

December 10, 2023 – Mark 1:1-8

Never go to bed angry. It's one of the most common pieces of advice given to newlyweds. And it actually has a Biblical origin. Ephesians 4:26 says, "Do not let the sun go down on your anger." But Paul isn't just talking about married couples. He says to remember that in all of your relationships. Never go to bed angry... with anyone. Spouse. Family member. Friend. Neighbor. Coworker. It doesn't matter.

And in general, I think it's a good piece of advice. Because, as Paul was pointing out in that verse, it's easy to let your anger consume you. To let it block all your rational judgement. To let it drown out the voice of the Holy Spirit telling you how God's child should behave. And eventually, to let it fester into bitterness and hatred. Very often it begins with just a single argument and one angry night.

One spouse disagrees with the other spouse. One neighbor disagrees with the other neighbor. One member of the church disagrees with another member of the church. Pretty soon the disagreement becomes heated and intense.

And then, at some point, somebody decides to pull the plug. To end the argument. Not through reconciliation or compromise or forgiveness. But through the silent treatment.

Yes, the silent treatment. When you simply refusing to argue anymore. Walk away. Hang up the phone. Block them on Facebook. Stonewall. Its an incredible effective device during an argument. Because there is no defense against it. You cannot force someone to argue. And, in the moment, that kinda makes us feel good.

But that doesn't mean that the disagreement has gone away. Quite the opposite. The conflict is more intense than ever. It's just never going to be resolved. Not until the two sides begin talking again. Do not let the sun go down on your anger.

This is true in our human relationships. But its also true in our relationship with God. And I think, to a certain degree, we see the silent treatment at work in God's relationship with Israel. Because, if you've read the Old Testament, you know that Israel had a rather volatile relationship with the Lord.

They argued constantly. Israel's very name means, "those who struggle with God." And I think it could just as easily be translated, "those who argue with God." Because that was, really, their only way of struggling. As Jacob found out for himself, you can't physically wrestle God and expect to win.

And, really, you can't argue with God and expect to win either. But Israel tried. Boy, did they try. Year after year, God sent prophet after prophet to argue with Israel. About everything. How they treated the poor and destitute. How they allowed corruption in the government. How they were sacrificing to false gods on pagan altars. How they had no faith or repentance left in their heart.

But it didn't work. And God ended up sending Israel into Babylonian captivity as part of their punishment. But that wasn't the only punishment that God had in mind for them. Because after they returned from Babylon and returned to their same sinful, corrupt, faithless ways, God threw up his hands and said, "You know what? I'm done arguing."

And the prophets disappeared. For generation after generation, the people had argued with God, wishing he would let them do whatever they wanted. Wishing that he would stop sending these annoying prophets who reminded them of their sin. And so he did. For 400 years, there was not a single prophet to be found in all of Israel. God was done arguing.

And for the Israelites during that time, it felt an awful lot like he was giving them the silent treatment. Those years are called by many theologians "the silent years." The years between the Old and New Testaments. When there wasn't anything inspired by the Holy Spirit to write because God had nothing more to say to them.

But, despite how it felt, God hadn't given them the silent treatment. Not really. Not like we give to each other. He wasn't speaking any new words to them, but he had not left His people. Not at all. And even in His silence, He continued to speak.

Because His Word was still with them. They may not have listened the first time, but the words of the prophets already sent to Israel continued to cry out to the people, even though they were long dead and buried. The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of our God will stand forever. Through decades of idolatry and exile, God's Word had endured.

Israel's sin is familiar to us. For it's a sin we're prone to commit as well. Because when God tells us something we don't want to hear, our first reaction is to argue. To find a loophole in God's commandment. To find an exception to God's rule. To find a way to explain our sinful actions so that they don't sound quite so sinful.

But God's Word is still there. He may not send prophets anymore. But he still sends pastors and faithful laymen and the writings of theologians new and old. And he still sends his Word to remind us of what is right and wrong. What is righteous and what is wicked. What is from God and what is from the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh.

We argue, and he points to His Word. We argue, and he points to his Word again. We argue, and he points to His Word yet again. And eventually, we just want him to go away and stop talking.

And then something bad happens and we need him. We pray to him. And we plead into the silence, "Where are you God? I know I failed. I know I was wrong. I need you. Talk to me." But we've spent so long pushing his Word out of our lives, we wonder if he's still there for us at all. That's at least what the Israelites had begun to wonder. 400 years without a prophet. Has God abandoned us?

No, God had not left His people. As St Peter tells us in our Epistle, "*[The Lord] is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.*" And so He was not done speaking to them. Because He had one more prophet to send. And in some ways, this prophet was sent to preach the same old argument as before. Care for the poor. Punish the corrupt. Do away with false gods. Repent and believe.

But in another sense, John the Baptist was completely different. Because he was the last of the prophets. And his job, more than any other, was to prepare the way of the Lord. To blaze a trail of repentance and faithfulness that Jesus' entire ministry would follow.

You see, God had been silent, not because he was overwhelmed with emotion like so many of us are when we argue, but because this was part of His plan all along. To show Israel the seriousness of their sin, yes. But also, to change the argument.

To wake them up to a new possibility. That maybe it doesn't have to be a constant argument. Maybe it doesn't have to be a constant cycle of sin, failure, and repentance. Sin, failure, and repentance. Over and over again. Maybe the baptism can be more than what human hands can offer. More than a symbol of that cycle that our sinful nature will never let us break.

Maybe the baptism can be one of power worked by someone more powerful than any prophet. A baptism of the Holy Spirit and of fire, washing not just our bodies our very souls as well. Working in our hearts in ways that no human will or effort ever could. And breaking that cycle of sin, failure, and repentance that we could not break.

So that it's simply a baptism of salvation. Apart from all our works and all our sins and all our failures. A baptism that saves. And brings the greatest comfort God's people have ever known. The voice of someone speaking tenderly to them and proclaiming that their hard service is over, their sin is paid for, and they have received from the Lord's right hand double for all their sins.

John the Baptist came to prepare the way of the Lord. He came to proclaim the coming end to mankind's argument with God. An end that came by Jesus Christ coming to earth and winning the argument by losing His life. And in so doing, proclaiming to everyone, "I love you. And I don't want to argue anymore." Amen.