

I don’t think it’s a coincidence—at this time of year when we speak of a light that overcomes the darkness, on this day when we have lit candles in the name of peace, hope, love, and now joy—I don’t think it’s a coincidence that the cover story this month for *The Atlantic* magazine is titled, “Why Are We So Angry?” The article is not just about anger in general. If you saw the animated movie “*Inside Out*,” or have ever studied psychology, or taken advantage of therapy, then you know there is a generality to anger, in that everyone has it. It is a fundamental, elemental, non-negotiable part of the human experience. Some might claim to be able to keep their anger completely in check. Some might deny ever being angry, but denial is just that: proof that it probably exists. Everyone has it.

The article, however, with its subtitle: “The Untold Story of American Rage—And Where It’s Taking Us,” aims to talk about a more specific anger—an anger whose existence the author readily admits—you may not be convinced of. “Recently,” the author writes, “the tenor of anger [in our country] has shifted. It has become less episodic and more persistent, a constant drumbeat in our lives.”¹ Charles Duhigg, who wrote the article, goes on to say that whether you agree with his diagnosis or not, perhaps we can all agree that like any emotion, anger can be good...or bad.

“Good anger...encourages us to air our grievances and find solutions. [When leaders understand this], they can reframe anger as moral indignation, which can extend the power of grievance into an instrument for the pursuit of a more just world. [Think Cesar Chavez organizing California migrant workers for fair wages, Abraham Lincoln condemning slavery for the sake of union, or Dorothy Day insisting on non-violence as the only way.] But when we come to believe that justice is impossible, we get the desire for revenge. [When] we no longer expect our anger to be heard, we don’t express ourselves with the hope of finding

¹ From the January/February 2019 edition of *The Atlantic*. “Why Are We So Angry? The Untold Story of American Rage—And Where It’s Taking Us,” p. 65

compromise or reconciliation. Rather, we become willing to do *anything* to advance our interests, regardless of who is standing in our way. When we want revenge, we keep going until we feel like we've taught the other person a lesson."²

When this happens, the goal of our anger becomes only to hurt someone else, and this can never be a good thing. Duhigg concludes what I think is absolutely true: everyone has anger. We just don't always know what to do with it.

At no time during the year is this perhaps truer than it is now, during the season of Advent, in the days leading up to Christmas. When the distance between what you want and what you can afford feels especially huge. When there is much talk of loved ones coming home for the holidays, but your loved ones are simply gone for good. When we are surrounded by great crowds at the malls and in church, but we somehow feel terribly lonely. It's enough to leave some feeling depressed, anxious, even angry. What to do?

One option is to simply choose happiness. We've heard this advice before, probably read it on a billboard or a bumper sticker. When life gets you down, when negativity surrounds, you can choose to be happy. Don't let anyone tell you that you can't be happy. When poverty and sorrow and sadness come knocking, it's up to you to still choose happiness. You can do it! Really? I mean, it sounds nice, but I've often thought that telling someone who isn't happy with their job or their marriage or their life, and who may even be angry about it, that they could choose to be happy, is a bit like telling a starving person who hasn't eaten in days because they don't have any money with which to buy food, well, you could choose to be full. The fact is, not all choices are created equally, and the unhappy person can sometimes no more choose to be happy than the hungry person with no food can choose to be full or the poor person can choose to just work harder or the refugee can just stay put and choose to make a better world where they are.

Now I know what you may be thinking. Yes, but what about those people who, stuck at the bottom of some barrel, with grit and determination they seem to rise above the fray? Is it not the American Dream we all know to pursue life, liberty, *and* happiness? Yes, no, I don't know. What I know is this: last Sunday afternoon I showed up here in the sanctuary

² Ibid., p. 73

at 3:30 p.m. hoping there would be at least a dozen people on hand to go Christmas caroling with me. You see? I had told 4 families we would stop by and sing to them, and I really didn't think they'd want to hear from just me. These are families and individuals who have found lately that no matter how hard they try, life's just not getting any easier. The dreams are getting harder to keep alive. But maybe a few songs and *at least* a few visitors will help. Over 40 of you showed up!

At our fourth and final stop of the night, standing in Pam and Bob Gilson's living room, as the group started into "Silent Night," I stopped singing. I listened. I looked around the room, and you know what I thought? I thought, wow, these are my people. How lucky am I to belong to them. It's the same thought I have every Sunday when we come forward for Communion. I look at the line of people stretching up the middle aisle; some of us really struggling in our hearts...or bodies...or both, to be a part of it; our children so excited to be a part of it. No longer sitting in our individual pews, we stand together as the Body of Christ to receive the Body of Christ. And I think, there's no reason I should get to belong here. But for the grace of God, I'm with them.

I had the same experience this past Tuesday when I went with Cara Burns to visit Edith Read and Irene Baptista, two sisters in their late 80s who live together and care for one another. We brought along the gifts of Communion to share and Cara also brought along Cliff, already on Christmas break from preschool. At one point in our visit I noticed that the only Christmas tree Edith and Irene had was a small tree set-up on a low table in a corner of the room. Edith pointed out the lights on it but said they couldn't plug it in because they couldn't reach the outlet, which was under the table. Cliff, who has been sticking especially close to his mom, didn't skip a beat. He went over and, being the only person in the room small enough for the job, crawled under the table and plugged the tree in. The lights went on and Irene, who had a stroke several years ago and can't speak, let out an excited moan that could only be described as...no, not happiness. It was something more than happiness; something deeper, something that she couldn't come up with all on her own. It was joy.

That's what we're talking about on this fourth Sunday of Advent, just two days before Christmas—Joy. It's what has Mary singing.

My soul magnifies the Lord,

and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

Mary knows that by all appearances, she's nothing much to look at. She's a poor girl with no exceptional credits to her resume. Her soon-to-be-husband hails from a town no one has ever heard of. She's lowly. Yet God has looked upon her with favor, because this is what joy does: Joy doesn't see what is lowly. Joy sees what can be lifted up. Joy doesn't look into a room and check to see if the coast is clear, if everything is in order and as it should be. Joy comes in where it's dark, and crawling under the table, joy plugs in the light. Joy does not look for a place to belong. Joy goes to those places where nothing seems to belong, and joy declares, these are my people. Count me as one of them.

But it must be said that joy does not look to make us happy. If Mary hasn't figured it out already, being picked by God is not going to make her life any easier or happier. Soon, she will have to journey to Bethlehem, where there will be no room in the inn. She'll have to deliver her baby in the cold darkness of night. Then, she and Joseph will have to run for their lives. They will become refugees in a world turned cruel, victims of a government that wants only to take power, but never to give it. Makes you wonder how it is that Mary is able to sing of God's love and mercy. But I don't wonder. Being here with you, I don't wonder at all. It's joy.