

## 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost - Hosea 11:1-11

Last week we witnessed the twelve tribes that David united begin to split, continuing under his son, Solomon, who angered God by marrying foreign women and worshipping their gods. Following the death of Solomon, the kingdom divided into two separate kingdoms. The ten northern kingdoms, with their capital in Samaria, were known as Israel and were ruled by Jereboam, The tribes of Benjamin and Judah formed the southern kingdom, known as Judea, with the capital in Jerusalem. This was the House of David.

Today we move forward several years and meet Hosea, who was a poet. His writings span a period of about twenty-five years. The poem of YHWH's anguished love for the beloved child Israel stands as one of the most poignant testimonies to divine love in the Old Testament, if not in the entire Bible. Quite possibly, the earliest expression of God's love in the bible, it is also the most passionate, as it portrays God's heart in conflict with his plans, his compassion averting his anger.

Hosea is the first of the Minor, or Peripheral, prophets. Peripheral Prophets did not have a place in the palace or the support of the palace treasury. The Minor Prophets tended to direct their rage towards Israel's leaders as well as the people.

A seminary professor each year would ask her students, "What is the difference between a lunatic and a peripheral prophet?" The students were always silent. The answer, "The lunatic did not have anyone to record his words on a scroll." The answer was not meant to be disrespectful, but rather to convey the force and volume of voice used, as these John the Baptist prototypes hurled their incriminating accusations towards ordinary people and royalty alike.

The prophet Hosea is the husband of Gomer, a prostitute. Hosea spends his days worrying about a woman who refuses to abandon her trade, and, though she has three children, she apparently takes little or no responsibility for their care. From this agonizing family situation, Hosea teaches that Yahweh feels about Israel the same way that Hosea feels about Gomer - rejected, abandoned, and humiliated.

Hosea, spurned and jilted father and husband, could truly understand and reflect on the nature of Yahweh in the radical way that he does in today's pericope. "When Israel was a child, I loved him as a son, and I called my son out of Egypt. But the more I called to him, the more he rebelled, offering sacrifices to the images of Ba'al and burning incense to idols."

Hosea first presents a summation of his understanding of the present state of the people of Yahweh, freed from the slavery of Egypt, the central claim of the action of Yahweh for the people. But instead of thanking Yahweh with praise and right actions, Israel worshipped the Ba'als, sending up great clouds of incense to human-fashioned idols, to silver-festooned blocks of polished wood.

The Ba'als are formidable adversaries to Yahweh. The Ba'als are immediate gods, represented by fertile fields, jars of olive oil, and succulent smells of bread and roasting meat. In the Spring, the cry "Ba'al Chaie" - "Ba'al is alive," rang through the mountains and hills of the villages of Israel, and many Yahweh worshippers joined in, seeking to ensure a bounteous crop and a satisfied family. Though Yahweh worship was demanded in the sacred place of that God, more than a few Israelites hedged their bets and serenaded Ba'al with fervency and frequency. After all, where was Yahweh anyway? On some mountain somewhere, I suppose, but what has Yahweh done for you recently? The

Exodus was long ago, and Ba'al is current, relevant, offering his riches regularly. Yes, Yahweh has a difficult antagonist in Ba'al.

But Hosea is convinced that those things that Ba'al is believed by many to have done and to be doing for Israel have, in fact, been done by Yahweh. "It is I who taught Israel how to walk, leading him along by the hand. But he doesn't know or even care that it was I who took care of him." Yahweh is the one who trained the young Israel to walk in the right way. And when they fell and hurt themselves, it was Yahweh who offered healing, not the non-existent Ba'al. Whatever Ba'al is supposed to have done, Yahweh was the real actor.

Yahweh is a parent, teaching Israel to take its first steps, picking them up in great divine arms, healing them when they fall. Yahweh encircles them as they grow with cords and belts of protection. Yahweh lifts the yokes from their necks and offers them food. There are touch and taste and smell here as the divine parent plays the appropriate role and Israel grows up safely and protected. Yet, Israel rejected Yahweh's teaching and love, choosing instead the supposed support of the Ba'als.

