

Consider a basket of summer fruit. I was thinking too late that instead of flowers, when this text comes up in the lectionary, there should be baskets of fruit adorning our sanctuary. So, imagine if we did that...a wide shallow basket sitting there in front of the altar. It's piled high with honeydews, cantaloupe, fuzzy peaches, shiny red and purple plums, all different kinds of tomatoes, bunches of red, purple and green grapes hanging over the sides. Each fruit is at its perfect succulent ripeness. After the final hymn and dismissal, imagine children grabbing a few grapes. But, mostly, everyone goes off to coffee hour or home and the fruit basket gets left right where it is. Now, the air conditioning here in the nave gets turned off during the week. On Tuesday, the faint sweetness from the fruit still hangs in the air. By Wednesday, there are flies. One more day, in the warm air, and succulent ripeness has become a crawling rotten mess-compost in a basket.

There's a pun in Hebrew that many good study Bibles will footnote. The word for fruit has the same root as the word for end. This is what the Lord God is asking Amos to see. Like an artist called to bring the invisible into the light, the fruit basket is at once ripe and full of taste for good pleasure and nutrients for the sustenance of life and on the edge of becoming a crawling rotten mess of compost. Amos is to see the coincident capacity to be good and to be rotten.

The people of Israel are raising their songs in the temple and setting aside time for something they call the Sabbath but their songs are not from the heart and they spend their Sabbath time anticipating when they can get back to corrupt commercial dealings. The target audience for Amos' warnings is those who dare to abuse the poor and practice injustice.

Amos speaks the words of the Lord God, the judgment cast down for the corrupt and deceitful behavior. Amos speaks of cosmic hopelessness made by God: eclipse, famine, and even earthquake. Their grief will be as of the mourning for an only son, i.e. to say there is no future. This is an angry God.

It's easy to look at the text and believe God will be absent. We might want to absent ourselves from relationship with an angry God. A closer look says only that the words of the Lord will not be heard and that people will become as hungry and thirsty for those words as when they hunger for food and thirst for water. There will be no prophets and the people will wander to and fro for someone to speak the wisdom of God, to bring them hope, "but they shall not find it." In our Sunday readings, this is the last we'll hear from Amos, dresser of sycamore trees, spokesman for an angry God.

Hundreds of miles to the east, at about the same time, there was a famine of the word of God in Nineveh. God was angry at the great city for their wickedness. There were no prophets nearby so God called Jonah to speak the word of the Lord to Nineveh. Jonah

tried to avoid the call and run the other way. That led to a few days detour in the belly of a great big fish working out his own issues about how he might best respond to the call of God to do something he really didn't want to do. When Jonah remembered who and whose he was, he found himself on a beach being called again to wicked Nineveh. Good thing for Nineveh, too, because they heeded Jonah's warnings to return to the Lord. They did turn from their evil ways, and God did not bring calamity upon them. And, they lived happily ever after.

Well, all but Jonah. Now, Jonah's angry... angry enough to die and it's not terribly clear why. He's just had tremendous success. He did what he was told. Nineveh though didn't have to pay anything for their wickedness. So he goes off to sulk in a booth. Jonah wants fairness and punishment rather than clemency and compassion. But, it's God's world, not Jonah's. Jonah really knows this. In his own prayer he addresses God, "I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing." (Jonah 4:3, also Exo 34: 6-7) Off in his mad, he also gets angry at the bush for which he did nothing that shaded him for a day before the worm attacked and shriveled it up. His anger is consuming him.

Our humanity is our gift from God. A natural part of our humanity is the capacity to become angry. We are holy and beloved people and when that is harmed, abused, or diminished in any way, anger is a justified reaction. I'm talking about this justified anger and not the one consuming Jonah, considered one of the seven deadly sins. Our scripture is clear, anger can be of God. This wrath speaks of the sanctity of personhood.<sup>1</sup> We are worth being angry about.

I believe this righteous anger is closely tied to compassion. And I wonder if every time Jesus had pity or compassion on the great crowds that gathered around him, the hungry, the sick, the blind, the enslaved and the destitute, if his stomach didn't churn as much with anger as it did compassion. "Why are there so many? Why is it like this?"

An angry mother named, Candy Lightner, asked these same questions in 1980.

[She] made a pledge in her deceased daughter's bedroom. She would do something about the outrage of drunk driving—a decision that quickly inspired a handful of grieving, determined mothers to join in the fight. Though united in cause, they had no office, no money and no clout. In fact, all they had was sorrow, pluck and a picture of a pretty, 13-year-old girl killed by a drunk driver. Yet they initiated one of the great grassroots successes in American history. They were as their name suggests: MADD. As their fledgling organization grew, they stood toe to toe with politicians who knew the stats but did not act. They took on a powerful industry that put profit over safety. They challenged a society that viewed drinking and driving as acceptable—even laughable. And they caused a visceral reaction. The getting there wasn't easy. It was tough. It was messy. And it was fraught with obstacles. Yet MADD proved, time and time again, that

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<sup>1</sup> Garret Keizer, *The Enigma of Anger: Essays on a sometimes Deadly Sin*, p 22.

it would not be bullied or derailed....They did not just say that drunk driving killed thousands and injured millions. They held up photographs—and described every nuance of their loved ones’ lives—to prove it. As a result, a mountain of traffic safety and victims’ rights legislation has been passed. Annual alcohol-related traffic fatalities have dropped from an estimated 30,000 in 1980 to fewer than [15,500 in 2008.]<sup>2</sup> And, perhaps most important, society no longer views drunk driving as acceptable....<sup>3</sup>

Candy’s Nineveh was to see that no more drunks get behind the wheel of a car. Unlike Jonah, God didn’t have to call twice.

Examples like this can seem overwhelming to everyday folk. There are many other examples of neighborhoods reclaimed and communities rebuilt because anger over what was unjust was married with compassion. Brought together, they release an energy that can change our world and move it close to the world God has ever intended for us.

“Where is your Nineveh? Where might the shadow of Jonah be in your life? Like Jonah, where in your life are you angry enough to die? What would it be like for you to go into your Nineveh? What would you have to give up? What might you receive there? Ask yourself what you are choosing today? And, what about tomorrow?”<sup>4</sup> Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.madd.org/Drunk-Driving/Drunk-Driving/Statistics.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> Laurie Davies, *25 Years of Saving Lives*, [www.madd.org](http://www.madd.org) accessed 17 July 2010.

<sup>4</sup> For the final questions and inspiration to use Jonah: William L. Dols, “Angry Enough to Die,” *Just Because It Didn’t Happen...Sermons and Prayers as Story*, 2001 p 21-24.