Wrath: From Polarization to Peacemaking
Jonah 2-4

On Wednesday morning I yelled at someone I didn't know. They couldn't hear me, of course. They were in their car, and I was in my car. We were turning from Hazelglen onto Victoria. There aren't two lanes on Hazelglen, but there's an unwritten rule that if you're turning right, you get as far to the right as you can, and if you're turning left, you get as far to the left as you can, so it effectively becomes two lanes and both cars can turn at the same time, since it's a pretty short light.

But there were two cars in front of me that were square in the middle of the lane, turning right. And the first car decided to turn about as slowly as a car can go while still moving. Inching around the corner. While I sat there helplessly with nowhere to.

I was already in a bad mood on Wednesday morning. I hadn't slept well the night before. I was feeling frustrated and anxious about church stuff. I had just finished reading about the latest bit of chaos being unleased in the United States.

So I got angry. I was angry. And I yelled. I yelled at this person I didn't know whose driving habits just put me over the edge, taking everything that was simmering and boiling it over.

I imagine I am not unique in this experience. Maybe you don't yell at other drivers. But we've all had a moment when all our pent-up frustrations and anger burst out and got the better of us.

This isn't and has never been unusual. Anger is a perfectly normal human emotion. But it does seem to me that I'm angrier more often than I used to be, that there's more simmering below the surface these

days. And it seems that everyone's a little angrier. That as a collective society, we've become less nice to one another, and find it much easier to lash out instead.

Statistically, this is actually true. Every year Gallup does a global assessment of human emotions. The most recent published results are from 2023. The good news of the poll is that negative emotions, including anger, dropped by one or two points from the all-time peak in 2021 and 2022. The bad news is that levels of stress, sadness, and anger are still higher than they've ever been.

Mental health experts say there are a number of factors that contribute to our rising anger, that are all somewhat interrelated. On the one hand life is stressful and chaotic. The pandemic, wars, inflation, and political upheaval mean that life feels precarious, and there's tension everywhere. When posed with a threat, humans are wired to go into "fight" mode, and anger helps us get there. We have a neurological compunction to get angry when we feel stressed, and that anger has to go somewhere. So we end up looking for someone to blame.

The good news – or bad news - for our nervous systems is that our media is now designed to provide us with a steady stream of people to blame. Anger, it turns out, is addictive. It feels good to stew in rage and contempt. Elizabeth Oldfield says that "wrath allows the tension of balancing in complexity to dissolve in the joyous freefall of certainty. It is akin to a sugar high, and as addictive."

Media content creators know this. They know we're more likely to read stories about bad news than good, so that's what they put in front of us. They know we like stories that confirm our biases, so that's what they give us. And they know we like to feel rage and we want people to

blame, so the algorithm sends us one example after another of all the people who are to blame for the stressful situations we find ourselves in, all the people who don't act or think or live like us and must therefore be responsible for the mess we're in.

In his book *Fractured,* Jon Yates says that we have PLM – People Like Me syndrome. We're more likely than ever to spend time with people like us, and so less likely to encounter NLMS, or those who are "Not Like Me." And social media only shows us the aspects of NLMs that are likely to enrage us and confirm our prejudice.

Which is what leads to polarization. To the idea that that group of people over there is inherently bad, and my group over here is inherently good. Which breeds, not just anger, but wrath. Which is an important distinction. Anger isn't all bad. Sometimes it's necessary. There are things in the world that we should get angry about.

But wrath is anger taken to a new level. It's anger…but also contempt. Wrath leads us to write off whole groups of people as evil, unable to change, and unworthy of any attempt on our part to seek reconciliation. Wrath isolates us from each other and makes us less humane – less human – to one another.

And in our inhumaneness, we can do terrible things to other people. Case in point…the Ninevites. The book of Jonah doesn't tell us a whole lot about the Ninevites, just that they were wicked. But other books of the Bible and historical records give us a better picture, and it isn't a pretty one. Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrians, who destroyed the Northern Kingdom in 722 BC. Prior to that, in 701 BC the Assyrians set siege to Lachish, killing thousands of Judeans. We know this because archaeologists have found wall reliefs from the ancient city of Nineveh

depicting multiple images of Judeans being impaled and their heads being stacked up on top of each other. The Ninevites were proud of their cruelty.

So it makes sense that when God tells Jonah to go and preach against the city, Jonah runs in the opposite direction. One does not simply walk into Nineveh.

But God, of course, has other plans for Jonah. The Book of Jonah is a story written with a lot of comedic hyperbole – things happen quickly, they happen dramatically, and it's all a little hard to believe. There's a great storm, Jonah gets thrown overboard by the sailors to appease God, Jonah is swallowed by a great fish and then gets spit up onto land, and finally decides that running away from God is more trouble than its worth. So he goes to Nineveh.

Jonah walks through the city streets over the course of three days, shouting out a simple message: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown." In the Hebrew this is a sentence of just five words – a comedically short warning.

But that's all it takes for the Ninevites. Astonishingly, they believe him. All of them. City advisor to plumber. They put on sackcloth, sit out in the streets, and repent of their wickedness.

So God forgives them. He sees their repentant hearts and his anger abates.

Which makes Jonah furious.

It turns out he didn't run away from Nineveh because he was afraid.

He ran away because he didn't want to give God the chance to forgive his enemies.

