

“The World Has a Lover”
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Hosea 11:1-11

There are passages in scripture that are best listened to and not read. When we hear one word at a time, we don't know how the words will add up or how the situation will be resolved. Suspense builds, and we are brought more deeply into what is being said. Listen, now, like you have never listened before. In the place of “Israel” I will read “you,” but I will leave Egypt and Assyria in place; you'll have to mentally insert your own places of bondage and persecution. Two exaggerated pauses will stress the portrayal of the dramatic mood changes in God's heart.

Speaking for God, Hosea writes:

“When you were a child I loved you, and out of Egypt I called you daughter/son. The more I called you, the more you went from me; (you kept sacrificing to other gods, and offering incense to idols).

Yet it was I who taught you to walk, I took you up in my arms; but you did not know that I healed you. I led you with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to you like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to you and fed you.

(Long, uncomfortable pause)

You shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be your king, because you have refused to return to me. The sword rages in your cities, it consumes their priests, and devours, because of their schemes. You are bent on turning away from me. To the Most High you call, but the Most High does not raise you up at all.

(Long, uncomfortable pause)

But, how can I give you up? How can I hand you over? How can I treat you like I don't know you? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; for I am God and not a mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath. You shall follow after the LORD, who roars like a lion. When he roars, his children shall come trembling from the west. They shall come trembling like birds from Egypt, and like doves from the land of Assyria; and I will return them to their homes, says the LORD.”

Nineteenth century writer Ralph Waldo Emerson once said that “All the world loves a lover.” I suspect he was right. There is something that draws us to love; we are attracted to love like we long for peace and safety, when dissonance and danger are finally resolved. Hosea doesn't disagree, and adds something more: The world needs a lover because it has a Lover. That's the first point I want to raise before us. The world needs a lover because it has a Lover. It is not simply that we are addicted to love and thus we need it. It is much more than that! There is no reality apart from Love and, thus, the only alternative is extinction.

I like diagrams, and would diagram it this way: Love is the center and the circumference. St. Bonaventure put it this way: “Christ is the one whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.” And guess what, nowhere literally means everywhere! In other words, the Love of God, revealed in Christ, is the Love that holds us and our world. And when we surrender to God’s Love, we find ourselves falling into a wholeness that holds us. And in time, the healing begins, and shalom is established.

The second thing I want to suggest flows from the first: The Love of God is more like a capacity than it is an emotion. The severity of God’s Love requires this container. A favorite metaphor for this is the Heart of God. A strong heart, that is strong enough to be elastic and lasting. The story of Hosea is unlike anything in scripture, I think. What makes it so unusual is that it comes to us as a narrative description of the inner struggle within God’s own heart, portrayed as combustible as a piston-driven engine. The story of Hosea is like viewing into the inside of an engine through a narrative glass window. And at verse seven in today’s reading, all the world holds its breath to see how the pressure will be relieved. Our falling into wholeness requires that the serious and severe Love of God to flex and adapt to the ongoing consequences of that first act, that first explosive “roar,” to change the metaphor as Hosea does, the roar of the Lion of Judah, when God breathes life into dust! The Love of God is more like a capacity than an emotion, the Capacity that has been flexing and adapting since creation’s start. God isn’t an emotional wreck like we sometimes are, who from time to time is likely to explode from red-hot anger. God is not mortal, says Hosea! God is LOVE, but love must work itself out.

The third and last point I want to make is that God’s heart is our “storm home.” A couple of weeks ago, when I first started preparing for these two Sundays with Hosea, I found myself reflecting on an old recording of “A Prairie Home Companion.” Are you familiar with Garrison Keillor and his homely broadcasts? I hope this ending won’t sound too precious. In times like these, a dose of “A Prairie Home Companion” is just what I need.

Mr. Detman, the principal of the elementary school in Lake Wobegon, decided one year that each of the children who lived in the country would be assigned a “storm home,” so that students would have temporary shelter in the case of an unexpected snow blizzard. Keillor was assigned to Mr. and Mrs. Krueger. Mr. and Mrs. Krueger is an older couple that lives near a lake. They lived a beautiful little house with a rock garden bordered by pansies and tulips, with a bird bath in the center of the garden. There were two metal lawn chairs in the front yard and, off to the side, stood two cast iron deer, grazing on the perfectly groomed lawn.

Keillor says that

“If you were a child lost in a forest and you came across this house in a clearing, you would know that you were a lucky child. In my imagination, I would go to their house and knock on the door. Mrs. Krueger would answer and say: “Ah, it’s you; I knew you would come someday...Come in and get out of that wet coat. I’ll make you some hot coco.” And then she would turn and say, “Carl, come on down, look who’s here!” He’d say, “Is it our storm child?” She’d say, “Yes. He’s here big as life.” After dinner they would play cards. And before going to bed, they would eat oatmeal cookies. Whenever things got bad, I would always think to myself, “Well, there’s always the Kruegers,” and somehow just knowing that made my life more bearable.”

Whatever else I sure of today, I'm pretty sure that we all need a storm home. We need one because we have always had one. God's heart is both place and promise that Love can recreate something good after a storm passes. The contours of God's Love are strong enough to hold us. Too precious? Maybe so, especially so for anyone who hasn't felt held lately. Many of the people around us have never been assigned a Mr. and Mrs. Krueger. But we can fix that. We can assign ourselves, so that the holding needed can begin. Amen.