“The Anguish of Love”

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Phil. 3.17 – 4.1; Lk. 13. 31 – 35

Anguish. The word itself suggests a feeling of loss, deeply felt. It has to do with experiencing the pain of absence, at times so severe that it presses toward the edge of despair. No one who has lived through deep hurt needs an explanation for it. Truth be told, the very utterance of the word—anguish—touches something essential about us as human creatures. It has to do with our sense of belonging to others, and the feeling we have when this sense somehow crumbles—because of death or some other loss. It expresses an absence, but this is the mark of a longer presence, if one we have lost.

Anguish is an ancient word, with roots traceable across the root languages: the Sanskrit *amhu,* suggesting a “narrowing”; the old English *enge,* meaning “narrow” or “painful”; or the old Norse *angha*, meaning distress or sorrow. The same root also finds its way into the widening family of European languages to give us the word “anger.” And, if you think about it, anger does have somewhere at its core a sense of loss. It is a response to something that has failed—a breach of trust; a betrayal; a sense of hurt.

Anguish and anger lie at the heart of the scene from Luke’s gospel, where Jesus laments over Jerusalem with a mix of these feelings:

> Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

These are hard words, to be sure. Matthew, as he remembers this story, offers an even harder version in his gospel, placing it at the end of a long series of invectives decrying the “scribes and pharisees.” Why this? Because Jesus denounces them as hypocrites, observing the outward obligations of the law—what we *should* do—without regard to what we *might* in ignoring the call to compassion. In both versions, though, Jesus expresses his anguish for the people and his anger over their failings to listen to the prophets in the often difficult words they bring.

Anguish and anger: here we come to a side of Jesus we do not often see in the gospels. His sense of outrage finds expression in his lament over “Jerusalem”—the city of peace, the center of Israel’s life, the heart of the world—for refusing to heed those who reminded the people of justice. Yet this is shaped by his deep anguish for those “children,” as he calls them, whom he desired to “unite.” “You were not willing!” he cries out in anguish, frustrated perhaps but also indignant at their closed hearts in refusing his prophetic call.

Why is this text appointed as a reading during Lent? Because in this long season of repentance, and in the tradition of fasting, we seek—together—to empty ourselves of what is not essential, in order to make room in our lives for greater compassion and gratitude.

How we should do this is a question we must discern together, seeking to discover again—through such communal discernment—the power of Lent as a season that binds us to each other and awakens us to the call of justice. Toward what end? The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, suggests one reason, describing how what he calls "our body of our humiliation" might be "conformed to the body of [God's] glory." Here, it seems right that anger and anguish belong to this journey into greater faithfulness, this path that leads us toward a change of heart.

During the last academic semester, I co-taught a seminar on the troubled question of race in the US, exploring the anguished story of slavery and its subsequent chapters of discrimination and segregation, leading to the outrage expressed in the "Black Lives Matter" movement in recent years. It was a painful course to teach, recalling for me my experience of growing up in the segregated South, moving to the North and living through the anguished struggle of the Civil Rights movement. I suspect many of you have similar stories from this time. Perhaps they are mixed, as mine are, with a sense of anguish and anger.

We began and ended the seminar watching the acclaimed film by Raoul Peck, "I Am Not Your Negro," based on the witness of the American writer James Baldwin. Heralded in a *New Yorker* review last year as a "life-altering" experience, it is a film that cuts to the very core of our identity as a nation. The script that shapes the film is Baldwin's portrayal, late in his own life, of three black martyrs of the 1960s: Medgar Evers, assassinated by Klansmen in June, 1963, followed by the slayings of Malcolm X in February, 1965, and Martin Luther King, Jr., on April 4, 1968. Each was, in his own way, a prophet whose passionate work for justice pointed to one of the deepest wounds in our history as a democracy.

The film captures the anguish still gnawing away is at the root of our culture—which, like the Jerusalem Jesus anguished over, still "kills" the prophets and refuses to be "gathered" together as one people. More divided than ever, with ever more vocal expressions of hatred toward those "others" we fear, we live amidst the tensions James Baldwin pointed to as a collision of pride and fear. We continue to tolerate the contradiction rooted at the core of our national psyche, the pressures of a "dialectic between guilt and rage, forgiveness and denial," as one film critic put it. This still troubles our history and haunts our experience as a nation, uncertain as we remain about how far we ought to embrace diversity. "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"

It is a film suited to Lent, a season of repentance in the church's year when we find ourselves called to face the shadows—our shadows—of suffering. When we gather to take a hard look, once again, at crucifixion, an execution of one seen as a prophet. An act of violence supported by good religious people gathered in Jerusalem for the Passover festival, that story of deliverance from slavery. An attempt to silence one whose voice was too strong for the power-brokers of his day, above all those charged with keeping public order in religious and political terms.

