

“Trembling”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

Hosea 11:1-12

November 10, 2019 - Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost

We have been dwelling in the divided kingdom for the past few weeks, with the foolishness of kings having led to the split into the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. You northerners are in for it pretty soon.

It's the roarin' 20s — the 720s BC — and things are looking very shaky. The Assyrians have been breathing down your necks. And you've made alliances with, of all places, Egypt! The folks in the South are thinking, “God's not gonna like that...” In desperation, the Israelites have made concessions to the Assyrians. Some of your people have already been deported. You're basically a vassal state for the empire right now.

The King is named Hoshea. Where there's a king, there's a prophet, and so we find ourselves in the book of Hosea. We're moving from the prophets who only appear in the stories of the kings to the ones who get their own books of their writings and speeches. Hosea's book is very problematic for modern ears. He takes his own experience of infidelity and uses it as a grand metaphor for the relationship between God and God's people. There are places where the “scorned angry bro” side of Hosea comes through more than is helpful theologically.

But tucked into this book is chapter 11, where we find this lovely poem in which God speaks and the language sounds like a parent or caregiver that we all know, or long for, or long to be. Listen to God's description of living with Israel, a toddler, then a teenager, whom God cannot help but love. It will help to know that Ephraim is the most prominent of the tribes of the Northern Kingdom. And if you're in the Southern Kingdom, don't get too comfortable, for the bell of exile tolls for thee before too long. Hear these words from the prophet Hosea:

When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son.
The more I called them,
the more they went from me;
they kept sacrificing to the Baals,
and offering incense to idols.

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.
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.

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

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.
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.

They shall go 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.

Ephraim has surrounded me with lies,
and the house of Israel with deceit;
but Judah still walks with God,
and is faithful to the Holy One.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

I can't hear this poem without thinking of Jesus telling the parable we usually call "the Prodigal Son." I wonder if the disciples listening to that story of a son who had gone astray returning to overwhelming grace from his dad would have said, "Does this remind you of that Hosea passage?"

In the prodigal son story, the wayward young man finds himself so hungry that he considers stealing slop from some pigs. In that moment, he "came to himself" and started thinking about how to ask for

forgiveness.

Here we find God, troubled and trembling with so many emotions. God begins by remembering the deeply tender care God provided, despite the bratty behavior of Israel. Then things ramp up, as Israel rejects God in favor of military alliances with the empire and — God seems inconsolable! — with the very place from which God liberated them in the time of Moses. God has shouted, “Make good decisions!” and Israel has slammed the door and gone to hang out with the worst kids. As we all do at times with people we love who have to learn the hard way, God turns to a “tough love” approach. “My people are bent on turning away from me. To the Most High they call, but he does not raise them up at all.”

But then, as Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann puts it, God “‘comes to [God]self’ as the son ‘came to himself’ in the prodigal son story.” “How can I give you up...? How can I hand you over...?” God declares, “I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.”¹

Despite the bad alliances, despite the idol worship, despite the maddening fickleness of Israel, God’s never gonna give you up, never gonna let you down, never gonna run around and desert you. God’s never gonna make you cry, never gonna say goodbye, never gonna tell a lie and hurt you.

Many of us were taught that God is unchanging and, while immense, actually fairly simple. God has a list of rules and if you follow them, you’re all set. Break them, you’re in trouble. Or at least we were taught that the God of the Old Testament worked in this way. Here we find God trembling in rage and then in brokenhearted love. God imagines roaring like a lion and the people being drawn, trembling, to that roar, so that they may, at last, go home.

Here we find a God who is not stoic, but deeply emotional. But then this God is able to be self-reflective and considered and to look at the big picture and maintain complexity and to hold opposing ideas in tension. In the era of the Twitter Presidency and Facebook brouhahas about Very Important Stuff, I wonder if you too yearn for complexity and self-reflection.

I do not have the capability to destroy cities, but I do have within my grasp the ability to destroy relationships. We dream of the most powerful people caring about nuance and being able to admit when they’ve made a mistake and possessing a basic understanding of something before they bloviate about it. But that is not a dream for the way we conduct ourselves — we can really, actually, literally do it. Hosea has offered us the poetry path to express righteous anger and to not erase it, but to weigh it against abiding love.

If God can withstand betrayal — and, to be clear, God has not gotten that roaring homecoming, even yet! — and keep after a people who turn to idols at the first sniff of trouble and reject the outpouring of love on Friday and deny resurrection on Sunday and forget all their promises by 9 a.m. on Monday, then surely

¹ Who am I? Rant vs. Relationship (Hosea 11:1-11) by Walter Brueggemann, at: https://day1.org/articles/5d9b820ef71918cdf2003f3f/on_scripture_who_am_i_rant_vs_relationship_hosea_11111_by_walter_brueggemann

we can try, yet again, to be a part of this love.

I've definitely gained some wisdom since becoming your pastor in 2014. For example, I learned the hard way to never, ever share a spoiler from the later books in the *Harry Potter* series from the pulpit. So I'm going to phrase this very delicately, trusting that some of you will get it, and others won't, and that that's okay.

Late in the series we discover that a character whose motives we have questioned has been acting out of a deep, trembling, abiding love this whole time. Despite rejection, humiliation, indifference, and death, this love was never abandoned. The character reveals the truth with eyes full of tears to a trusted companion who inquires, "After all this time?" The brokenhearted replies, "Always."

So it is with our God,
revealed to us in the love of Christ,
poured out for us in the complex meanderings of the Holy Spirit.

Seek complexity.

Consider poetry.

Abide in love.

Always.

Amen.