

January at the Movies I
Where the Wild Things Are...*Anger*

Romans 12:17-21

Introduction

Play “ANGER” vid from Video Team

Well, today we’re beginning a four part series called “January at the Movies”. The idea is to choose four popular films that are saying something on behalf of our culture about topics that also are addressed in the Bible. My intent here is *not* to be overly critical of any film, or even to recommend that you even watch them (some would come with warnings); although, in fact, I’ve chosen four films that I think all have something important to say about their particular subjects, or at least which raise questions that are worth talking about, even if they don’t intend to provide answers.

(And, in that regard, what *I* have to say in response to these films is not all there is to say, either. As the line in our promo said, “Sometimes you just have to talk about them.” That’s the plan here – so, if you end up discussing these films/ topics in the context of Scriptures and the Christian faith this week, or this afternoon – whether or not you agree on my take on them – I will consider this day a rousing success!)

I just played a video clip of the responses of some of our youth around questions of what do *we* do with anger. That’s today’s theme. There are probably thousands of films that deal with anger, because it is so common in our human experience. We all get angry, and we probably all have crossed a line at times in our anger that we wish we could take back. So, our first film is one person’s perspective on those questions that we saw answered by some of our FUMC youth.

Where the Wild Things Are is a film based on a beloved picture book by Maurice Sendak. This screen adaptation is directed by Spike Jonze and Dave Eggers. (I understand that Spike Jonze consulted with Sendak in the adaptation of this short book for the much more lengthy film, so in spite of a number of objections that I’ve heard that ‘the film is nothing like the book’, it seems that this much ‘darker’ screen version is what Sendak had in mind all along.) Now, if you haven’t seen this film and you’re picturing in your mind, The Muppet Movie, you might want to revise that into something more like The Muppets Meet Lord of the Flies! (And I’ll say this a couple of times – I *liked* this movie! Just recognize it for what it is!)

January at the Movies I
Where the Wild Things Are...*Anger*

Max (played by Max Records) is a 9-year-old boy who definitely feels neglected. In the beginning of the film, Max builds a snow fort and wants his older sister to play with him, but she is too busy on the phone or with her friends. He gets into a snowball fight with his sister and her friends, but his snow fort gets crushed by them – all part of the game. They don't even realize how they have hurt Max, as he stands there crying, and his sister just leaves with her friends.

Max's parent's are divorced, and his mom works late. She comes home, and tries to spend a little time with Max, but she, too, is busy with projects and a boyfriend. Outside of school, Max has no one. He leads a lonely existence. One night, (same night as the snow fort) unable to contain himself any longer, Max fights with his mom, he bites her and she yells at him, he runs away, you know how those things can go. The rest of the film – until the very end – consists in Max's imagination. He sails off to an island and meets 'the Wild Things'. Max, through smooth talking, becomes their king, but he eventually discovers that the Wild Things are just like the people he left back home.

These wild things have many layers.

So, at first this world appears perfect – they all break things and don't care, they listen to everything Max says and take his suggestions, but eventually Max starts to notice friction between the creatures. His attempt at 'kingship' starts to fall apart. And to his dismay, Max eventually realizes that in spite of his good efforts, he is the *cause* of much of the friction, in fact, he ends up making the monster family even more dysfunctional than it was before his arrival.

Here's a little clip that will give you a taste of the film... this is Max's introduction to 'the family':

*** Play: Clip – This is our Family –*

You heard Carol say in his introductions – “They act weird, and can hurt other people's feelings...”

And you can see even in this short clip hints of how true that is. Judith is passive aggressive (as she backs into Ira demanding attention, but *saying* “You don't need to bother with me”... Ira is gentle, but gets his feelings hurt easily... Alexander (the goat boy) – always seems to get lost in the crowd. Everyone ignores him (you see him in the background asking, “You can introduce me to the king”, but no one does.)

January at the Movies I
Where the Wild Things Are...Anger

Then there is Douglas (the 'Eagle – like' character) – Carol says, "I count on him for everything..." And indeed, they are best friends. But in the end, Carol severely injures Douglas while acting out in his anger.

I think we need to keep in mind here that Spike Jonze portrays an entire film – successfully, in my opinion – from the viewpoint, logic, and, heightened view of emotions of a 9-year-old. Everything is 'big, everything tends to go to extremes, and there is not always logic in the action.