In this season of Lent, we do well to keep one eye on that impossible but somehow necessary story of resurrection—which is not some kind of awakening from apathy, but a rising from death. Or, as the apostle Paul put it, "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ" (1 Cor. 4. 6). This is the Easter message, already foreshadowed in Lent; it is the hope we are invited to find in our lives, as individuals and as a community. It is the manner in which Christians have "framed" the narrative of the tragic through the ages. It is what the poet Wallace Stevens reminds us of in the opening lines of one of his early poems: "After the final no there comes a yes,/ And on that yes the future world depends." ("The Well Dressed Man with a Beard").

The anguish of living in the growing darkness of this "final no," as the poet puts it, is the context in which we are to seek a stronger "yes," one on which "the future world" depends.

This may call us to an indignation strong enough to rouse us from indifference, to cross the line and stand with those who face hatred in our society. If so, it will be the same indignation that fired the Civil Rights movement, the rising of black pride, and, in our day, the Black Lives Matter movement. All this is an expression of love's anguish—and, yes, its anger over what remains to be done so that God's will might be done "on earth, as it is in heaven."

This is the anguish, and the indignation, Jesus voiced in lamenting Jerusalem, reminding us that the gospel is a love story—not in a sentimental sense, but as a story filled with anguish that longs for promises yet unfulfilled. And it is a story of indignation, like that of Jesus in the gospel. For love refuses the wrong, and seeks what is right, as the apostle reminds us in 1 Corinthians 13. And if love is indeed calling us to be "patient and kind," it also calls us when circumstances demand to be impatient, refusing to acquiesce to what is wrong in our lives and in our society.

I was struck by this theme in re-reading the journals written by the Dutch Jew, Etty Hillesum, another martyr—this time at the hands of the Nazi death machine, which executed her in Auschwitz on November 30, 1943. In the extraordinary journal she kept in the years leading up to her murder, she devoted a long entry to the theme of anguish, or sorrow. Speaking of the need to cry out, with the prophets, in protest over what she described as the "horrors" of her times, she went on to reflect on the role of anguish, suggesting what it means to rebel against what is wrong, and, yes, to come to "know and share the many sorrows and sad circumstances that a human being can experience"—though without "clinging" to them and thus prolonging the agony.

How should we face such things? Etty Hillesum, facing what she knew would come—and did when she faced execution in one of the Nazi death camps—suggests that we should let this anguish "pass through [us], like life itself, as a broad, eternal stream, they become part of that stream, and life continues." Only in this manner, she reasoned, could we preserve our strength, and "not become tagged on to futile sorrow or rebelliousness."

She goes on to suggest that our anguish ought to "open ourselves up" to what she describes as "cosmic sadness":

> One day I shall surely be able to say to [my friend] Ilse Blumenthal, 'Yes, life is beautiful, and I value it anew at the end of every day, even though I know that the sons of mothers, and you are one such mother, are being murdered in concentration camps. And you must be able to bear your sorrow; even if it seems to crush you, you will be able to stand up again, for human beings are strong, and your sorrow must become an integral part of yourself, part of your body and your soul, you mustn't run away from it, but bear it like an adult. Do not relieve your feelings through hatred, do not seek to be avenged on all German mothers, for they, too, sorrow at this very moment for their slain and murdered sons. Give your sorrow all the space and shelter in yourself that is its due, for if everyone bears his grief honestly and courageously, the sorrow that now fills the world will abate. But if you do not clear a decent shelter for your sorrow, and instead reserve most of the space inside you for hatred and thoughts of revenge—from which new sorrows will be born for others—then sorrow will never cease in this world and will multiply. And if you have given sorrow the space its gentle origins demand, then you may truly say: life is beautiful and so rich. So beautiful and so rich that it makes you want to believe in God. (*An Interrupted Life: The Diaries of Etty Hillesum*, ed.

by J. G. Gaarlandt and trans. by Arno Pomerans [New York: Pantheon Books, 1981], 81 – 2).

Ours is not the work of entering into Jesus' disappointment and sorrow, his anger and anguish, over Jerusalem. That would miss the thrust of this story, which is about the prophet's witness against the failings of his or her own culture. No, our anguish, our sorrow, must face the burdens of our own day—in our own lives as in the places of power and privilege in our nation.

For if we turn from this work of anguish, if we look away from the burden of violence that continues to mark our society with the shadows of racism and inequality, we will give ourselves to hatred and thoughts of revenge. We will devote ourselves to building walls—figural or literal—to keep out those we fear, and refuse to see the struggle of those whose lives have been broken by the bonds of oppression. And we will find ourselves becoming diminished, racked with feelings of vengeance, unable to move beyond the weight of that "final no." And, when we do this, sorrow "will never cease and will multiply," as Hillesum put it.

But only as we face the anguish of love can we, as Etty Hillesum suggests we must, come to a place where we might say from the depths of our soul that, yes, "life is beautiful and so rich, so beautiful and so rich that it all makes you want to believe in God."