“Anger or Righteousness”

Psalm 37:1-11, 14-17, 27-28a, 39-40 Romans 12:19-21 James 1:19-21

 Thirty years ago this month, “The Princess Bride” was released in theatres. I know what you’re thinking – “inconceivable!” – but it’s true. It is a movie of heroes, giants, villains, wizards, and true love on a course that never did run smooth. Early in the movie, the main character, Westley, meets a Spanish swordsman of incredible skill. They start as enemies, but Inigo Montoya takes a moment to tell his life’s story. He says that when he was eleven,

“my father was slaughtered by a six-fingered man. He was a great sword-maker, my father. When the six-fingered man appeared and requested a special sword, my father took the job. He slaved a year before it was done… The six-fingered man returned and demanded it, but at one tenth his promised price. My father refused. Without a word, the six-fingered man slashed him through the heart. I loved my father. So naturally, I challenged his murderer to a duel. I failed….[W]hen I was strong enough, I dedicated my life to the study of fencing. So the next time we meet, I will not fail. I will go up to the six-fingered man and say, ‘Hello. My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die.’”

Inigo Montoya was a child who witnessed something horrifying. His father was cheated and murdered and, as a young child, Inigo was not strong enough to avenge his father’s death. That moment was one of great loss, but also deep shame for him. And he gave his life to become a swordsman. By the time the movie takes place, he seems to be in his mid-thirties. He’s still desperately searching for the man who killed his father, but he’s paying the bills working for a man who believes himself to be a Sicilian criminal mastermind. Getting nowhere in his quest for vengeance, he has become a frustrated, bitter drunk.

 Inigo Montoya’s moment of vengeance does come near the end of the film and, despite being terribly wounded, he confronts and defeats the six-fingered man saying again and again, “Hello. My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die.” It feels like a great triumph for the heroes, but there’s this interesting moment afterwards where Inigo pauses and reflects, “[It] is very strange. I have been in the revenge business so long. Now that it’s over, I don’t know what to do with the rest of my life.”

 Anger is a force to be reckoned with and before we know what’s happened, it can swallow up so much more than we realize. Considering how powerful that anger can be, it’s interesting how often we describe it using images of fire. Anger burns hotly within us. We can be consumed with thoughts of revenge. We get all fired up when we’re yelling about something. And when we’re so angry that we’re about to go berserk, we might say that smoke is coming out of our ears or that we’re seeing red. Like fire, anger can easily flare out of control and threaten to harm all in its path (including the angry one).

 The thing about anger is that it taps into one of the most primal parts of our brains, sometimes called the reptilian brain. It’s where that fight or flight impulse comes from and it’s part of our survival instinct. That means that if we feel threatened enough and angry enough, our primal brain is able to hijack the rest of our brain. It can cause us to act without us thinking it through or even seeming to choose what we’re doing. When we see red, it can get to the point where it feels like something else took control of us. If we keep feeding that fire, if we nurse our grudges and hold onto our pain and anger, we can lose control and then we can lose everything.

 But this is not a sermon about the great power of anger and our unfortunate helplessness. There is a long road between something that angers us and the primal brain taking control and causing us to see red. James reminds us to, “be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce G-d’s righteousness.” James wants us to see that our anger is a tool that G-d gave to us not a burden, not a sin by itself. The power that we feel when we are angry is not why G-d gave us the ability to be angry.

 We affirm with scripture that we were created in G-d’s image, that we are truly G-d’s children. Anger is a part of that. The Bible speaks over and over again about G-d’s anger, G-d’s wrath. G-d gets angry because who we are and what we do matter to G-d. G-d guides us and teaches us and chastises us because G-d wants us to live in love and harmony with one another.