He knew that God is "gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love." And he didn't want God to be compassionate to this people who he deemed unworthy of compassion.

And that is wrath.

Jonah still holds out hope that the city will be destroyed, and he goes and sits out in the hills to see if his hope will pan out. It's hot and sunny, so God causes a plant to grow over Jonah to give him shade. But the next morning God causes the plant to wither and die, and Jonah explodes. He's so angry he wants to die.

Which leads to the question at the heart of this whole story.

"You have been concerned about a plant," God tells Jonah, "that sprang up overnight and that you had nothing to do with. Should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left – and also many animals?"

Jonah doesn't answer – the book concludes on the question. One commentator suggests that this ending means the question is now ours to answer. Will we do any better than Jonah when it comes to resisting the pervasive and persistent temptation to restrict the scope of God's concern to us and to our kind of people? Will we give into wrath? Or will we seek restoration and reconciliation with people who are different than us, who have maybe even harmed us?

On February 16, 1994, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, a young man named Valmarcus Jones shot and killed another man named Jeffrey Riley, who

was just 18. Valmarcus, or Val, got away, but a few years later he was indicted on federal drug charges, and in that process, evidence came up convicting Val of Jeffrey's murder.

At the trial, Jeffrey's mother, Jerline stood up, and, shocking everyone, told Val that she had forgiven him. "I can't do anything about it now," she said, "so I'm going to give you over to God. My prayer is you go inside prison walls, and you get to know Him."

For fifteen years Jerline told Val's family to have him call her. For fifteen years Val resisted. But in the meantime, he did come to know God. He started going to church inside prison and was mentoring other inmates. In 2012 Val completed his federal time for the drug charges and returned to Michigan to serve out his life sentence for Jeffrey's murder, eventually ending up in Handlon Prison as a student in the Calvin Prison Initiative. And finally, he was ready to talk to Jerline.

"I called her," he said, "and I just said, 'Mother Jerline, I'm sorry, I'm sorry for taking Jeffrey's life,' and she just shouted and she cried, 'you don't know how many years I have been waiting just for you to say that.'

Jerline now says of that day, "I got me another son."

The two are incredibly close now, and, though separated by prison walls, are working together to share their story and hold out the possibility of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation to others.

Jerline had every right to feel wrath towards Val, to write him off as unworthy of love or forgiveness. But she didn't. It took her time – the trial at which she forgave Val happened a few years after her son was killed – but she decided to reach out to him, not in anger, but in love.

And she stuck with him. She regularly told his family that she wanted to talk to him, to seek peace between them.

In Matthew 5 Jesus tells his followers that instead of seeking revenge, they should turn the other cheek. Elizabeth Oldfield interprets this as an instruction to "stand your ground." Anger fires up our fight or flight response. We either want to lash out and fight, or run away and never come back. But Jesus is saying, "Stand your ground. Don't lash out, and don't give up on a person. Stick with them."

Now, "sticking with a person" doesn't mean "stay in a dangerous situation." In cases of abuse and threat of violence, we should protect ourselves.

Rather, I think Jesus shows us what it means to stick with someone in the next verses of the Sermon on the Mount. "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

This doesn't mean, says Oldfield, that we ought to feel fluffy warm feelings towards our enemies. "Love in theological terms is rarely about feelings at all," she writes, "but about action. Praying a blessing over someone I hate is an act of resistance to that hate, to the wrath I find in myself. It orientates me towards the possibility of love. It feels like hacking off the clinging tentacles of an invasive plant to give the tree I actually want room to grow."

Jerline stuck with Val, praying for him regularly, open to the possibility of love.

God stuck with the Ninevites. He didn't have to send Jonah, but he did, offering the people an opportunity to repent and be reconciled.

Our “enemies” generally aren’t people who have caused us physical harm. We are an incredibly privileged people to live in as much safety as we do. But we still experience pain and hurt. We live with stress and anxiety. We’re afraid. And all those feelings can lead us to create enemies out of each other.

Can we, then, also stick with one another and hold out the possibility of love?

To the person who spoke unkind words about us to someone else?

To the person who said something ignorant on social media?

To the person who cut us off while driving?

To the person who is in fact causing genuine harm to communities we care about?

To be a peacemaker doesn’t mean we ignore these things or gloss over the hurt.

But it does mean that our deepest desire for a person isn’t that they receive their comeuppance, but that they might experience repentance and reconciliation, that we desire peace for that person, and for ourselves.

There’s a lot we can do to become peacemakers.

We can limit our intake of media, especially social media, since it’s designed to further stir up our outrage.

We can intentionally seek out relationships with people who are different from us.

But I think the most profound thing we can do to train our hearts away from wrath and towards love is to do exactly what Jesus told us to do – to pray for our enemies.

It's a lot harder to hate someone you're actively praying for.

So to close, I'd like to invite you to close your eyes. Think of someone you might consider an enemy – someone who's caused you pain or harm.

Call them to mind and picture them, and then in your hearts, say this prayer along with me:

God of peace and compassion, I lift up this person who has caused me pain or harm. I pray that their heart would be softened and their spirit would be healed. May they find your love and forgiveness, and may I be able to extend the same to them. Help me to see in them a fellow child of God, who is worthy of the grace and mercy that you extend to them, as well as to me. May we both find peace and reconciliation. Through Christ, who gave his life so that we might be reconciled to you. Amen.