

-There is a familiar term that most of you have probably heard of which is: “bait-and-switch.” Technically, it is a term that is used for borderline illegal acts of selling. When I was looking for a new used car, I saw a vehicle online that seemed very well priced and got into negotiations with the seller who when I asked to look at the vehicle said: “well, the vehicle is actually in Texas at a shipping center. It’s all ready to be shipped to you, (for free of course). All you need to do is pay \$5,000 to us first, we will ship the car to you and then if you like it, you can send us the rest of the payment and it will all be good.” Yeah right.... Bait-and-switch, even openly legal transactions today seem to be more bait and switch. Abby and I flew to MN to see family over New Years and I found out that the “cheapest tickets” airlines are currently selling nowadays (again, unbeknownst to me) don’t sit you together anymore. So we show up at the airport with baby Soren and our tickets show us sitting in two middle-row seats on the opposite end of the plane from one another. “Oh, I am sorry sir,” the airport attendant said to me. “This is our new basic-economy fare and I can’t sit you together.” Pretty soon, it seems like they are going to start selling spots in the airplane baggage compartment and say: “well, if you want an actual seat while you travel, you’ll have to upgrade your ticket.” Bait-and-switch seems to be more and more a part of our lives nowadays.

-It is probably because of our stronger bait-and-switch detectors that the lectionary strategically “carves up” our Old Testament reading today. This story, the call-story of the prophet Isaiah, is relatively famous at least in church circles. Pastor Daniel Disch at Atonement Lutheran commented at our textstudy this last week that he has a reader in his congregation who always wants to know when this “call story” will come up so she can read it and read it with gusto. This story is popular at ordinations, blessings, and even confirmation. We all seem to like the weird “fiery coal” touching Isaiah’s mouth and him saying: “Here I am! Send me!”

-And if the story just ended at verse 8, that’s what this would be: a very weird, but oddly inspiring “call-story”. Except this story doesn’t end at just verse 8, it goes on until verse 13 in what the lectionary titles “optional additional verses” (you’ll notice these verses are in brackets). You can probably see why most ordinations don’t read these verses and that’s because what God says here is extremely uncomfortable: “Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed.’ Then I said, ‘How long, O Lord?’ And he said: ‘Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is utterly desolate.’” Is this a bait-and-switch move? Is the lectionary saying: “Well, for a nicer call story and the luxury of not dealing with God’s wrath, you’ll have to upgrade.”

-Our “optional additional verses”, in my mind, make it look like exactly that: we want the nice call-story without having to deal with what God is actually saying.

-So what is God saying to Isaiah here? How do we make sense of these what seem to be very “angry verses”?

-Well, simply put, the context here is exactly that: anger. God is angry at what is going on. One of the strong themes of the book of Isaiah, especially the first part of Isaiah (what biblical scholars would refer to as 1st Isaiah) is: forgetting. The people of God are forgetting who they belong to. They are forgetting the teachings and law of God in loving the neighbor, sharing one’s gifts, and serving the poor. Isaiah documents many counts of theft, greed, corruption, and malice that this little kingdom of Israel commits. All of these things have direct effect on the poor and vulnerable: unfair taxing and driving families into poverty, stealing food and clothing, paying no attention to the sick, and defacing the Temple as a place of worship. All of these things are happening, and happen with consequence: most famously in that Israel gets so inwardly focused that they collapse as a government and get invaded by the Empire of Babylon.

-Perhaps the church tends to treat this text as a “bait-and-switch” text not because of what God says here, but because the church (society as a whole) is uncomfortable with God being angry. Our entire Advent and Christmas seasons mostly focus on love and a sweet, helpless baby. Oh how cute! That’s a God we can picture: a God of love, grace, and hope. But a God of anger we aren’t so comfortable with. Anger as an emotion, I think, is uncomfortable and intimidating. Many people aren’t taught how to deal with anger in a healthy way, so we place these unhealthy images on God.

-God is the “picture of health” so God must not get angry. This is what most of us, including myself, say in order to tame down these texts we would rather not deal with.

-But let me say some things in response to this: not having a faith which has room for God to get angry cheapens God. Just like anger makes up a portion of who we are as whole human beings, anger and judgement also make up a portion of the wholeness of the Divine. When we say that God does not get angry at children being separated from their parents at the border, or targeted housing policies that impact disproportionately people of color, or the sexual slavery and murder of hundreds of Native American women across our country, or the utter and blatant inaction on Climate Change that will have disastrous effects on all of our future children, it cheapens God and makes God in many ways not relevant. In the book of Genesis, God says: “And it was good”. Well, when we fall short of being good: when we kill each other or take away from each other, God gets mad (just like we should get mad!)

-Let me say something else about God and anger too: anger isn’t a switch that turns on full blast and off again like my boiler. Anger looks different with the God of Israel than with, say, the Babylonian or Greek Gods who seem to have two emotions: happy and angry (there is a reason why in Greek mythology you don’t want to get the gods angry with you). Many people have this view of anger even today. I had a friend who had a child with special needs who, after they were born, was approached by someone who

literally said: "Oh, you and your wife waited too long to have kids, so thus God was angry." I'm sorry, anger doesn't work like that. Anger is an emotion, like anything, which is coupled with multiple emotions: sadness, loss, mourning, loneliness, and empathy. So this over simplistic infatuation our society has with God's anger= God's punishment downright misses the entire point.

-We are tying two prayer quilts today: both for individuals who have a very tough prognosis with illnesses. I want to say today that God is angry, and not at either of them. It is completely against everything we understand and read about the God of Israel, our God, to even suggest that this is God's "punishment". That's not what Jesus came to say. Instead, what this text I believe is pointing most clearly to is God being angry at the evil that is in this world. God is angry that struggle and suffering because of evil illnesses occur within the bodies of fellow children of God. God is greatly disturbed with the families who walk with these individuals and who help care for them.

-I talked about the beginning part of Isaiah focusing on "forgetting who you belong to" and anger because of that. The book of Isaiah continues and ends at "restoration". "A shoot shall come out of the branch of Jesse". Perhaps this is a reminder to all of us that God's anger at "forgetting" and all of the injustice in this world can be connected with restoration and new life. Through God's anger, God is up to something and creating something new.

-May these prayer quilts be a sign, then, not just of our anger towards a world that is not fair, not just, not right in many ways, but also of new life and restoration. May our church work hard at not being a community that "baits-and-switches" people, but an authentic gathering of God's children who are called to reflect God's anger towards evil and injustice as well as love towards the creation of newness and life. Amen.