

**SERMON: “O The Deep, Deep Love of Jesus:--Part 2
“The Passion of the God of Relentless Love”**

March 15, 2009

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: Holy Father, whose relentless love will not let us go, speak to us now, through the reading and preaching of your word, that word of judgment and mercy we need to hear, that we may entrust ourselves in body and soul, in life and death, to you, who pursues us with goodness and mercy unfailing, even in the far countries of our willful disobedience; through Christ our Redeemer. Amen.

O. T. Lesson: Hosea 11:1-9

N. T. Lesson: Matthew 2:13-15

Last week we began a Lenten series of sermons on “The Deep, Deep Love of Jesus.” In the weeks leading up to Palm Sunday and Easter we will be looking at some of the great passages in the Old Testament--texts that provide the deep background for our being grasped more fully by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

We began last week with one of the most powerful and disturbing stories in all of scripture—**“the binding of Isaac.”** The story, which is depicted in the first of our stained glass windows, ends with the ringing assertion that **“the Lord will provide himself the lamb for the sacrifice, my son.”** The words echo across the pages of scripture, until in the death of the beloved Son on the cross, the Lord does provide himself, **“the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”**

This morning we come to another profound and poignant text—perhaps the most moving portrayal of the depths of God’s love in all the Old Testament. The story opens a window, as it were, into the very heart of God. It does so, not in the language of abstract theology or philosophy, but in the intimately personal language that every parent can understand all too well. Hosea portrays God’s relationship to Israel not only in terms of steadfast love and covenant faithfulness, but in terms of the relentless love of a parent for a rebellious child.

Hosea knows as well as any of the prophets of Israel how unfaithful God’s people have become. Out of the depths of his own wounded heart, he speaks to a nation on the brink of destruction--a nation that would soon be caught up in anarchy and civil war, as one king follows another to the throne, each no better, if not worse, than the ones before, and the foreign policy of the nation swings wildly from one foolish alliance to another. In the ensuing chaos national order breaks down and neither life nor property are safe. In the name of the Lord, the prophet declares,

“Hear the word of the Lord, O people of Israel; for the Lord has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or kindness, and no knowledge of God in the land; there is swearing, lying, killing, stealing, committing adultery; they break all bounds and murder follows murder. Therefore the land mourns, and all who dwell in it languish, and also the beasts of the field, and the birds of the air, and even the fish of the sea are taken away.” (Hos. 4:1-3) Any of that sound familiar? It should--we stand under the same indictment.

The Lord asks, “What shall I do with you, O Ephraim (Hosea’s word for the northern kingdom of Israel)? What shall I do with you, O Judah (the southern kingdom)? Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes early away.” Therefore, says the Lord,

“I have hewn them by the prophets. I have slain them with the words of my mouth, and my judgment goes forth as the light...Woe to them, for they have strayed from me! Destruction to them, for they have rebelled against me! ...Set a trumpet to your lips, for a vulture is over the house of the Lord, because they have broken my covenant and transgressed my law...The days of punishment have come... You have plowed iniquity, you have reaped injustice, you have eaten the fruit of lies....Therefore the tumult of war shall arise among your people, and all your fortresses shall be torn down...because of your great wickedness. In the storm the king of Israel shall be utterly cut off.”

Hosea proclaims the awesome and awful judgment of God. What should a just God do in the face of his covenant people’s persistent rebellion? How should a holy God deal with the sinfulness of his people? To loose the whirlwind of his judgment would seem only just and right. So the Lord utters those terrible words:

“I shall be to them like a lion, like a leopard I will lurk beside the way. I will fall upon them like a bear robbed of her cubs. I will tear open their breast, and there I will devour them like a lion, as a wild beast would rend them. I will destroy you, O Israel, who can help you?” (13:7-9)

Commenting on these words, the great Jewish scholar Abraham Heschel in his classic study of *The Prophets* writes, “How deeply Hosea must have sensed the pathos of God to have been able to convey such dreadful words against his own people whom he loved so deeply.” But these words, Heschel goes on, “were neither a final judgment nor an actual prediction. Their true intention was to impart the intensity of the divine anger. And yet that anger did not express all that God felt about the people. Intense is His anger, but profound is His compassion.” Heschel says, “It is as if there were a dramatic tension in God.”¹ Yes, a dramatic tension in the heart of God, a tension between judgment and mercy, between well-deserved punishment and unmerited grace, a tension in the heart of the triune God before which we can only stand in fear and trembling.

In the midst of these awesome words of judgment, suddenly the deep, deep love of God comes to the fore, as God remember how it once had been when God first called Israel into covenant, and set them free from slavery in Egypt, and led them through the wilderness to the promised land, all because of God’s own steadfast love and covenant faithfulness. It is like a parent of a defiant child pulling out an old album of baby pictures and remembering poignantly how once it had been. **“When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.”** It all began with God’s own initiative of grace, with a calling rooted in love.

But the love of God was rebuffed and rejected, time and time again. **“The more I called to them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Ba’als and burning incense to idols.”** There are countless parents in this congregation, and in every congregation, who have had a similar experience. The more you reached out in love toward your willful and wayward child, the more your child turned from you or against you. And the more it broke your heart.

