II Samuel 18
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"Who will rid me of this troublesome priest?"

Do you remember those words? Peter O'Toole spoke these fateful words as King Henry II in the 1964 movie Becket—one of my favorites. Henry, of course, was speaking of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Becket (played by Richard Burton) who in this 12th century setting became caught between the powers of Rome and England and found himself in Henry's cross-hairs. Becket had once been a friend to Henry, in fact, he became Archbishop at Henry's command and was largely expected to do his bidding. But somewhere along the way he develops some independence and a conscience and that gets him in trouble with his king.

"Who will rid me of this troublesome priest?" Many historians doubt that these were actually Henry's words. In fact, one source who claimed to have been an eyewitness, quotes him as saying "What miserable drones and traitors have I nourished and brought up in my household: who let their lord be treated with such shameful contempt by a low-born cleric?"[1]

Regardless, clearly *something* was said by Henry to members of his court because history tells us that after he spoke, four of his knights assassinated Becket--The Archbishop of Canterbury. Of course, Henry denied any knowledge of the murder, let alone having ordered it. In fact, in the aftermath, he goes through a public display of penance at Becket's tomb. Perhaps it is a genuine expression of loss for a once close friend; perhaps it is self-preserving—meant to remove any suspicions of guilt that most assuredly permeated the kingdom; perhaps it is a self-edifying display of piety to garner respect and sympathy. Or maybe all are true, or we'll never know the truth but we do know that Henry employs *plausible deniability*. Plausible Deniability, is when we want something to happen, but we don't want

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[1] Quoted in Edward Grimm's *Life of Tomas* (12th century)

to appear to be responsible for it.

So, here's what wasn't included in the lectionary passage for this week. In II Samuel chapter 18, before they head into battle to fight Absalom, David says "I myself will also go out with you." But his soldiers quickly reply, "You shall not go, for you are worth ten thousand of us." And (perhaps feigning compliance) David replies, "Whatever seems best to you, I will do." David acquiesces. Then he admonishes them, "Deal gently for my sake with the young man, Absalom." What does that really mean? Don't hurt him? Or dispatch him quickly so he doesn't suffer? Plausible deniability. He is putting distance between himself and the impending wrong-doing. This may seem a bit familiar if you remember the lectionary passage from two weeks ago. David sets his eyes on Bathsheba and has an affair, after numerous botched attempts to cover this up, he has her husband, Uriah, killed by sending him into certain peril on the battle field. Plausible deniability. David's machinations of the past make it easy for us to believe that at the very least, some part of him was relieved by Absalom's death, and more than likely, on some level, he facilitated it.

For both Kings—Henry and David—they were angry. Each perceived a betrayal of someone close to them, someone who threatened their power, their sense of who they were, the way they thought things ought to be.

Anger.

Do you get angry? I get angry. I really do. But not often in a way that anyone would know about it. Once, when my kids were in that pre-teen—no longer children but not yet teenagers stage—I was just furious with all of them. And I raised my voice. I surprised myself! And my three children immediately stopped what they were doing, turned to me with eyes the size of silver dollars and for what was only two seconds but felt like two minutes, we froze. And then…I heard it…a giggle. Once one started the other two fell in and I turned to my wife who had also been stunned and, poor Erin, she

had to leave the room not to let the kids see that she too had begun to laugh.

Maybe it's a rare thing that I show my anger, but I do get angry. We all do. Like when the Cubs blow a lead in the ninth inning. It's only natural to get angry. It's a human emotion. And it's not wrong to get angry, anger is an emotion just like any other. Ephesians says, "Get angry but do not sin." We've used the illustration before and it's not original with me, but I use it all the time, that there are two kinds of people, there are skunks and there are turtles. Skunks, when they get angry, they stink up the whole room, they yell, they stomp around, everyone knows they are angry, they can't hold it in. Turtles on the other hand, when they get angry, just retreat into their shells. They don't say anything, nothing comes out that looks like anger, but are they any less angry? No. As one who is a turtle, let me tell you that I get angry just like everyone else. Maybe you don't see it, maybe you don't even know it, but I still get angry. Maybe I don't yell or stomp around, maybe I do other things. Skunks have to be careful when they are angry that they do not sin by hurting another through misplaced anger or name calling or harsh words that hurt. But turtles are just as prone to sin, but we may do it in passive-aggressive ways. We may try to make others feel guilty or deflect blame on to others.