God is presented as rejected and spurned, and thus furious and vindictive. This people continually "turns away from Yahweh." Breaking point reached: God decides to drop the hammer and unleash the nations against Israel; foreign domination will ensue, the raging and devouring sword will afflict them, and God will ignore their prayers. The interplay between God's destructive work and God's hiddenness is notable. Judgment, in this case involves both aspects: God afflicts Israel through the agency of the nations and God hides God's face from them. When God hides, terrors are unleashed, and the redeemer available to Israel in the Exodus is suddenly out of reach.

It seems as if the voices present in earlier chapters - where Hosea takes Gomer the prostitute as his wife for no other reason than to use her as a parable of Israel's disobedience - have given way to a different set of voices. The metaphor has shifted from Yahweh as the wronged husband of a straying wife to Yahweh as the parent of a child who has spurned parental love. The imagery is quite tender, with Yahweh recalling Israel as a young child, called out of Egypt in the Exodus. There is poignant sadness, "the more I called them, the more they went from me," as the people continued to worship the Canaanite fertility god Ba'al. A sense of anguish of this deep betrayal of a deeper love pervades the passage.

Thankfully, the God of Hosea is the God who chooses, quite apart from human initiative, to be reconciled with God's own enemies. Without warning, God's heart is strangely warmed. A series of anguished questions reveals that God's ferocity was but a moment. "How can I give you up?" God exclaims. Just the thought of ignoring God's people, refusing their prayers, brings God out from behind the locked door of wrath and into the open, where God is available again as a God of compassion and mercy.

This shift from wrath to compassion was not prompted by any human deed, it comes from God's resolve alone to be at this moment a God of compassion rather than a God of wrath. There is no change in Israel, only a change in God. Rejecting wrath and hiddenness, God makes new promises: "I will not execute my fierce anger, I will not again destroy Israel." This is not the wrathful God of the Old Testament as described by many.

God not only resolves to set aside God's anger, God in fact takes divine judgment into God's own self. The key insight is found where God resolves not to give Israel up like Admah and Zeboiim, cities destroyed

along with Sodom and Gomorrah.

Israel's sin is here, compared to the sin of the cities destroyed in Genesis, but where the story in Hosea differs from the story in Genesis is in its insistence that God would absorb the judgment Israel deserved. Yahweh resolves to contain the "quake" in Yahweh's own life. Israel deserved Judgment, but what it got was mercy, secured through a God willing to suffer for their sins.

The furious Yahweh has given way to the plaintive Yahweh. How richly these fickle folk deserve the back of Yahweh's hand, but what they are about to receive is a complete change of the divine will and a thorough alteration of the divine emotion.

No longer can Yahweh reject the chosen people, because the Yahweh who supposedly gives us what we deserve has been revealed, rather, as the Yahweh whose overwhelming love and tenderness makes such behaviour finally unimaginable. Yahweh's "heart", the Hebrew seat of will and intelligence, quite literally "turns over" and speaks against the angry Yahweh. And the "comfort" of Yahweh, like the increasing glow of an oven, warms tenderly toward Israel.

The characters in this part of the text seem to be mother and child, like that of the doting parent who seeks to care for an infant child. Tenderness and love are expressed. Parents understand this passage well, as it describes divine compassion for a people that have drifted away from the right path.

The conversation here seems to be an internal one within God's person. There is this opening word of compassion: "When Israel was a child, I loved him." The divine parent speaks of teaching Israel to walk and

picking up the beloved child and providing healing. “I treated them like those who lift infants to their cheeks; I bent down to them and fed them.” These are expressions of love, expressions parents can identify with.