The movie itself is very dark, I'd be careful about taking young children to see this. The fact is that life is not always happy, and neither is Max right now. As one of the monsters says to Max, "being a family is hard." Their problems start to parallel his own problems at home. Max begins to think of his family and I think he starts missing them.

Let me show you one more clip...this is a conversation between Max and KW (who is a voice of reason throughout the film, and is the most 'motherly' of the figures...)

Clip #2 -- What's your story? –

[KW - Obviously you have no home or family

Max – I had one of them ...but

KW - But you ate them all?

Max - No! I didn't eat them... I just bit one, that's all...and went crazy... and I don't like frozen corn...]

Part of that dialogue goes like this:

Max – "They act like I'm a bad person"

KW - "Well, are you?"

Max – "I don't know."

While there are a number of themes worth talking about in this film (such as the human need for a 'King', and how poorly we ourselves handle that role!) I'm choosing the theme of anger today. There is a lot of insight here on the roots of anger, on how we adults tend to hold on to some very juvenile ways of handling anger, and what can happen when anger takes control of us. Including not really knowing how to answer the question: "*Are you a bad person?*" Our anger can certainly affect our self- image, and can hide the good thing that God wants to make of our lives.

January at the Movies I
Where the Wild Things Are...Anger

We all know what anger is, and we've all felt it: whether as a fleeting annoyance or as full-fledged rage. Let's just start by saying this: anger is a completely normal, even healthy, human emotion. But when it gets out of control and turns destructive, it can lead to problems—problems at work, in personal relationships, and in the overall quality of our life. It can make you feel as though you're at the mercy of something unpredictable and powerful. And that's where things really go south.

Like other emotions, anger is accompanied by physiological and biological changes; when you get angry, your heart rate and blood pressure go up, as do the levels of your energy hormones, adrenaline, and noradrenaline.

Way back in the 400's, some very wise Monks came up with a list to help people understand our brokenness, a list which you've heard of: "The Seven Deadly Sins". Interestingly, that ancient list doesn't include 'anger'... instead we find the word: *wrath*. Wrath is a cousin, a level of anger that from a human perspective, tends to be anger that is out of control and very generalized. Wrath is unrestrained anger that devours anyone nearby.

Anger itself, however, is not something condemned in the Bible. In fact, there are circumstances in which anger is the appropriate response. When we do not feel anger over injustice, there is possibly something wrong in our inner moral wiring – and of course a good example of that is Jesus' response to the people who were turning the Temple worship into an act of commerce, and were cheating people, to boot!

Anyone who claims that Jesus was not *really* angry when he turned over the money changer's tables and drove the merchants out with a whip of cords that he himself fashioned, is not dealing honestly with the text. (And some scholars claim that this one act was the biggest contributor to Jesus' eventual crucifixion.)

Anger is an emotion, a feeling. *What we do with it* determines whether or not it is going to affect us, and whether that effect is for good or ill. It can lead to some good things: a determination to feed hungry people, or join an organization like "MADD". But it can also be destructive.

There are two basic kinds of anger, and I'm going to symbolize them today with two items:

January at the Movies I
Where the Wild Things Are...Anger

** The first is a slow, simmering anger... and we'll illustrate that with this crock pot. I've had a lot of wonderful meals cooked in a crock pot. They're great - you plug them in, put in the sauce, the meat, the soup, whatever, and what happens? It slowly simmers. Cooks *all day*. So, crock pot anger is inner anger that mostly stays inside and doesn't get expressed much, but that constant simmering has effects on us - it changes our soul over time. And when it finally reaches the surface, watch out!

We see examples of crock-pot anger all the time. You see it in some marriages, when the couple, rather than addressing issues directly (like so many of our young people say they do when *they* are angry) they just let them build up. So over time something that is really pretty small, turns rather large.

It could be anything... like in a marriage, perhaps in the laundry procedure:

Dianna and I have a 'division of labor' in our laundry... she takes the hamper of dirty clothes downstairs and she sorts them and washes them, dries them, she folds them, brings them back upstairs...and I...wear them... ☺ Now, if I didn't take care of some other responsibilities to counter that, Crock Pot anger – could be cooking there, but it isn't... (I don't think!)

