abated.

For this reason, in *Psalms in Interpretation* (John Knox Press, 1994) author Richard Mays, an Old Testament scholar, finds it revealing that in contrast to other psalms which ask God to "change this situation," this one asks: "Change me; I am the problem." There is no escaping either God or the wretched truth of one's deeds, and this psalmist knows it.

This is not the cry of someone fearful of an abusive figure. This psalm reflects a self-awareness stirred up in knowing a God whose anger is inspired justly. Neither "I am sorry" nor incense will abate God's fury; only a change of identity can renew not just the spirit within the psalmist, but the right relationship with God. Here, God's impending anger is the catalyst for contrition and a return to righteousness.

Share aloud or reflect:

8. What is the difference between capricious anger, abusive anger and righteous anger?

9. Is it possible to express anger without risking a breach in relationship? What must be in place for that to happen?
10. Have you experienced anger as a tool for re-alignment?

ANGER TOWARD OTHERS (Optional, 5 minutes)

I'll never forget sitting in a Lenten evening worship during my seminary days and reading Psalm 137 responsively.

This wrenching song details the pain of the Israelites, now captive in a foreign land: "By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion" (verse 1). The psalm tells how the victors taunted and invited the humiliated Hebrew people to sing their cultural and religious songs. The Israelites refused to allow their hymns and their lives to be reduced to mockery. The Israelites also refused to forget Jerusalem, saying that no length of captivity would steal their hearts away from their homeland. Knowing the history, one cannot sing this psalm and not viscerally feel both the humiliation and the persistent pride of these captured people.

But then the psalmist promises that the horrific acts of the Babylonians would *also* not be forgotten, and ends the hymn with this clincher:

*O daughter Babylon, you devastator!
Happy shall they be who pay you back
what you have done to us!
Happy shall they be who take your little ones
and dash them against the rock!* (Psalm 137:8-9)

The voices in the seminary chapel, at first robust and aggrieved in spirit, suddenly trailed off and stopped. People shifted uncomfortably in their chairs at the thought of having just prayed for the death of innocents, these babies of oppressors. Worship ended, but the debate ensued. Some found this psalm, as one *prayed*, not just *recited* by us, to

be totally inappropriate. They found it impossible to reconcile hope for the violent death of children with Jesus' "Let the children come to me!" Others made the case that as Scripture, this text, too, has been deemed holy. They asked if this passage were to be excised, what other passages would be rendered unfaithful, and on what basis, and by whom? That the text was from the Old Testament doesn't make it any less ours, this group said. If the texts were good enough for Jesus, they should be good enough for us.

Now let's explore another psalm that raises similar issues, for different reasons.

WRESTLING WITH DEMONS (20 minutes)

📖 Read: Psalm 69

Psalm 69 is Good Friday's psalm—read on a day where death swirls around everything. There's the death of Jesus. There is also the death of integrity and compassion and justice. Psalm 69 is read on Good Friday in part because of the reference to vinegar offered to the persecuted one, not to mention its powerful cry of lament during unjust suffering.

What's surprising, given the numerous New Testament references to this psalm, are the embedded pleas for retribution against the enemies. Good Friday or not, that doesn't seem to be very Christian.

*Let their table be a trap for them, a snare
for their allies.
Let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot
see, and make their loins tremble continually.
Pour out your indignation upon them, and let
your burning anger overtake them.
May their camp be a desolation; let no one live
in their tents* (Psalm 69:22-25).

These lines drip with desire for vengeance. Interestingly, there is a difference between revenge and vengeance. Revenge, one can argue, is petty

and personal; a new attack inspired by old battles. Vengeance, though, carries a sense of righteous, albeit unwelcome, consequences for unjust acts. In Romans 12:19, Paul references Deuteronomy 32:35, saying: “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’”

This psalm prays that those who create oppression—rather than those who are threatened by it—experience the effects of their misdeeds. Righteous anger or indignation rises up when peace, well-being and justice are threatened. Righteous anger asks not for suffering for suffering’s sake, but for consequences to confront those who cause harm.

