

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
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St. Thomas, Glassboro – Todd Foster
(rev. 201907281308)

God's Heartache

In nomine...

I. Intro

When Becky and I were expecting children, we spent a lot of time discussing names, just like most couples. We both (I think) liked the idea of biblical names – names that would move somewhat fluidly between many cultures. “Todd” is not always an easy name in Spanish. But being slightly obnoxious, and enjoying Hebrew names, I always used to tease Becky that we should name our child “Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz” which means something like “quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil.” It’s the longest name in the Bible. Instead we settled on shorter names that, while not commonplace, are neither unheard-of in mainstream U.S. culture. Aviva means springtime and Elisha means “God saves.”

Our first reading today is from the prophet Hosea. The Jewish holy text known as the Talmud holds up Hosea as the greatest of the prophetic books. To us today, the story of Hosea is hard to read and hard to think about. It uses words my parents told me never to say. In case you were wondering, the Bible is not children’s literature. Today we have adult themes, adult emotions, and it’s all told with adult words.

God tells Hosea, “Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD.” The thing that Hosea is asked to do: I want to concoct ways not to take it at face value. I want to write a biography of Hosea and Gomer that is sympathetic, that finds love and nobility in their experience. But the Biblical text gives us absolutely no insight into their biography: that’s not what it’s about. And when it comes down to it, the Bible was written in a different time, a different place, to a different culture. The Bible doesn’t really care if it offends my sensibilities. God is not like you or me. So it may be that the strangeness, the offense of the prophet is a hint that we’re encountering the true God rather than a more comfortable false god made in our own image.

And, if you go read Hosea, you'll see that the prophet, in word and action, wanted very much to shock his hearers. Because Hosea is all about deep feelings of hurt and heart-break. The prophet's job is to en flesh and to interpret for his peers what God is feeling for them.

II. Thesis

And so Hosea marries a woman named Gomer whose occupation was as a sex worker. Probably she is employed by a shrine of the fertility deity called "Baal." The name "Baal" means "lord" or "husband," and that deity was thought to be a husband to the land, bringing good crops and fertile livestock. Gomer's job as a shrine prostitute was to, shall we say, facilitate the worship of Baal. You can see how that circumstance might cause deep distress in a marriage relationship.

So Hosea and Gomer had a son they named "Jezreel" after the name of the site of an infamous crime, and also a daughter named "Not pitied" and a son called "Not my people." Every time someone encountered one of Hosea's children, just by calling that child's name, they were proclaiming God's prophetic message.

Maybe you thought you had a tough childhood! My kids sometimes feel like they go to church a lot more than they'd prefer, and they do. But what if your very name was a sermon?

What are the crimes of Israel about which Hosea feels called to lament? There's really just one, but it manifests itself in two distinct ways.

First, Hosea's prophecy is a political message. And it's not just a criticism of particular policies, but it is condemnation of a specific ruler. Hosea refers to past sins of the ruling family, but later in the book he talks at length about their current policies. The problem is that Israel, instead of depending on God to defend her, keeps chasing foreign saviors. The nation prostitutes herself first to Assyria, then Egypt. She has no faith, no trust, in the living God, despite experiencing God's mighty acts and enduring love in the past. The nation and her rulers have betrayed God, like a spouse of many years who is suddenly spurned.

Second, Hosea's prophecy is specifically religious. Israel has not been satisfied with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God who called them out of slavery in Egypt and brought them into the land of promise. They have prostituted themselves to the foreign gods they found in the

land, like Baal, practicing forms of worship that are forbidden and abhorrent to the children of the living God. Again, there is a lack of faith that God will care for them, a lack of contentment with the God who has loved them, and a lack of commitment to the relationship they have had until now.

III. Good News

Our first reading today may seem not to have a lot of good news, but there are some things to hold onto.

The first is that God is still in conversation with God's people. God has not thrown up God's hands and walked away from the relationship. Another prophet is sent, with words and signs intended to help Israel to understand what God is thinking and feeling. The very fact that these words were recorded is a sign that the words spoken were powerful and effective, achieving their purpose at least in part.

The second is that, even in the book of Hosea, we see signs of hope, of God's enduring and passionate love for God's people even when they are faithless. We get a taste in the final verse of today's reading, and we'll get a much bigger taste in next week's reading. God is not giving up on God's people.

The message of the prophet for us is the same as it was for God's people hundreds of years ago. Often we get distracted from God, our desires and affections become disordered and fixated on something besides God's Kingdom. Yet God keeps calling us back into relationship with God, because God's love for us is constant. Throughout the Bible we read of God's people being called into relationship with God, and from them we learn how to hear God's call in the experiences of our lives today.

IV. Invitation

God is calling you to place God at the forefront of your life, to “Seek ye first the Kingdom of God.” Because that’s exactly the passion and focus with which God is seeking you. And it is in the mutuality of meeting between you and God that the Holy Spirit will manifest in your life, bringing God’s power and mercy into the world even through your words and actions. That’s the promise from our Gospel reading today, isn’t it, that God will give good gifts to God’s children, and that the greatest gift we could possibly ask for is the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Jezreel will become a place of blessing, Not-pitied will become “You have been pitied” and “Not my people” will become “my people.” In your baptism, your identity was changed from sinner to saint, and your name, whatever it is, was written in the book of life.

As the disciples sought to order their unruly desires in a way that would lead them to God, Jesus gave them a way to pray. The prophets invite us to sit at Jesus’ feet, to follow Jesus’ example, and to bear proudly the name that was given to us at baptism: the name of “Christian.”

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