

God's slow anger

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Isaiah 64:5 speaks to God, saying, “You were angry when we sinned; you hid yourself when we did wrong” (Common English Bible).

It took me a long time to come to terms with the idea of God’s anger. In my own faith, the most helpful idea here is that God is *slow* to anger. If we forget that God is slow to anger, then God is reduced to a cruel monster out to get us. If we forget anger altogether, then God is reduced to a puppy dog who wants to lick our face no matter what terrible things we continue to do. Both God-the-monster and God-the-puppy-dog are idols: images of God that don’t match what the Bible says.

Nowadays, when I read of God’s anger in the Old Testament, I recognize that God didn’t level Jerusalem the moment someone said a bad word. It was only after centuries of idolatry, greed, and oppression by all of society that God’s patience reached its end and Jerusalem fell. When I read of God’s anger in the New Testament, I see God’s anger falling on the self-righteous Pharisee who’s stuck in his ways, not the humble tax collector trying to turn his life around, begging for mercy (Luke 18:9–14).

In other words, God isn’t out to get us the moment we slip. Faith is more about staggering, stumbling, and falling toward God than flying toward heaven on the wings of our own righteousness.

The next verse of Isaiah says, “all our righteous deeds are like a menstrual rag.” (That’s the Common English Bible’s translation, and it’s more accurate than the euphemisms in the NRSV and NIV.) Sick, tired, and grossed out at attempts to make ourselves pleasing to God, the author of this text yearns that God would come to us in our brokenness and sin, acting like a master potter who can work with even

stiffened clay.

People often assume that Advent is a time when we should look for the perfect Christmas presents for our loved ones. This Isaiah text suggests it's more important to look at our own lives, reckon with our own sin, and ask God to reshape us into something beautiful.