Absalom was a skunk. When he got angry, everyone knew it. And often his anger was understandable and justified. Absalom openly blames others for all the problems he has, whether they are really their fault, or his own. David, on the other hand, I think might be a turtle. He's pretty good at the blaming others game. He worries about plausible deniability. He has developed through the years as a person who is loved by his people, so when he does something wrong, there's always extenuating circumstances so the blame never seems to fall on him. He's the persecuted one, isn't he? By Saul, when he was young, by enemies from without, by unscrupulous people within, now even by his own son, Absalom. And even when it really is his fault, like when he commits adultery with Bathsheba, he couldn't really help himself, could he? And he's so sorry afterwards that everyone forgives him.

The good of the country was paramount in his mind and even if the means to get there was not always the most just, that's the way of the world. Violence, torture, manipulation, deceit, betrayal—when they are done in a good cause, one can't be blamed, can one? He's only doing this so that his sons don't need to, so that he can leave them a stable, peaceful country.

Trying to lay the blame on someone else, whether we are skunks or turtles, is a common way of behaving. Don't we all do it? I know I do.

We can be so quick to lay blame. Because anger is a response to a perceived threat. Maybe not physically but maybe to something that we value as part of our way of life. We get angry if we think someone is threatening that. But does anger cause us to want wreck something or to fix something? Should anger drive us to revenge or to seek reconciliation?

Anger is natural and necessary. So what *is* anger's job? We can probably think of all sorts of things that anger does that it shouldn't do: break things, tail somebody who is going too slow ahead of you, speak ill of somebody who has hurt you in some way, or in the extreme, wound or even kill. We don't need scriptural examples like David or historical examples like Henry to illustrate this for us—random shootings of strangers in churches, movie theaters, or on our streets are our modern day examples of anger being misused like a weapon in an arsenal. You remember how in past we have talked about how God gives us tools to use—compassion and patience and kindness. Or we can use other weapons— malice, blaming, scapegoating. Will we use anger as a weapon to destory or to give us the energy to fix?

How do we use our anger? What do we do when we get angry? Does anger give us the energy to change a situation that needs some changing? Isn't that what anger's job is? We certainly have things

that need changing in our society, in our nation, but we also have them in our workplaces, in our homes, in our families, in our relationships, and yes, in our churches. All too often in all these places we can resort to blaming, to manipulation, to hurting another person, just because something made us angry or we didn't get our way. We want to justify ourselves and let the blame fall upon another. And what are the results? David shows us.

It has been said that King David was a man after God's own heart. I think that it is in this passage that we finally realize what that means. David has been kind and cruel, faithful and adulterous, a fast friend and a difficult enemy. He has made good decisions and he has made terrible ones. He has acted with justice and he has sinned deeply. He has known great joy and now he knows great sorrow. Another one of his sons is dead and so David weeps. He weeps that prayer that every parent knows-- "I would rather that this had happened to me." Would that I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son—that's the sorrow that echoes down the years. And we do that too, we are sorrowful when the anger that could be used for positive change becomes destructive. But what if we didn't do that? But instead began to put away all the bitterness and wrath and wrangling and treating each other like it is all your fault, but instead learning to forgive one another, as God in Christ has forgiven us. That's the life we can put on now. David was a man after God's heart because he wept over the pain of the human condition and he wept over his own mistakes. But the joy of the Christian life is that we are beloved children of God, we are more than we thought we could be and we can become imitators of God, forgiving, speaking the truth, acting kindly, acting with love. What would have happened if there had been more forgiveness and less blame in the lives of Absalom and David? Maybe the cycles of violence and vengeance would come to an end. What would happen if there is more forgiveness and less blame in our lives? In our society? In our politics? In our world? For all the racism, the gun violence, the hatred, the blaming, the cycles of poverty and uncaring? What would happen if when we got angry we asked, "what needs to be changed?" rather than "who is to blame?" What would happen in our families, what would happen in our church? You have people in your life who need your

forgiveness. Can you forgive them, can you let go of your grudge even though they may not ask? You

have people in your life who don't love you. Can you love them anyway?