

MAY THE WORDS OF MY MOUTH AND THE MEDITATIONS OF *OUR HEARTS* BE ACCEPTABLE IN YOUR SIGHT,
O LORD, *OUR ROCK AND OUR REDEEMER.* (Ps19:14)

In our first lesson from the Hebrew scriptures: Moses promises the people that when they move out in groups to settle new territory, God will raise up from their midst a prophet like Moses (Dt18:15). —Someone with integrity, a human face and voice for God —not speaking for themselves or driven by their own ego or power trip, but someone who tells the honest-to-God truth. And such a prophet is accountable with their very life to speak *only* in God’s name. The prophet is accountable to God AND to the people. The prophet will die if they turn out to be wrong, to be speaking and leading falsely. And further, God will hold the people accountable, also, to “heed the words that the prophet shall speak in God’s name.”

Twice in the Book of Acts (3:22 & 7:37), this very passage from Deuteronomy is cited as referring to Jesus. Jesus —a human face of God— also carrying the tradition of the shepherd-leader walking in the midst of the people.

In today’s gospel, Jesus’ integrity is on display. We see his “sage-on-the-stage”-style teaching moments reinforced by his “guide-on-the-side”-style transformative, healing interaction with an individual.

This is still the very first chapter of Mark —the gospel that our lectionary will take us through this “year B” of our cycle of readings.

Still in chapter ONE and *ALREADY*, Jesus has been baptized and spent time in the wilderness, has taken up where John the Baptist left off when he was arrested —Jesus took up preaching in the countryside and on the streets, and now we hear for the first time Jesus teaching in a house of worship. Still chapter one.

Wow. “Authority!” ¹·He knows what he’s talking about. And then —²·and *then*— the power of his teaching — underscored one-on-one! This exorcism, this miracle. God is giving a sign: Jesus is the real deal. His words and his actions have integrity. He heals and transforms the man who had the demon and also heals and transforms the community. Their member —formerly possessed— is restored in his right mind. *WHEW!* He is restored sane to the community. They know God is acting in their midst. The healing, exorcising miracle proves the truth of Jesus’ teaching that already made such sense to the people.

But I am intrigued by the demon in today's gospel. He has such clarity! He knows and names Jesus as the messiah –from a local town of Nazareth. And he asks: ***Have you come to destroy us?*** ...*(ever since I was little, I've known that demons have that kind of voice...)*

This demon is –and I think: ALL demons in the gospels are– **ANGRY!**

Now the Demons I've met are angry, too. They have lots of bluster but they don't usually have such clarity.

Here's an example. this is one of those embarrassing memories
[story of my rising anger and eventual horn-honking at a car in front of me that sat at an intersection through 2 or 3 sequences of green-yellow-red. ...I finally realized road construction was blocking the lanes on the far side of the intersection. It wasn't her fault. I was not seeing the bigger picture.]

My anger was due to my lack of understanding, my impatient desire to get on with my plans, my superiority in not being one of *those people who lets their phones distract them from the moment at hand.*

...and look at ME these days ~ depending on a plethora of phone apps!

The point is that the reason for anger is DISRUPTION.

Today's demon says it out loud to Jesus: ***Have you come to destroy us?*** Andrew Lester, the author of this **red** book, *The Angry Christian* (Westminster John Knox 2003) says that anger is a natural response to threat, danger, the possibility of destruction.

The problem is, unlike THIS demon,
 we can be angry without knowing why,
 and we can be angry without even knowing that we *are* angry.

Let's look at road rage. When someone cuts you off, it's easy to get angry. What's the threat or the danger there?

Well. Driving like that could kill somebody if speed is involved.

OR it could cause an accident - physical injury, maybe. There might be financial implications. – Who will pay to fix my car if this idiot wrecks it? There might legal implications—will I get a ticket or have to go to court? There will definitely be loss of time and having to acknowledge the fact that you are not in control of your life: This is NOT what I wanted to do with my

day. My plans will have to take a back seat, while we sort this out with the cops and insurance companies...

And then there is the kind of road rage that is caused by threat to our egos. You know. You're on the highway, signs say the left lane ahead is closing, some dutiful people pull immediately into the right lane, which begins to get clogged. Meanwhile, the clueless or *MORE LIKELY* those who are in a hurry **or who *think they're more important than the rest of us*** are zooming by waiting until the very last second to merge in front of all of the virtuous, orderly, patient people.... ***Who do they think they are?***

Notice: when you start to compare and compete with others or feel put down, it's quite possible that your ego is involved. And when your middle finger gets involved, I'd say that's a clear sign that your ego IS involved.

But —beyond road rage— there are threats to human dignity that are worthy of our attention and anger.

The gospel —and the vows we take in baptism are very clear about the imperative to **respect the dignity of every human being.**

Remember that Jesus repeatedly promotes dignity by drawing people out of shame and discounting hypocrites who enhance their own egos by looking down on others.

The gospel is pro-dignity, anti-ego, anti-disdain. And it is so often our over-sensitive egos that feel threatened and burst out in anger.

Now whenever I read in the Gospels that something happened in a synagogue — the place of worship— that means to me this is something that also happens in churches.

Yes. Much of the time Christians don't *want to be* angry. In the gospels, demons seem angry — but Jesus stays calm.

And heck! In the sermon on the mount Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said ... 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment ^(Mt5:21f.) .

I don't for a minute think that Jesus is saying that anger is as bad as murder, but it's clear: The gospel is about the health and integrity of relationships. Anger is serious.

So look: This church is in a time of transition. Our rector is gone. We will soon have a short-term interim priest for a few months, and then we will choose a new priest-in-charge. ...which means CHANGES ARE AFOOT.

And changes are a THREAT to the status quo. Members of this church: You ARE the church. Changes WILL unbalance you. Whatever equilibrium has been here will feel threatened. Anger is a natural response.

Mostly, our anger does not come out with the clarity today's Gospel demon demonstrates. Mostly, we are angry without identifying what kind of threat we feel.

Especially in church, where nice-ness is at a premium, and anger is rather taboo, it's important to know that anger can manifest not only as an outburst or ranting or upset or frustration.

It may manifest as humor that has a mean edge to it. Or in passive behaviors such as not being able to make yourself come to worship or another meeting, or being late, or forgetting, being confused, or fussing about random details, or nagging. You may notice these behaviors in yourself or in others. They may happen here at church or at home. Sometimes anger in a situation, where it is difficult to express gets unloaded at home unfairly against those who love us most. (Lester, *Angry Christian* pp5ff)

Let us be on the look-out for anger in any of these forms, and when we find it, let us pray for the spirit of Jesus, that we may counter it clearly yet with compassion and that we may seek the truth behind it and get the bigger picture, find out what is threatened, at stake, or endangered – whether it be a core value of our church community, the dignity of a person, the status quo, or simply our own status and ego.

Take seriously the spirit of Paul's in today's second lesson: "Take care that your behavior does not become a stumbling block for others."

In the calm compassion and humility of Jesus Christ, AMEN.