Listen to God’s own lament of heart-broken love. “It was **I** who taught Ephraim to walk. **I** took them up in my arms; but they did not know that **I** healed them. **I** led them with

¹ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962) p. 46.

cords of compassion, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them.” Can you imagine a tenderer, more moving depiction of God’s parental love? You can almost see the tears in God’s eyes. The Old Testament scholar Bruce Birch says “This passage has no parallel for its portrait of divine tenderness, care, and love.”² At least it has no parallel on this side of Jesus’ parable we call the “Parable of the Prodigal Son,” better named the “Parable of the Waiting or the Loving Father.”

The image Hosea sets before us is one which all of us can see vividly in our minds. It is the image of a parent teaching a child to walk and feeding the child. Pull out your own scrapbook of memories. Do remember the first steps of your children? I can still see Jean letting go the side of the coffee table and taking those first wobbly steps across the floor in the den of Susan’s parents’ house in Greensboro. Susan and I stood there watching her every step. Encouraging her--reaching out to her, ready to pick her up when she plopped down on her bottom.

And what parent can ever forget those royal messes your children would make with those nasty Gerber’s mashed peas and carrots as you were first feeding them with a spoon? Pretty vivid image, isn’t it? Hosea depicts God’s love as being like that of a parent who patiently and tenderly seeks to teach a child to walk and feeds the child.

But what happens when the child you fed and taught to walk, walks on her own, and not just walks, but runs, away from you? What do you do then? How do you respond? However much we may restrain it, our natural, human response is anger. ‘You want to have your own way—go ahead, see how you like it!’ Hosea imagines God saying in effect, ‘Israel is determined to turn away from me and to follow other gods of their own making. They shall have their willful way... and bear the consequences!’

“They shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me. The sword shall rage against their cities, consume the bars of their gates, and devour them in their fortresses. My people are bent on turning away from me; so they are appointed to the yoke, and none shall remove it.” (Hosea 11:5-7)

Who could blame God if that were how God should choose to treat us in our persistent turning from his ways of justice and mercy? At times it seems as if God does let us have our way. God hands us over to our own desires and gives us the freedom to do as we please. The result is what we can properly be called “the wrath of God,” as the freedom we childishly demand for ourselves turns into our deepest enslavement. Doesn’t it seem obvious that right now we are living through a time of the wrath of God?

But it is not out of anger that God responds with wrath. It is out of wounded, long-suffering love. Here, with great theological daring, the prophet Hosea offers a dramatic glimpse into the very heart of God. It is as if God were questioning himself. Judgment is called for! Judgment will come! Ah, but... **“How can I give you up, O Ephraim! How can I hand you over, O Israel!”**

² Bruce Birch, *Hosea, Joel, and Amos: Westminster Bible Companion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), p. 99.

In divine justice God can and must call into judgment all that is contrary to his holy will, all that seeks to thwart his purposes for human wholeness and well-being. And yet, with mighty compassion and infinite tenderness the Lord restrains his wrath.

“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 no mortal, the holy One in your midst, and I will not come to destroy in wrath.”

Hearing this story of the passion of the Lord of relentless love, we as Christians cannot help but be reminded, as we mentioned earlier, of what we call the parable of the prodigal son. The plot is much the same. “The loving father—the self-indulgent son—the consequences of alienation in a distant land—the persistence of the father’s love—the return to forgiveness and love in spite of the rebellion.” In all these ways the parable of Jesus echoes the passionate speech of the Lord in Hosea 11. Jesus may well have had those very words in mind when he told the parable. Bruce Birch says, “It is both reassuring and humbling to recognize that from the beginning of our story as the people of God we have been dependent on the graceful love of God that perseveres in spite of our sin and enables our homecoming no matter how far we may have strayed.”³

Just how persistent is that relentless love of the Lord of wounded love? To what lengths and heights and depths will God go to be with and for us forever? The psalmist knows.

“If I ascend to heaven, thou art there. If I make my bed in Sheol (the realm of the dead), thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there thy hand shall lead me and thy right hand shall hold me.” (Psalm 139:7-10)

In the depths of God’s own being, God calls us home and offers us a future and hope, rooted in the relentless love of the Lord who with tears in his eyes asks, **“How can I give you up, O Ephraim! How can I hand you over, O Israel! I am God and no mortal, the holy One in your midst and I will not come to destroy in wrath.”**

The dramatic tension between the judgment and the mercy of God gets stretched as wide as can be in the death of the Beloved Son on the cross. There on the cross God judges and condemns sin once and for all. There is no cheap grace in the heart of God! None whatsoever! But the judgment of God is not an expression of anger. It is a witness to the passion of God’s long-suffering love that will not let our sin separate us from the promises and purposes God has for us. In a way we can never fully express--out of a deep, deep love we can never fathom--God takes into God’s own divine life the condemnation we deserve. There on the cross the Lord, whose heart of wounded love the prophet Hosea was given to see so poignantly, gives his Son, his only Son, whom he loves, **“not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.”** For from God’s severe mercy and the relentless love that will not let us go, nothing in life or death can ever separate us. And that is good news for time and eternity. To God be the glory. Amen.

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³ Birch, p. 101