Yet, there is another side to this conversation - the dark side of the conversation. Parents understand this experience as well. When a child spurns the parent’s love, affection and provision, time and again, frustration can build. The parent might want to send the child to another realm! God has reached out with love and compassion, and yet Israel has chosen to go astray, spurning God’s compassion.

God contemplates letting them fall to the Egyptians and the Assyrians. *That will teach them!* Since the people of God are bent on turning away from God, God isn’t going to lift them up in their time of trial. You made your bed, now lie in it. It’s a rather discomfoting word, but isn’t it understandable?

Nonetheless, according to Hosea, this frustration is short-lived. God seems unwilling to give up on Israel. God’s compassion “grows warm and tender”. There’s the promise that God will not act in the heat of anger. There is the hope of return from exile. The parent who has struggled with raising a child who tests the limits may understand this passage better than the one whose child has rarely pushed the boundaries. There are parents who take pride in the fact their children never score below an A in school or disobey an order. Most of us, however, have been, and maybe have dealt with, children who are less than perfect. There is a wrestling of the spirit as to what to do. Do I cast the child off or keep the child close? Hosea leads us to believe that God will withdraw the judgment.

We meet this loving parent again in the parable of the Prodigal son.

Jesus may have had this passage of Hebrew Scripture in mind when he told the story of a father who watched his son walk away with his inheritance and squander it in a distant land. The father waits patiently for the headstrong child to experience the consequences of his actions and return. “While he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion.”

The same compassion that melted the anger of the Holy One in Hosea is described by Jesus as the heart of God for each wayward child. Anger melts in the face of love and the longing of our hearts is fulfilled as we are called home.

That each lost sheep and wayward child breaks the heart of God is a revelation. God wants us to come home, to be at home with ourselves and with one another. Wrath and revenge are never God’s ultimate goal; and if that is true, they can never be ours.

We may rage in anger at betrayal, but beneath the anger is loss, and the deep desire to be made whole, and for relationships to be restored. We long to return to a home and community that loves each one into living the life we were meant to live. And that is also the longing at the heart of God.

When we think about God’s willingness to suffer on behalf of sinful humans, we tend to think about Christ hanging from the cross. Hosea helps us realize that the cross is not a new development in the life of God. It represents who God is, fundamentally. The cross is a climactic moment, but one that is situated along an already existent trajectory. In Christ God does not become a suffering God. Rather, God exercises God’s deep longing to be among God’s people, a longing that motivated the construction of the Tabernacle with a seat for God. God’s willingness

to suffer on behalf of creation, however, is supremely seen in Christ, who takes unto himself **not only sinful human rage but also divine wrath.**

The Holy One in the midst of the people is not the powerful God of Amos, the ranging God of Micah, the demanding God of Ezekiel. Here, Yahweh is the warmly compassionate God, who in plaintive sadness and expectant hope keeps searching for Gomer/Israel, as a God of new heart, a God madly in love with someone who too often does not, will not, cannot love Yahweh back. This is the God Hosea has discovered. This is the God of Jesus the Christ.

Throughout this passage, we sense the tempestuous moods of God, the deep tides of God's compassion surging against the rock of a justly-deserved punishment for the people's faithlessness. There is no cheap grace here, no easily won indulgent love. Rather we glimpse the pain of a parent's heart, torn by the thoughtless straying of a wayward child, yet loving nonetheless. Here we glimpse that the hope for such a relationship, and for future of the child, lies in the 'turning' within the heart of the parent rather than in any change within the child. Here we are shown the Holy One who is beyond our ways, whose steadfast love outlasts all betrayal.

In Mark's Gospel, we see the disciples turning away the children, keeping them from seeing Jesus. The disciples, like the rest of society did not think that children were worthy of Jesus' love and attention and tried to keep them away - perhaps equating them to outcasts, sinners, and other undesirables. Children had no status. They were not valued. They were at the bottom echelon of society. They counted for nothing.

