

AFDs. Angry First Drafts. Initial drafts of letters into which you pour out your anger, frustration, and disappointment. Letters addressed to, let's say, a restaurant at which you felt insulted by the wait staff. After a thorough accounting of your glasses not being refilled, your food arriving at your table cold, being called ma'am in a tone that communicated anything but respect, and being over-charged, you continue on in the letter to describe the way your second grade teacher, Mrs. Schmucker, humiliated you by yelling at you in front of the class for something you didn't do and how frustrated you are with the traffic delays on 204 and how the TA in your junior year geology lab figured your grade incorrectly and screwed up your college GPA, putting a graduate school scholarship at risk, but by the time you figured what had happened he was on his way to Peru for a graduate study program and you never heard from him again and also, by the way, your neighbor installed a fence post on your property four years ago even though you asked nicely that she not.

These are the kinds of angry letters that I write, letters I fantasize about sending to those who have done me wrong and yet letters I'll never send, letters that will be deleted, character by character, from my computer or shredded as Ginny the corgi barks because Ginny barks at the shredder which somehow makes the whole experience more satisfying or, if I'm really angry, a letter that gets burned in the backyard so I can literally watch it go up in smoke. Even as I'm writing them, I know I will not send them. But, it sure does feel good to get it all out on paper in my Angry First Draft. As Hemmingway wrote in *Winner Take Nothing*, "If he wrote it he could get rid of it. He had gotten rid of many things by writing them."

Sometimes when I'm reading through the prophets in the Old Testament of the Bible, I feel as if I'm reading a whole bunch of Angry First Drafts. Maybe not so much with Isaiah, with his talk of the lion lying down with the lamb, but Hosea calls the nation of Israel a whore because it is unfaithful to God (4:15) and Moses shatters the two tablets of the ten commandments when he observes the people of Israel worshipping a golden calf (Ex 32:19); Samuel rebukes Saul for disobeying God in an angry exchange that sees the Kingdoms of Israel torn from his grasp (1 Sam 15:24-30) . . . Nearly all the prophetic writings of the Old Testament show deep hurt and anger about injustice, false worship or the misrepresentation of God's self-revelation.¹

This morning's scripture from Jeremiah, what Dick just read, sounds like Jeremiah's Angry First Draft-except, this is the one that got sent, the published version, this written account of the Word of the Lord as found in Jeremiah and WOW. It. Is. Angry. And, if this isn't his AFD, if this is the edited version, holy guacamole I can't even imagine what the earlier drafts were like!

Hear portions of it again as it appears in Eugene Peterson's *The Message* contemporary version:

What did your ancestors find fault with in me that they drifted so far from me, Took up with Sir Windbag and turned into windbags themselves? It never occurred to them to say, 'Where's GOD, the God who got us out of Egypt . . . Who took care of us through thick and thin, those rough-and-tumble wilderness years of parched deserts and death valleys . . . I brought you to a garden land where you could eat lush fruit. But you barged in and polluted my land, trashed and defiled my dear land. The priests never thought to ask, 'Where's GOD?' The religion experts knew nothing of me. The rulers defied me . . . My people have traded my Glory for empty god-dreams and silly god-schemes. My people have . . . walked out on me . . .

Jeremiah preached these angry words while living in Jerusalem, six centuries before the birth of Christ. Jeremiah reminds the Israelites, the people to whom he is a prophet, that God brought them through myriad trials and tribulations, saving them from slavery in Egypt, providing them with their daily bread during the

¹ https://www.methodistevangelicals.org.uk/Articles/523406/The_Angry_Prophet.aspx

Exodus, and delivering them safely to the land flowing with milk and honey. How did the people thank God? They drifted away from God, they turned to foreign gods, they neglected the very people—the widows, children, and refugees God had commanded them to care for—they abandoned the least among them. Jeremiah, a prophet, someone who speaks on behalf of God, is angry and communicates the anger of God.

Indeed, God and Jeremiah are so angry that God commands Jeremiah to go around naked for three years to draw attention to himself so that people will notice him and will hear the wrath of God Jeremiah speaks. I, for one, am relieved that God has spoken to me and suggests it is in everyone's best interest if I just wear a robe.

