

Meditation – “Reliable”

Scripture Reading – Hosea 11:1-9

Sunday, August 11, 2019

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Our Scripture reading for today is Hosea 11:1-9. The prophet Hosea excels in his use of simile and metaphor. He portrays the nature of Yahweh and Yahweh’s relationship to Israel by means of word pictures. Two weeks ago we read that Yahweh is like the husband to an unfaithful wife (2:2). Surely this is the most familiar metaphor from this ancient prophet’s writing. And yet, Hosea also describes Yahweh as the physician (7:1), the fowler (7:12), the lion (5:14), the leopard (13:7), the she-bear (13:8), the dew (14:5), the dawn (6:3), the rain (6:3), the cypress tree (14:8). In today’s reading, God is like the parent who bends down, lifts up, and chooses compassion over anger. Hear now God’s Holy word.

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.

*² The more I called them, the more they went from me;
they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols.*

*³ Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms;
but they did not know that I healed them.*

⁴ I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love.

I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks.

I bent down to them and fed them.

*⁵ They shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king,
because they have refused to return to me.*

*⁶ The sword rages in their cities, it consumes their oracle-priests,
and devours because of their schemes.*

⁷ My people are bent on turning away from me.

To the Most High they call, but God does not raise them up at all

⁸ How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?

How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim?

My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.

⁹ I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim;

for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst,

and I will not come in wrath. Amen.

The title of the meditation: “Reliable”

The text: “My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger...for I am God and not mortal, the Holy One in your midst...” Hosea 11:8b, 9b

Let us pray. Holy God, it is difficult to comprehend your utter reliability and capacity to love beyond our expectations. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

“Reliance” is the name of a sculpture by Leon Bronstein that has become etched in my memory. I saw it several years ago in a Clayton Gallery and every time I read Hosea eleven, the image of this sculpture comes to my mind’s eye. It is a tall, bronze figure, with very straight, strong legs bending over in an act of incredible flexibility and holding on to another very small bronze figure. Both the rigidity of the legs and the flexibility of the figure’s upper body intrigued me.

As a former gymnast, I understand how imperative both strength and flexibility are in the sport. During high school basketball games, little gave me more joy than the privilege of leading the crowds in cheers by crossing the gym floor with multiple back handsprings following a well-placed round off.

The lines of the Reliance sculpture reflect both the strength and the flexibility which are necessary to bend down and to hold the smaller figure. To be reliable is a quality of character that is not possible unless one is both strong with a solid (and yes, rigid) foundation and flexible with the ability to bend. In fact, it is precisely one's strength that makes it possible to bend, and therefore be reliable...trustworthy, steadfast, and faithful.

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son...it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them.

There are few scenes of tenderness in the Bible that can compare to the metaphor of God as one rearing and nurturing an infant. Perhaps it is because caring for a small child has many aspects that are universal, regardless of cultural circumstances. Perhaps it is because we understand how vulnerable and dependent small children are.

When the Bible speaks of God as parent, the image most often used is that of God as Father. This is particularly true in the New Testament and reflects the patriarchal culture in which the Bible was written. In the Old Testament, however, to be too specific in naming God was considered idolatry, turning something into God. Yahweh was holy and wholly other, and Yahweh's name was too holy to be uttered. The explicit naming of God as Father in the Old Testament is rare. The Bible uses feminine images for God as well and the unspoken implication in the eleventh chapter of Hosea is that Yahweh is like *a mother* in her devotion to her children.

A friend of mine in St. Louis strategically placed a large, colorful piece of artwork in her kitchen with the words "A mother never, ever gives up." My friends, this is the message of hope in the eleventh chapter of Hosea. This is what God is like: a mother (and a father) who never, ever give up... ..who cannot forget the years of bending down, of lifting up and feeding even when many years have past and their children become, as Hosea describes later in this chapter, "bent on turning away."

Hosea was a prophet who understood the joy and the agony of parenting. Hosea believed that the most difficult "bending" parents would be asked to do comes later when their children, in the process of growing up and coming into their own, make choices or experience hardships that cause themselves and those who love them to suffer. Hosea understood that even reliable parents, who never give up and who provide discipline and boundaries for their children, suffer when their children suffer.

It's part of being a parent and by using the metaphor of parenting for Yahweh's relationship to Israel, we are given a rare glimpse into the suffering heart of God. The suffering God of Hosea anticipates the suffering Christ of Gethsemane and of Calvary's cross, a God who would give up God's self rather than give up on us; a reliable God, whose strength is an open hand rather than a clenched fist.

More moving than the nurture in the introductory verses of this chapter (if that is possible) are the emotions expressed in verses 8 and 9. *How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over O Israel? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.*

Yahweh, a God of compassion and mercy, cannot destroy Israel. The parent draws back from the horror of it all and having placed judgment and mercy in the balance, decides in favor of mercy. And why is it that Yahweh's compassion ultimately wins over Yahweh's judgment? The answer defies all logic; that's just the way Yahweh is. The reason is woven into the very fabric and nature of God's being: *"For I am God and not mortal, the Holy One in your midst."*

The two dimensions of the reality of God, the “both/and” of God, are articulated in this statement. “The Holy One” describes the separate, other dimension of God. At the same time the Holy One is “in our midst.” The separate God who created the world, the God who is lifted up is present in Yahweh’s willingness to “bend down.” God is both separate and present. God is both beyond the wildest imagination of our minds and somehow mysteriously and lovingly present in our lives. The God of Hosea, the suffering God, who bends down on our behalf, anticipates the God who in Jesus Christ, would be lifted up on a cross to save us from ourselves.

Hosea reminds us that God is both compassionate and angry. In fact, it is because of God’s compassion that God feels anger. Which parents among us have never been angry with the children we love? During the time of Hosea, it is difficult to believe; however, in the Book of Deuteronomy there is a law recorded which allowed parents to bring a rebellious child before the court and stone their child to death.

Hosea proclaims the good news that this is not the way of Yahweh. This is not who God is!! Do not be mistaken, my brothers and sisters!! Among all the caricatures of ancient prophets who proclaim a God whose basic emotion is anger, Hosea stands as a beacon of light defying this portrayal of who God is. Hosea’s words of long ago speak loudly and clearly today to any who would claim their own acts of rage are on behalf of an angry God. No, our rage is our own, and we all must learn to curb it, to control it, and to transform it.

By the grace of the God who bends down and lifts us up, who prepares a table before us and invites us to partake, may we discover the strength and flexibility within ourselves that makes it possible to bend, to lift up, and to become as reliable to one another as God is to us. Amen.