But we've all seen examples of how frustration can lead to anger. 'Crock Pot' anger is a Family systems type of anger – it tends to get passed around in families, it asks people to choose sides over issues that sometimes are long past, even forgotten. It seeks allies: so people simmer in their anger over parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents, sometimes people who aren't even alive anymore. And there is in some people a well of rage that is just below the surface, and seldom addressed. Simmering.

It can grow from frustration in others – in their lack of doing or being what we want them to; or from a lack of personal self-fulfillment (that we end up blaming others for), from random negative circumstances that we *choose* to take personally... the crock pot is cooking!

** A second kind of anger is **explosive anger**: like a firecracker, or a stick of dynamite. Dynamite is pretty much inert, but once the fuse is lit, you know that there is going to be something big is going to happen. Can't miss it! And the thing is, there's no telling what is going to light that fuse.

January at the Movies I **Where the Wild Things Are...Anger**

Explosive anger is often, if not *always*, related to crock pot anger. It's like the ground on top of an active volcano – that well of lava is boiling underneath the surface, and you never know when it is going to erupt. (Jesus said that the stuff that comes out of our mouths starts in our hearts!) The thing is, with explosive anger, the 'precipitating circumstance' – the object of our expressed rage – does not necessarily have to have *anything at all* to do with whatever is feeding that 'inner crock pot'.

Examples of this are "Road Rage" incidents. We *all* get miffed at other drivers – when I'm on my MC I have little patience with drivers on cell phones! And I can yell pretty loud. But people who take this to extremes, who click into 'angry mode' whenever you get behind the wheel, you're tapping into something much deeper than other drivers.

Explosive anger is often released these days in Emails and texts. Someone completely misunderstands what you wrote before, or you strongly disagree with something they've written ... and boom! You send off a response! No editing, no retraction – its out there! Explosive anger. Doesn't accomplish much.

So, what *does* the Bible say about anger? Quite a bit! In Genesis 4 (Genesis is the first book in the Bible, and one of the oldest) we read the story of Cain and Abel, sons of Adam and Eve. Cain is a farmer, and he brings some crops as an offering to God. Abel is a rancher, and he brings choice meat as his offering. Now, we don't know why, but for some reason God accepts Abel's offering but rejects Cain's. (Perhaps it had something to do with the attitude in which it was given, surely it didn't matter *what* was given.)

Cain's response to that rejection was anger. Really, he is angry with God, but instead he directs his [**] anger at his brother. And God comes to him with a warning – God says, "*Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it.*"

Cain did not heed this advice, and ended up murdering his brother. So we see that even in this very ancient writing, God 'tags' anger with a warning label: "*You need to get control over your anger... through it, sin is crouching at your door. It desires to have you*". We also see in this that even thousands of years ago, God knew: we have a choice in how we deal with our anger.

January at the Movies I
Where the Wild Things Are...Anger

[**] **Two Negative effects of anger** (i.e., anger that ‘has us’)

[**] 1. Anger Leads To Isolation When we’re constantly angry, people avoid us, and we tend to avoid others. What does Max do in the Film? In the heat of his anger, after this ugly confrontation with his mother, he *runs away*. He fantasizes about what a world would be like under *his* rule. But in his isolation, he realizes that things are even worse, yet he doesn’t know how to ‘fix’ it.

I’ve heard people say to me, “I’m just an angry person” – as if that involves no personal choice or responsibility. It’s like saying, “I have green eyes, I’m Irish/ German descent, and I’m angry”. What?

Anger is isolating because doesn’t need to be in relationship in order to exist; it doesn’t need community, it doesn’t want to heal or reconcile. So people who embrace their anger tend to isolate themselves. And in that isolation all energy goes toward feeding that anger. People avoid us, or distrust us, and their lack of response to us makes us *more* angry, and downward it goes.

In Ephesians 4 pastor HY last week read Paul’s word about anger: “*In your anger do not sin*”: *Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.*” So here, again, Paul clearly implies that anger is something that we can control, it is a choice we make. It doesn’t always lead to sin, either. There is not a direct correlation between anger and sin.