But, since we're still talking about Jeremiah's indecent exposure thousands of years later, the whole naked preacher thing certainly did help make a point about just how angry the prophet and God were.

About the anger of the prophet, monsignor Charles Pope,² writes . . .

The biblical prophets were people too, and one of the human passions that most drove and affected them was anger. The focus in the passage is on "righteous anger," our response to sin and injustice. Seeing injustice and observing the sinful behaviors of the very people who should have exemplified holiness, provoked the prophets to anger, to disappointment, and to rebuke rooted in love for God and [God's] people. Of itself, anger is neither sin nor virtue. It is simply a response in the face of perceived danger or injustice. Sometimes we have to get angry enough to *do* something about a problem and work at it until it is resolved.³

That is how the anger of the prophet is described.

About the anger of the Lord, Yale Divinity School Old Testament Professor Gregory Mobley, who will visit here next year to lead a weekend of workshops about perseverance in faith, writes, "[God], The Judge of the quick and the dead, the Supreme Justice who oversees the system of tough love that makes life meaningful, feels outrage when the strong oppress the weak. The administration of divine justice is impassioned."⁴

And so it is that the prophets got angry and God got angry and in the gospels we learn that Jesus got angry in the face of injustice, oppression, and sin. Our lived experiences tell us that these things make us angry, too. But, sadly, most of us aren't taught how to deal with our anger. This usually leads to one of two things—we either spew our anger all over inappropriate places in unconstructive ways to unsuspecting people or we bottle it up and allow it to live rent free in our hearts and minds and then it eeks out as passive aggressive behaviors.

Anger is an emotion and an emotion can't be argued. It just is. And, contrary to what some folks, especially some Christian folks think, being angry isn't a sin. Indeed, as the good monsignor pointed out, "Sometimes we have to get angry enough to do something about a problem and work at it until it is resolved." Anger can motivate us to work for justice for all of God's people and creation. For instance, I'm angry about the situation at the Southern border but there's little I can do to impact immigration law so instead I send money to a refugee shelter at which a friend volunteers in Tucson. I'm angry that animals sometimes grow endangered because of human greed but I wasn't invited to the G7 conference so instead I invited Kay Charter of Saving Birds through Habitat to come to my house to suggest native plants for our property that will support bees, bugs, and birds. In these situations, situations of systemic injustice about which I am angry, my anger motivates me to act.

² Msgr. Charles Pope is the pastor of Holy Comforter-St. Cyprian, a vibrant parish community in Washington, DC. A native of Chicago with a bachelor degree in computer science, his interest in the priesthood stemmed from his experience as a church musician. He attended Mount Saint Mary's Seminary and was ordained in 1989. A pastor since 2000, he also has led Bible studies in the U.S. Congress and at the White House in past years.

³ <http://blog.adw.org/2018/08/battle-anger-gods-prophets/>

⁴ <https://ethicsdaily.com/the-prophets-and-divine-anger-cms-20851/>

But then there is that other kind of anger most of us are carrying around with us, an anger about things that happened in the past, angst about things that can't be changed, deep feelings of resentment towards people who likely don't know or don't care about how deeply they hurt us. This is a different kind of anger, an anger that eats away at us, a bully emotion that crowds out other feelings and robs us of a sense of contentment and well-being. This anger is toxic and like any other toxin, ought to be eliminated.

And the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that that kind of anger can be eliminated because Christ came that we would have life and have it abundantly. God knows carrying an abundance of anger with us everywhere we go is NOT an abundant life. In Christ we find new life, fresh starts, and opportunities to lay the past to rest so that we can embrace the peace that passes understanding we find in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Different methods work for different people. I get rid of anger by writing Angry First Drafts. Others go to therapy. Some people exercise. Many of us pray. From what I can see when I'm waiting at a red light, there are folks who jam their anger out listening to loud music in the car. One person I know mows her anger away in the summer and shovels it away in winter.

This passage invites us to see anger for what it is—neither virtue nor sin—but something that is. It can be a gift that motivates us to act on behalf of the least among us. It can be a burden we needlessly carry that limits our chance at joy and peace. Regardless, it is ours and presents us with choices as to how we're going to use it, or get rid of it, to help ensure we all have life and have it abundantly.