Theologian Walter Brueggemann proposes in *Deep Memory, Exuberant Hope* (Augsburg Fortress 2000), that prayer to God is precisely the place we can wrestle with demons of hate. In private and communal prayer, understandable fury and hostility can be directly vented to God, instead of directly acted against the neighbor. Brueggemann writes: “These speech practices provide a way to do something with our brutalizing rage at loss so that it does not escalate into anti-neighborly hurt” (p. 62).

In an earlier book, *The Threat of Life: Sermons on Pain, Power, and Weakness* (Fortress 1996), Brueggemann found this psalm’s honesty to be refreshing, if not initially awkward. It makes sense that we use this psalm on Good Friday, a day wrought out of Jesus’ consistent, searing, honest critique of the powers that be. Brueggemann writes (p. 108):

The reality of Good Friday, as the governor and the crowd learned only late, is an occasion for dangerous social criticism. There is an insistence in the life of Jesus that innocence gives power, that inhumanity is not a safe policy, that honesty is required of reality, and that things must be called by their right names... Jesus got himself killed because he exposed the false ordering of power that paid no attention

to the little ones, among whom he counted himself. He answered the powerbrokers sharply and defiantly, even as he prayed for them: “You have no power over me, unless it had been given you from above” (John 19:11).

In this sense, when we look at the shenanigans of modern-day power brokers who seem to wish for the demise of “the least of these,” when we consider the lies that seek to maintain and consolidate control, when we see the inequities that compound inequality, we have righteous reason to be outraged and to hope that these malevolent impulses not only be stopped, but that those responsible be expected to answer for their misdeeds.

It’s a hope based not in revenge, but in righteous anger. It’s a hope that finds full fruit in righteous consequences—not retribution, but justice.

Share aloud or reflect:

- 11.** Where is the line between anger and hate?
- 12.** Do you see a difference between vengeance and revenge? Justice and retribution?
- 13.** How should faith inform our expectations of consequences for our oppressors?

CLOSING PRAYER

God of righteousness, relieve our fears: our fear of retribution for the radical act of faithful living, our fear of righteous indignation, our fear of calling a thing what it is. Help us trust your justice and your desire that all, even we ourselves, are worthy enough to receive it. Amen.

CLOSING HYMN (5 minutes)

My Lord, What a Morning (ELW 438) 🌸

No hard feelings?

Session one

The angst of anger

OVERVIEW

This session will provide participants with an opportunity to study stewardship of emotions, specifically anger, through the Psalms, especially Psalms 44, 51, 69 and 137. As will become apparent, the Psalms reveal sometimes surprising ways to express and contend with anger from God toward humanity, anger from humanity toward God, and anger from person to person.

OBJECTIVES

This session invites participants to explore the Psalms and:

- Consider a broader definition of stewardship that includes stewarding our emotions, including anger.
- Compare vengeance versus revenge, and justice versus retribution.
- Understand the arc of the faith journey of God's people as a return to righteousness.

SUGGESTED PLAN

This study can be very flexible. Most groups will spend the bulk of their time exploring Psalm 44 and Psalm 51. Don't feel badly if you cannot complete all the sections in the time allowed. If time runs out, suggest that participants read the remainder of the session at home as personal enrichment.

PREPARE AHEAD

- You may opt to have participants read the Scripture texts ahead of time or have volunteers read them aloud during the session. The psalms are not printed in the magazine but can be found in either the NRSV Bible or the *ELW*, beginning on p. 335.

- You will want to offer safe space and gentle direction for people to share their feelings related to anger. You might consider having a pastor or counselor present to help provide extra support where needed. Understand that participants will have both similar and varied perspectives and experiences. Be clear that anger is a feeling, as opposed to aggression, which is threatening or violent behavior. Before the session, if you do not already have these in place, you may wish to place resources (brochures on a table or a poster in the women's restroom or other places) for those who may be experiencing domestic violence or needing a support group for past experiences where anger became violent.

