

“The Lioness Cries”

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A Reflection for the Second Sunday of Advent

Hosea 11:1-11; Matthew 2:13-23

December 9, 2018

Read the Scriptures by clicking [here](#) and [here](#).

*Can a mother forget her nursing child?
Can she be without compassion for the child of her womb?
Even if she forgets, I will not forget you.*

Isaiah 49:15

God’s promise, from the prophet Isaiah. A prophet speaks God’s message to us. A prophet let’s us see the way things really are.

Long before Isaiah, there was another prophet of God, Hosea. God called Hosea to not only tell the truth, but to show it too. Hosea would show us God’s pain, anger and grief. Also, Hosea would show us God’s faithfulness, God’s love, and God’s never-let-us-go grace.

How does Hosea show us? He gets married. God tells Hosea to marry Gomer. Gomer is burdened with a terrible reputation. It’s a reputation she has made for herself. She “sleeps around.” She’s already wrecked one marriage. This one with Hosea is not different. She continues to be unfaithful. But Hosea stays with her.

We heard this last week. Remember, their story is a living parable of God and God’s People. God’s People — that’s Israel, that’s us. We have a track record of spiritually “sleeping around.” We cheat on our relationship with God. God waits for us to come home. We break God’s heart. God takes us back. That’s our story.

This week we hear the same story, told with a different living parable. It is, to my mind, one of the most poignant pieces in the Bible. Maybe because it is so personal, something many of us can imagine and some of us know too well.

Last time God was a jilted spouse. Now, God is a torn-apart parent. A mother, perhaps. Maybe Gomer helped Hosea write this.¹

In the prophets hands, it becomes a vital way for us to see something about ourselves. And to know something wonderful about God. And, later, to help us see Jesus.

¹ John Goldingay, Daniel & The Twelve Prophets for Everyone (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 95.

II

*When Israel was a child, I loved him.
Out of Egypt I called my son.*

You might know that the history of God and God's People began with a tiny and unlikely family: Abraham and Sarah and their offspring. God began with them, but it really got going generations later, when their descendants were a whole nation of people, the Hebrews. God delivered them from slavery in Egypt.

"My son," God called them. It's like God took this motley crowd of nobodies with nothing, and adopted them as God's Firstborn. Picture God, holding out holy hands, saying "come here!," catching us as we learn our first steps, and lifting us in the air with delight. Picture God, rushing to where we've fallen down, kissing our scrapes "all better." Picture God, nursing us. Picture God, holding us cheek to cheek, and swaying a soothing lullaby. Picture God, snuggling us up for the night, safe against the monsters.

This is God!

III

Picture God's People, Israel, raised by the Perfect Parent.

By God's grace, through Jesus, Israel's story becomes our story too. We have been rescued by God, adopted by God, raised by God, protected by God.

This is us.

In that sort of culture, a firstborn son had entitlements and honours. As he grew, he assumed responsibilities. He would represent the father. He would uphold the father and family's honour.²

Instead of living into this, however . . . picture us catching trouble. Breaking curfew without a care or a call. Worrying about what everyone else thinks except God. Without an gram of gratitude, an ounce of respect. Offering only curses for all the blessings.

We are healed, and we thank our lucky stars.

We are fed, and we think we have made it on our own.

We are protected, and we puff up our power.

We are taught, and we think we know everything.

² Walter Brueggemann, "Who am I? Rant vs. Relationship (Hosea 11:1-11)" Day1.org (July 25, 2016). day1.org/7419-on_scripture_who_am_i_rant_vs_relationship_hosea_11111_by_walter_brueggemann

We are raised, and we run out of town.

This is the parable Hosea tells. It's the story of God and God's People, God and us, God and everyone.

This is us.

IV

What have we done to God?

Hosea shifts images. God is a lioness.³ (She's the one who raises the cubs.) God is mother lion . . . and she's got cubs like us! How do you think this story—Israel's story, our story—is setting up to finish off?

God is angry. It's the anger of betrayal. Not just a broken heart, but God's heart torn and trampled. Hosea voices God's anger run wild.

Ever since I brought you out and made you my own, you've been nothing but trouble! How often can I leave the door unlocked at night, and then break down in the morning? You're off running the streets, and I'm back here dreading the flashing lights and the knock at the door. How many more times will I have to bail you out? No more. No more. No more. I can't do this any more. I'm tapped out. I'm done in. This is what you want to be. Then you've had it with me. Go back to Egypt. I'm done with you.

This is ugly. Is it a glimpse into the heart of God? A snarling lioness? Left bereft by her own offspring? Ready to devour them?

God is love!

And love hurts.

What have we done to Her?

This is God!

³ I'm bringing the image of lion in verse 10 forward in the story, to my re-telling of verses 5-7.

IV

But God is not us.

*My heart turns within me.
My compassion grows warm and tender.
I won't act on the heat of my anger.
I won't destroy my child.⁴*

*For I am God, and not a human being.⁵
I am the Holy One in your midst.*

Remember how I began, with the prophet Isaiah:

*Can a mother forget her nursing child?
Can she be without compassion for the child of her womb?
Even if she forgets . . .*

Some mothers do forget, fathers too. We all let down our kids in some ways. Sometimes our children tear us apart.

But God is not us.

Even if a parent forgets, I will not forget you.

For I am God . . . the Holy One in your midst.

Thank God!

God is the Lioness who cries out. She roars and her cubs come trembling from where they've wandered off too. (Of course they tremble; their mom's a lioness!) We are trembling, because this is God, and we have run off. Still, we come back, and come home.

And God delights in God's child.

⁴ The Hebrew word is "Ephraim." It was one of the names used for Israel, the Northern Kingdom after the civil war that divided it from Judah.

⁵ The Hebrew word is "ish." That is not the usual word for the collective humanity ("mankind"). Rather, it specifically means "male" or "man." I'm not sure of its significance here, though John Holbert's analysis is interesting. See "A God We Hardly Know: Reflections on Hosea 11:1-11" (July 29, 2013) www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/God-We-Hardly-Know-John-Holbert-07-30-2013.html

V

When Matthew wrote his account of Jesus' beginnings, he wanted us to remember this.

Our second reading was from his Gospel. He tells how God hustled baby Jesus and his family to safety . . . in Egypt! Of all places! Egypt had been about oppression and slavery. God had delivered God's People from Egypt!

Matthew is simply telling us what happened. But he knew it meant more too. As he thought of Jesus, he remembered Hosea:

Out of Egypt I called my son.

"My son" is God's People. Now, "My son" becomes Jesus. Jesus represents God's People. Jesus represents us. And, in the great plot-twist, Jesus changes the story.

Jesus becomes God's People, including us, brought out of Egypt. But, in the great plot-twist, Jesus is also the One who rescues us from sin's slavery and death's destruction.

Jesus becomes God's People, including us, the First-born of God. But, in the great plot-twist, he proves faithful to God. He follows God's way, all the way. Even to death, death on a cross.⁶

Jesus becomes God's People, including us. But, unlike us, he is also the compassion of God, the heart-break of God, the anger of God, and the forgiving, embracing love of God.

Jesus is God, unlike us. He is a human being, like us.

Look at Jesus. Hear the Lioness roar!

⁶ See Philippians 2:9.