

Hate and Madness

Scriptures: Genesis 4: 1-7; Ephesians 4: 25-27

January 17, 2016

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I. Introduction

Towards the beginning of *Moby Dick*, Captain Ahab tells the crew of the Pequod about his quest to kill the white whale that had bitten off his leg in a previous voyage. His first mate is a man named Starbuck who is sort of the moral compass of the story, and this is your literary trivia for today, also the source of the name of the coffee chain, Starbucks, so you just file that away. And Starbuck says to Captain Ahab as he is making this announcement to the crew, "Vengeance on a dumb brute that simply smote thee from blindest instinct! Madness! To be enraged with a dumb thing, Captain Ahab, seems blasphemous." And he, of course, is right. It is blasphemous and a blasphemy that takes a terrible toll in this tragic story.

Every January we take a few weeks to look at theology through a slightly different lens, and the hope there is as we engage some meaty theological topics through literature or movies, that we create some space where people who are maybe not normal churchgoers would find a place to come and see what life in the church is like. So, for those of you who are regular Metropolitan folks, this is, again, my invitation for you to use this month as a chance to invite some friends that you might know or family that you might know who don't have a church home and think maybe church is a little bit odd. This is a way to sort of introduce them to life in the church and doing theology in a way that's a little bit more inviting.

So, we started last week to use this wonderful great American novel, *Moby Dick*, to look into some important theological themes. We started off looking at the power of awe and we're going to take a few minutes this morning looking at the whole issue of anger.

II. The central narrative of *Moby Dick* is built around the obsessive quest of Ahab to kill the White whale.

The whole central narrative of *Moby Dick* is built around this obsessive angry quest of vengeance of Captain Ahab for this white whale that has wounded him. Ahab lays this quest out to his ship not long after they're out to sea at what they expect will be a three-year voyage. And Ahab in a very seminal scene takes a big gold Spanish doubloon and he nails it to the mast of the ship and he tells his crew that the first person who lays eyes on the white whale gets that ounce of gold.

Ahab is certainly going to be whaling for other sperm whales along the way, but his almost sole quest is to find Moby Dick and everything else gets ignored and pushed to the side, even very old and traditional whaling traditions. For example, it was very common in those days that when two whaling ships came within sight of one another,

that they will pull together and they'd have what's called a gam, and the captain of one would visit one ship and the first mates on the other and they'd exchange news and mail. In an age when you didn't have electronic communication and you were out at sea for literally years, this is the way that people kept up on what was going on in the world. But Ahab, when he'd go by another whaling ship, he'd say, "Have you seen the white whale?" and if they haven't, he'd just keep on cruising, because his sole focus was trying to find the object of his obsessive anger and hate. As the narrative builds, of course, they actually start meeting ships who have seen Moby Dick and sometimes been injured by Moby Dick. That just lends more fuel to his fire so that by the time the narrative climaxes and they finally see Moby Dick, they engage in a long three-day chase of the whale which ends in the destruction of the Pequod and the loss of its crew and the death of Ahab.

III. Ahab's obsessive anger is a helpful cautionary tale

Ahab's obsessive anger feels to me like a helpful cautionary tale because it feels to me as though we experience anger in a lot of aspects of our life, either our own or other people's. We see it as a recurring theme in the current presidential election, the role that anger has in motivating people. We see it in the prevalence of road rage. We see it in the violence of religious extremism fueled by and fueling hatred of the other. Now the scriptural witness about anger is an interesting and complex one, because there are many places throughout the narrative of scripture in which anger is clearly viewed as appropriate. The prophets are often bringing a very passionate sense of anger at the injustice that they see around them. Jesus gets very angry at a couple of points, particularly when he sees the money changers exploiting the poor in the temple and he responds angrily to that. So, there are clearly places in the biblical texts that affirm the appropriateness of anger. Anger is a very natural emotion and it is a healthy and normal response to our experience of injustice in the world or our being hurt by someone or something. So, our initial reaction of anger is not one that we can often control and it is a fairly natural part of being human.

So, what does Jesus mean in our Gospel text today when he appears to equate being angry with murder? He tells his disciples, "You've been told not to murder but I am going to take it a step further -- if you're even angry with somebody, you have committed murder in your heart." That's a pretty stark passage. And it's one that I think is a little bit easier to understand by unpacking some of the grammar of it. And I apologize for getting into linguistics in the course of the sermon, but this is an important piece for me because in the passage in Matthew, Jesus says, "When you have anger with," and the verb is in the present tense, when you are angry, and present tense in English denotes it's happening right now. But present tense in Greek has a slightly different nuance.

The present tense in Greek implies that it is an ongoing action. So, if you say, "I'm having breakfast" and it's in the present tense, that means you're in the process of ongoing eating. If it's a simple completed action in Greek, it's an imperfect. But in this passage from Matthew, the Greek is a present tense which means that what Jesus is

saying is that when your anger is an ongoing activity, we've got a problem. Does that make sense? Give me a nod or I'm going to go over it all over again! So, what Jesus is saying is not you can never feel anger. What Jesus is saying is that when you hang onto the anger on an ongoing basis, we've got a problem. And the thing about anger is it's so wonderful to hang onto, isn't it? It's so easy to hang onto and it can become very much a habit.