 So where does anger fit into that? Well, here is how I would define anger: anger is our automatic response to injustice, whether it happens to us or to someone else. Think about things that you get angry about – politicians taking bribes, people being murdered in their homes, someone cutting you off on the freeway. Each of these things hit us hard because that’s not how we believe that people should behave. Politicians should vote their conscience and not special interests – corruption is unjust. People should be safe to live their lives in their own homes and communities – senseless loss of life is unjust. People driving recklessly…well, they’re jerks. It’s unfair to endanger me and my car because you feel a little impatient and crazy! Anger is a warning light in our minds alerting us to something that is wrong. And that fight or flight adrenaline and power and energy that we feel – that’s our mind and body preparing itself to do something about it. We are physically built to fight injustice and to work for good.

 This might sound over-simplified: see a bad thing, internal bat signal goes off, fix a bad thing. But that’s how the system was designed to work. The problem comes when we feed the anger and fan those flames. The problem comes when we don’t use that energy to make things better – we use it to focus in on what made us angry. Then we get bitter and wrathful and obsessive. Then we stew and fume and sabotage others and cut ourselves off from the hope and the possibility of life. Then we become Inigo Montoya and don’t notice that 20 plus years have gone by and we never had the time to build something meaningful for our own lives. When anger turns to wrath, when anger becomes our home and not a means of moving forward, then we have crossed the line into sin.

 The question becomes: anger or righteousness? Revenge or justice? Because after a certain point, if we believe that we have to take everything into our own hands – if we believe that our anger is the only thing that will bring about true justice…then we have lost faith and our anger has become our god. In the Romans passage, Paul admonishes his readers to never avenge themselves, but to leave room for the wrath of G-d. Then he quotes Deuteronomy 32, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” If vengeance belongs to the Lord, that means that it does not belong to us. Justice wants to get back what we are owed, to try to restore what was lost. Vengeance wants the other person to suffer because we have suffered. In some cases, vengeance can never be satisfied. But what G-d has said, what Paul is bringing to our attention is that we are not called to be the agents of ultimate punishment. We are not the ones who will bring forward the consequences of the evil in each ones’ heart. Only G-d can do that. So if we trust G-d to repay the wicked, if we trust G-d to heal our wounds, then our lives will not be dominated by anger and hatred and vengeance.

In Christ, we are free to live and grow and explore new hopes and new challenges, building up where we are able. With this freedom, we can feed our enemies and we can give them something to drink because, “by doing this [we] heap burning coals on their heads.” If anger is a fire and its coals are hottest and strongest clustered together – if this angry fire become stronger when it is fed more and more fuel, then what is the best way forward? Surely, if we heap burning coals over someone’s head, the coals will burn for a moment and then they will fall away and cool down. We can transform our anger into an act of compassion for even the most wicked – even those who “bring down the poor and needy, [those who] kill those who walk uprightly.” Maybe the Spirit will work through us to turn their hurts. Maybe the coals we heap on their heads will dislodge some of the embers from their own anger and hatred. And that is a miracle.

When G-d strengthens us to equip ourselves with anger, then we can, “be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for G-d.” Then we won’t have to worry about people who do evil things and seem to have all the fortune and the luck. Because as Psalm 37 reminds us and Jesus echoed in the beatitudes: “the meek shall inherit the earth.” It is the humble – those who seem lowly and powerless – who can lean on the strength of their faith and trust in the Lord to release their anger and live in love. That is the kingdom of heaven that Christ is building all around us, even as we speak. That is the reality that you and I can live into more and more each day. The psalmist encourages us, “depart from evil, and do good; so you shall abide forever. For the Lord loves justice; G-d will not forsake the faithful.” It doesn’t say do it all perfectly. It doesn’t say, “try to do good, but if you mess up or it’s too hard, it’s probably alright to keep doing the same old sinning.” We can’t fully and finally depart from evil – but we can depart every day, as often as we need, leaning on Christ each step of the way.

Even though Inigo Montoya gave up 20+ years of his life, he started a new path at the end of the movie. No matter how much anger and hatred have taken hold on your life, there is always time to let it go and to practice this new life in Christ. And so, friends, be directed by your anger, but not dominated by it. Be patient for the Lord to act, trusting that G-d accomplishes justice even if we don’t see it in our lifetimes. Use this faith and this hope to let your life become beautiful, surrounded by love, and trusting in the kingdom of heaven. Amen.