But Paul’s teaching is that we need to be careful to keep the crock pot empty! Don’t let the sun go down on your anger! So, either deal with it, or move to Finland.

[**] **2. Revenge**

A second negative response to anger is revenge. Someone cuts us off on the highway, and we end up tailing them – ignoring the fact that we may be the cause of some worse consequence. Someone hurts us – intentionally, or unintentionally, we often don’t even try to find out – and we get revenge by shunning them, by cutting them off emotionally, by interacting with them in bitterness, by talking about them to others, by purposefully hurting them through your words, through fantasizing bad stuff happening to them ... its not ‘shooting them’ but it’s still revenge.

January at the Movies I
Where the Wild Things Are...Anger

Revenge can feel good... for awhile. But revenge is never justice, and never leads to a positive outcome because the *point* of revenge is to harm another person. The Bible says that revenge is ultimately up to God, not us (Romans 12:19)

[**] *Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.*

Now, that doesn't mean that we shouldn't take action when we're angry, it means that we need to decide what is *appropriate action* – what is appropriate for us, and appropriate for God.

[**] **Ways to Deal With Anger**

Ok, I know my time is really short, but let me share with you, quickly, some tips on dealing in a positive way with anger... you might want to jot these down, because I'm going to move along...

[**] **1. Count to 10;** i.e., take time to contextualize your anger. Even a short time of reflection can allow us to respond more rationally.

[**] **2.** If there is any doubt: **Don't say it!** This is the opposite of 'just do it' - just *don't*; ask someone else to read that email before you send it, or save it for a few days and review it first. Pick up the phone and talk that person ...

[**] **3. Be patient** (with self and with others) this isn't something that is going to change overnight. It took time for you to learn this behavior, its going to take time to learn something else. Learn from others, understand that not everyone sees things as you do. Be patient...

[**] **4. Tell Someone** that you are angry: start with God! Name it carefully, talk to the person that you are angry with, talk to a Stephen Minister, or a parent, or a teacher, or a pastor. Don't just throw it in the crock pot and see - too late - what's for dinner!

The last two have to do with praying the Lord's prayer centered around your anger issue:

[**] **5. Forgive:** someone else, forgive yourself... speak it, seek it! In the prayer Jesus taught us to pray he said, "Pray like this: Forgive us our trespasses (i.e., sins) as we forgive those who sin against us." So, Jesus ties together our willingness to forgive others with our own forgiveness. We're going to do a sermon series on this topic after Easter... we cannot continue to seek revenge or hold anger against someone whom we've forgiven. We *can't*. and the person who is set free is

January at the Movies I
Where the Wild Things Are...Anger

us! We are only going to find freedom from the grip of anger by releasing people/ events that are holding us in bondage.

[**] 6. **Pray for God's will** to be done. This is learning to value God's will over ours. We need to ask ourselves: "*What's my self interest in this circumstances that is making me so angry?* Is it wounded pride – I thought I should have been the one to receive that promotion, that honor? I should have been recognized? Is it Envy?

When we are living in a way that seeks God's will in all things – when we pray for it, when we're obedient to it, when we're living in grace and forgiveness, and things don't go the way we want, we can get angry, or we can assume that God has a bigger plan in all this... look for it, embrace it.

I was talking to someone as I wrote this message about how tough the 2009 economy was for him... business was tough, he had to lay off employees... some people are angry about the economy. Others are learning valuable lessons about what is really important in their lives, what they are capable of, the value of community, family, and faith... hard lessons. But worth it.

Or, they could just be angry...

When we Pray the Lord's prayer: "Thy will be done..." God unplugs the crock pot... and pulls out the fuse. And we regain control.

The one part of "Where the Wild Things Are" that I didn't care for – at first – was the ending. Max goes back home, it's now late at night. His mother is sitting at the kitchen table, very upset. (As a parent I wondered, 'why aren't the police there?' "why isn't she out scouring the neighborhood?") anyway... Max walks in, and she simply kneels down and hugs him...I wanted at least a lecture! But the more I thought about it, the ending started to remind me of a scripture about another son who messed us big time... and he decides to go home. Here's what Luke wrote:

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him."

We're going to mess up... but God's grace is never ending. He'll not give up on us, he'll work with us, and in us, and through us. And God *will* make something beautiful out of our lives...

Amen.