

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
“We Make the Road by Walking: Anger Management”  
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Genesis 3:1-16, James 4:1-7

He was running late for class. Our son Andy was in his first year of middle school and was running late for his next class. His middle school was not the easiest around...actually I suppose most middle schools are not that easy. He had already been pushed down some stairs and been picked on because he had not yet hit his growth spurt. He arrived at his locker, quickly whirled the combination, opened his locker, but before he could place one set of books inside and retrieve another, the kid next to him slammed Andy's locker closed. Had this been the first time his hall-mate did this, it might have been funny. Had it been the second time his hall-mate had done it, it might have been annoying. Yet this had become the ritual. Andy was running late. He would open the locker. The kid would slam it shut, forcing Andy to redial his combination...and you get the picture. Normally Andy just put up with it, but this time he got mad. His anger took hold of him and opening the palm of his hand he hit his hall-mate hard enough to send him flying to the floor. Needless to say, the teacher standing in the hallway saw the hit, dragged Andy to the principal and we picked him up for his three-day suspension. On the way home he uttered those words we have all said, “Life is not fair.” “No,” Andy we replied, “Life is not fair.”

I have often wondered if those were the words Cain said to his parents, Adam and Eve, when God rejected his offering. To get the full gist of this I think that we need to go back to the story. There are two brothers, Cain and Able. Cain is the older and has been given the more difficult vocation, to be a farmer, while his younger brother Able is given the easier job of being a shepherd. I say Cain had the easier job because farming means, tilling the soil (without a plow by the way), planting the seeds, watering the land, weeding and protecting the plants from all sorts of enemies. If there is not enough rain he would fail. If there was too much rain he would fail. Able on the other hand could simply move his animals from place to place. Then, one day both Cain and Able offered their gifts to God. Able's was accepted and Cain's was not. Now, let me be clear, the Bible story does not say why one was accepted and the other not. It was just the way it was. Needless to say Cain was angry. He had done everything right. He had worked hard. And this is what he got, rejected by God? Life was not fair and he didn't like it.

At this point in the story, God returns and warns Cain that Cain is at risk of being consumed by the anger he feels because life had not been fair; because God had not chosen to accept his offering. God then offers Cain some advice. First he tells Cain to try again. Maybe the next time, if things work out, his offering will be accepted. Maybe life will be a little fairer. Then God warns Cain that if he is not careful, his anger will take hold of him and he will do something that he regrets. “*Sin is lurking at your door,*” God says, using the image of a ravenous lion waiting to consume Cain. Finally, God says something very interesting. Cain must master sin. Cain must master the anger that is waiting to consume him. Needless to say, this response was not what Cain was looking for. Instead Cain gave into the anger, sent a text inviting his brother into the field, and then killed him. If life was not going to be fair, then

Cain was going to even the score. As we all know though, this is an act which Cain quickly comes to regret. He is not only suspended he is expelled from the land. His anger had gotten the best of him.

Chances are that most of us, at one time or another, have uttered those famous words, “That is just not fair.” Maybe we have been waiting patiently in an orange-cone zone, where traffic is slowing merging and moving, when some guy whips around everyone else and forces his way in front of you. Life is not fair and our anger grows. Or maybe it’s at work. We have toiled long and hard on a project, perfecting it, writing the best reports and then someone else gets the credit, the raise and the promotion. Life is not fair and our anger grows. Maybe it is at school. We are working on a group project (let me ask here, how many of you liked group projects?) and we pour our heart and soul into it, but there is one kid who does not contribute anything. Then the grade comes back and we are all marked down because the one kid did not follow through. Life is not fair and anger grows even more. And it is in those and many other moments when life is not fair that our anger is crouching at the door urging us to unleash the dogs of war; to say or do something to someone, in order to set the world aright. It is, as Amy put it last week, a train wreck waiting to happen. And even though we know that we must master it, as God said to Cain, we are not sure that we can.

It is in this moment then that I want to say that not only must we master it, but that we can master it; that regardless of how unfair life is, we have the power to master the anger that arises in our lives. I say this because this is what God tells Cain, and what James tells us. First this is what God tells Cain. In the story, when God tells Cain that he “must” master sin, he is also telling him he can master it. I say this because the Hebrew word that is translated in our Bibles as, must, as in must master, can also be translated, as shall; as in Cain you shall, you will master it. In other words, the Biblical story teller is letting his audience know that they are not helpless in the face of the anger that arises from the unfairness of life; that they have a choice to set aside the anger and the power to do it. In fact, I would argue that this sense of how we deal with an unfair world is at the heart of this story. The story is written in such a way that it calls out to our own sense of unfairness and injustice and puts us in Cain’s place; a place that events all around us show us to be a place that can lead to violence and death; in families, communities and nations. The writer of Genesis shows us however that this does not need to be the case.

James takes up this same issue. He places the center of unfairness in our not having what others have. “*You want something and you do not have it so you commit murder (either figuratively or literally) and you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in conflicts and disputes.*” In other words, life has not been fair to me so I will allow my anger to take hold of me and I will rip apart the world around me in order to level the playing field. And the very fact that James is writing about this means that members of the Jesus community were allowing the unfairness of life to rip apart their lives and the life of the church. Yet, James, tells the church, it does not have to be this way. It does not have to be a train wreck. Instead, if people do two things, they can deal with the unfairness and the anger it brings.

First we are to return to God. James says, “Submit yourselves therefore to God.” The image here is one of us placing ourselves in a situation in which God and not our anger is in charge of our lives. We are submitting to God and not to anger...the lion waiting to take hold of us. By so doing we are allowing the love, peace and presence of God to invade our lives and take charge. It is an intentional act that

reconnects us to the very one who has created us, given us life and placed the Spirit within us. Second, we are to resist. “Resist the devil and he will flee from you.” Or to put it in terms of our story, resist anger and it will flee from you. I am not sure how many of you drive by Seaholm High School, but this last week the school’s electronic sign posted the start date for school, followed by “resistance is futile.” And that is the way we feel sometimes about the anger that arises from the unfairness of life. Yet James and the writer of Genesis both argue that as God’s people we can resist; that we have been given everything we need when plugged into God, to stop the train wreck before it happens. Submit and resist; they are the keys to overcoming.

The challenge for us then is to put this into practice. It is to intentionally practice submitting and resisting. It is not easy...especially in our day and age in which letting anger loose seems to become more and more of an accepted practice. Yet if we are called to be people of peace and reconciliation, then we are called to this practice. So my challenge for you is this, to ask yourselves how am I practicing submitting and resisting in those moments when the unfairness of life is leading me to anger?