Ahab is a reminder that anger easily becomes chronic and it builds on itself. At one point in the book Melville says, "Ahab piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down." In our lives anger often can take on a life of its own. Anger builds and builds and spills over in all kinds of unexpected ways.

There's a wonderful moment in the last Avengers movie when the guy who is the Incredible Hulk, who becomes the Hulk because he gets angry, is asked by one of the characters, "How is it that you can just turn the anger on and off when you need it?" And the Hulk looks at him and says, "I'm always angry." It's always there waiting to come out. And at some point we start to realize that the anger may have less to do with the thing that we are angry about and more to do with what's going on inside my heart and head.

Have you ever been angry with someone, had a conflict of some sort, and you separated from them for a period and in your head you played over and over the conflict and figured out exactly what you needed to say to that person and how you were going to give them a piece of your mind next time you saw them, and then the next time you saw them they had no recollection of the conflict at all, right? Have you been there before? And you realize, "You know what, I did that all to myself. All of that anger that I was churning up, all of that conflict that I was getting geared up for and prepared for was my stuff. It didn't have to do with them at all. It doesn't have to do with the whale at all. It has to do with me." And what Jesus is inviting us to do is pay attention to the way we let anger take over our heads and our hearts.

Ishmael, the narrator of *Moby Dick*, says of Ahab, "God help thee, old man, thy thoughts have created a creature in thee; and he whose intense thinking thus makes him a Prometheus; and a vulture feeds upon that heart forever and that vulture is the very creature he creates." The image there is obviously out of Greek mythology where Prometheus the titan is punished by the gods for giving humanity fire with a vulture that eats at his liver and heart every single day. Ishmael realizes that Ahab has got this thing eating at him every single day and, you know what, no one inflicted it on him, he created it himself. We create it ourselves.

And that anger starts then to infect everything else that goes on in our lives. It impacts the relationships that we're engaged in and the work that we do. Which is why Jesus in this passage tells his disciples, if you are angry with somebody and you're bringing a gift to the altar, stop what you're doing, lay it down and go make up with the person that you're angry with. Now, I say that with some trepidation before we have

taken this morning's offering! But the point is even something as good and pure as giving our gifts to God gets contaminated by our anger, by the anger that we bring to that. So, Jesus says go and deal with the conflict and then move on and do the work that you're called to do.

In our passage from Genesis, one of the classic texts from the Hebrew Scriptures, we get the story of Cain and Abel, and we don't know much about Cain and Abel. We know that Cain was an agriculturalist and Abel was a shepherd of some sort, a herder, and that they both brought their gifts to God and that God preferred Abel's over Cain's. Now we don't know why God preferred Abel's over Cain's. The writer never tells us. It is a subject of endless speculation by theologians throughout history. Was God a carnivore? We don't know. All we know is that Cain felt mistreated in the process. And it is one of those classic moments where, you know what, gosh, darn it, sometimes life just isn't fair. We don't know why. It's not fair. Then Cain starts to get angry. And God knows where this is going and so he says to Cain, "You need to be careful at this very moment as the anger starts to take hold and watch it and get in charge of it." He says, "Master it. Because otherwise it's going to --" and I love this image, "it crouches at your door waiting for you, waiting for that moment of weakness to act." And of course, Cain doesn't pay attention to that and we have the first murder.

The message there, however, is that the anger that sometimes feels out of control is in fact entirely in our control and that one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is the ability to control where our thoughts go and what we do with them. So, what Janet was helping the children with this morning is helping them figure out how do I break that cycle of building anger. Sometimes it's through some physical release. We get out there and we run, we throw a ball, we do something with our bodies. But I also want to suggest to you all that while it feels sometimes as though we cannot control the things that are running through our heads, Jesus' point is that we in fact do have control over those thoughts and we can change the tape -- that analogy dates me, I realize that. We can put in a different playlist. We can figure out a different way to take our mind and we can make that choice so that the anger is not something that we are caught up in and helpless against. We can make choices and we can engage in disciplines that help us take our minds in a different direction.

And this, of course, is part of the great genius of Dr. Martin Luther King who we celebrate this weekend. We celebrate Dr. King because of his powerful leadership of our Civil Rights Movement. But it wasn't simply the movement for civil rights that we celebrate his life for, it was the way that he helped us understand civil rights and change take place, and his repeated insistence that the vehicle for social change had to be nonviolent resistance because violence begets violence begets violence. All that happens is an endless cycle of retribution, which is what you see in so much of the religious conflicts in our world today. And that if we can figure out a different sort of discipline where hate and anger do not set the terms of the engagement, then transformation becomes possible. So, whether it's mastering our own thoughts or shaping the way communities engage with each other, we have the opportunity to structure our lives so that anger and hatred do not have the last word.

IV. Conclusion

Moby Dick is a classic because like all classics, the themes that run through it are themes that were true in the 1850s and the 1950s and the 2015s and 2016s. Our propensity to fall into patterns of hatred and anger continue unabated. And while few of us are likely to become Captain Ahab's with that sort of obsessive angry response, we all see those emotions trying to hold onto us and we see them in the people around us. And *Moby Dick* is a reminder that when we give into and let flourish the emotions of anger and hatred, it takes us inevitably down a course that leads to darkness and destruction. The Holy Spirit through the power of the resurrected Christ has given us the ability to turn that around and to instead become channels of God's healing and forgiving love because evil can never conquer evil. Only love can change our hearts.

Amen.