OPENING

Warmly welcome participants, including newcomers. Tell your group your time plan for the sections you will cover. During the session, if you feel a particular section or question may need more time, confirm with participants that this is OK.

Invite participants to sing the opening hymn. Tell participants that the hymn text echoes the themes in this study, especially the refrain, which asks God to "let the fires of your justice burn," and verse 4, which remembers "who holds us fast" as nations rage.

DISCUSSING ANGER

Some may have strong reactions to particular psalms, especially Psalm 137, as well as the idea that expressing our anger (aloud or even privately or in a journal) can be an act of faith and a way to work through complicated emotions. If this is the case, spend a little time talking about how many Christians feel uncomfortable expressing anger toward God or others. Listen and assure them that our feelings around deep emotions like anger are both natural and complicated, and that Scripture also reflects the tension we feel. Encourage participants to listen to each other in a nonjudgmental way. Try to also listen to the psalmist in this way.

You may note that Psalm 44 expresses anger as well as deep, abiding faith. At times, Jesus also expresses anger or irritation. In all these expressions of anger or frustration, the overarching theme is a return to righteousness or a renewed relationship with God. We (and those we love) can help to steward the emotion of anger (either before, during or after it is expressed). We do this so that whenever possible (and it is not always possible in the moment) the drive is toward honest self- and communal reflection, positive change, and righteous (rather than retributive) outcomes.

You may wish to emphasize that anger itself is not the problem. Take coffee, for example. Coffee can boil, but you don't want it to boil over. A coffeepot brews and warms, but can't be left on all day or the vapor will rise, the residue will burn and the coffeepot may warp. Likewise, anger that is not stewarded can turn into actions we regret. Anger that is out of control or suppressed for too long can turn into rage, which is not led by wisdom.

You may wish to point to some practical tips for anger management, such as taking a break (or going for a walk), clear communication, using

“I feel” language or writing honestly in a journal about your angry feelings (as well as other emotions, such as fear, that may lie behind them). If someone has an ongoing conflict that needs resolution, you might encourage them to look for a designated person to talk with who won't gossip or judge them or the person with whom they are in conflict. A pastor or counselor can be a good person to help one work through and interpret anger without fueling it. This person must be fully on board and committed to the intent to dissolve and resolve the problematic situation.

Model gentleness and patience when discussing the idea that God may be angry with us. Note that the author of Psalm 51, fearing God's anger, responds with heartfelt honesty. The author acknowledges that all the wrong the psalmist has done to others who are created in God's image, essentially wrongs the God who created and loves them (verse 4). You might also mention that the psalmist's desperation and grief (verse 1-5) and longing for joy (verses 8 and 12) are a foretaste of our next two sessions on “The Ache of Grief” and “The Peace of Joy.” 🌸

OPTIONAL CLOSING ACTIVITY (15-20 minutes)

Materials needed: hoops of various sizes (for example, embroidery hoops or a hula hoop), craft wire, twine or yarn, ribbons and scraps of fabric.

Using a spider web or a dreamcatcher as a mental image, we will create an individual or communal color splash web to symbolize our re-imagined, transformed and stewarded emotions.

1. Tightly wrap the outside of a hoop (i.e., individuals may each use their own embroidery hoop or a group may create one together using a hula hoop) with twine, yarn or craft wire.

2. Randomly tie additional pieces of wire, twine or

yarn across the hoop, creating a web or dreamcatcher-like pattern across the middle of the hoop, in random directions, leaving random spaces in between.

3. Use different colors of ribbon or strips of fabric to represent emotions. Tie them to the hoop and to the web depending upon the color of your mood. For instance, are you excited about an upcoming event but worried about other aspects of your life? Perhaps some green and purple strips could represent this mix. Attach strips of color that you feel represent the mix of emotions you are experiencing.

4. Use your emotion wheel as art to steward you and anyone else with whom you want to share. 🌸