Jesus shows how these nobodies were worthy of his and God's love by



inviting them to come, just like the Israeli tribes, despite their sinfulness, despite turning away from God, despite their unworthiness, were embraced, reconciled and loved by God. Jesus demonstrated that we all, including children, sinners, outcasts and those despised by society, are accepted and loved by God.

Grace, compassion, divine suffering and forgiveness are not New Testament categories, they are biblical categories. The God of the Bible, the God throughout the Bible, the God throughout both Old and New Testaments, is just such a God.

**Amen.**

## **PRAYERS of the People - NOVEMBER 12, 2023**

God of peace and love, today we gather to remember. We remember that in Jesus of Nazareth you have called us to be people of peace saying, "Blessed are the peacemakers" and reminding us that we are to love our neighbour and our enemy as we love ourselves.

Loving God, we acknowledge that as a global community we fail to live out those words. We give thanks for all who have chosen to serve their country. We give thanks for their bravery, commitment, and love. But we know that when armies meet on the field there are always some who don't come home.

We pause in the memory of those who went and did not return to mothers and wives, husbands and children. We remember all who fell and were buried far from home, or who sank to a watery grave in the cold Atlantic. We remember those in this century who went back to the battlefield only to return in a coffin carried solemnly to a waiting aircraft.

God, whose hope for the world is peace, we not only remember the fallen of Canada who lie buried under a military tombstone. We also remember the fallen of all the nations of the world. We honour all who die as a result of humanity's common failing to live in the peace you have hoped for all these millennia.

We pray too for those who returned from battle forever changed by what they had experienced. For those who bore, and still bear, wounds and trauma of body and soul. Help to reawaken and strengthen our commitment to work for peace, as we remember that peace will never come from a gun barrel but from the depths of our hearts. Help us remember our calling to be peacemakers at home and abroad, in the big things and in the small. And may we never forget the cost that has already been paid.

Loving God, we pray for the people of Israel and Gaza. We pray for those grieving the death or wounding of loved ones, for those in hiding or being held hostage, for those whose homes and lives have been

suddenly destroyed. We pray that world leaders would use their influence wisely to help de-escalate this conflict and create space for dialogue. We pray for wisdom so that one day peace can prevail that is just for all people, Palestinian and Israeli. Give courage to Bishop Azar and the people of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land in these tragic and terrible times as they provide support, encouragement, comfort, and hope.

We long for deep and lasting peace between and among us. May we see the belovedness of our fellow kin, in our own country and in the United States, where Jews and Muslims have been targets of hate-crimes; In Myanmar, where fighting has broken out and in Sudan, where there have been ethnic killings; In Ukraine, as the cold of winter sets in and violence continues; on the United States border, as a growing migrant caravan comes from Central America, South America and Mexico.

We pause in the midst of our remembering to hold in our hearts, minds and souls those who struggle with mental, spiritual, and physical challenges ... May they know that they are not alone and may your promised word of peace touch the disquiet and disorder in their lives.

We pray for our Bishops, Susan and Kathy, for pastors, deacons, teachers, musicians and lay leaders. Today we uplift our own congregation and Mount Olive in Surrey and their pastor Lori-Anne Boutin-Crawford; our sister congregation in Peru, San Juan Camino d'Esperanza, and all leaders of all churches, denominations and faith partners around the world, caught up in conflict, war, and violence. Strengthen their faith and perseverance.

We long for deep change in how we tend and treat the earth. We pray for places suffering due to extreme weather events: flooding in Kenya due to El Nino; recovery from Hurricane Otis in Mexico; for communities in Iceland evacuated due to a possible volcanic eruption; for those grieving and healing after earthquakes in Nepal; For those in countries around the world feeling the effects after an abnormally warm autumn.

God of truth and justice, help us to lift our eyes above the torment and suffering of this broken world. Grant us the grace to pray for those who wish us harm. As we honour the past, may we put our faith in your future; for you are the source of life and hope, now and forever.

**Amen**