“Family Matters”

Sarah Wolf

Psalm 139:1-18

Hosea 11:1-11

August 4, 2019

Our reading from the Minor Prophets comes from the book of Hosea. As with Amos, some knowledge of this minor prophet may be helpful before we dive in.

Hosea was a prophet who, like Amos, was active during the 8th century. As was also the case for Amos, Israel is still split into two kingdoms — Israel to the north and Judah to the south. It appears that Hosea is from the northern kingdom and that is where his prophecies occur. Also similar to Amos, the book of Hosea is a series of prophecies warning the northern kingdom against their growing practice of idolatry. His prophecies foreshadow the fall of Israel to the Assyrians, which we will see in today’s text. Although he is often seen as the “prophet of doom,” today’s text offers an abundance of hope and restoration.

———

My family is weird. I know a lot of people probably think their families are weird. But mine is weird, weird. For example, once, we came up with a car game (I’m not sure who came up with it first, but I’m willing to bet it was my father) where someone meows a hymn and everyone else has to guess what the hymn is. For those of you for whom this makes no sense, which is *totally reasonable*, I will demonstrate. (Sarah begins to meow “A Mighty Fortress is Our God.”) We could spend hours that way, meowing our way through the hymnal, as the miles flew by.

See? We are weird, weird.

But this week, as I was ruminating on today’s text from Hosea, I thought back to a lot of my childhood memories — both the good, the bad, and the weird.

There were the memories of stopping at Waffle House in the middle of the night on yet another overnight drive to Ohio. There was the period of time where I was a particularly horrid teenager (which I’m still apologizing for). And yes, there’s the many car trips in which my family meowed hymns. There are so many poignant memories associated with childhood. Good, bad, and weird.

That’s what today’s text is about — a childhood. To be specific, it’s Israel’s childhood.

This text from Hosea is a love letter from God to God’s people, whom God has raised from infancy.

Actually, it’s more like a baby book.

Remember baby books? Perhaps the ones you filled out for your children, or maybe the one your parents filled out for you?

I remember going back and reading my baby book that my mom had filled out. There was one page that talked about “baby’s favorite game” and my mom had written that I enjoyed sitting on the kitchen floor, moving a set of items from one plastic container to another. My mother, the type-A accountant, then wrote, “I hope this means she will be organized.” Well, anyone who has been in my office will know that that was wishful thinking on her part.

But that was one of her hopes for me. She had a lot more, I’m sure. Hopes that I would grow up to be a kind person, a smart person, a loving person. I’m sure that she had dreams that I would grow to love God the way she did. And the baby book is where she shared a few of those dreams.

In Hosea’s words, we can imagine God filling out all of those sections of a baby book for Israel — first steps, first words, first time-out because Israel wouldn’t listen.

God remembers,

"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 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.”

This is a very intimate God that we see in Hosea. This is God as parent.

And what kind of parent is God? Gentle. But firm. Loving, but uncompromising in God’s expectations for Israel.

The imagery of God in this passage from Hosea is very different from how we might imagine God typically. When we hear these words, we picture a loving parent grasping a toddler’s hands and helping them take their first steps.

We picture a parent bending down to lift up a weeping child to comfort them, bringing them to their cheeks to kiss their tears away.

*This* is the God that Hosea shares with us.

Because Hosea shares *all* aspects of parenthood with us. It’s not always easy for God. Verse 5 starts a change of tone in God’s memory of Israel. Israel has refused to return to God.Hosea’s prophecy is that Israel will return to Egypt and the nation of Assyria will rule over them.

God laments, “My people are bent on turning away from me.”

The next section of the text invites us into the interior life of God. It’s like when we’re watching a play and one character turns away from the rest of the stage, toward the audience, and begins a soliloquy.

God asks aloud, “How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?”

Baptist minister Paul Simpson Duke explains God’s questions saying, “In times of catastrophe, we have always asked, ‘How can God allow it?’ Here a curtain is pulled back to discuss *God* asking — four times — ‘How can *I* allow it?’ Even God must struggle with the theodicy question.”*[[1]](#footnote-2)* Theodicy is the struggle to understand how God can permit evil to exist. This text from Hosea shows even *God* wrestles with evil.

God wrestles with the idea of ever giving up and handing over Israel. Do they deserve it? Yes. They’ve ignored God and refused to turn back. They are bent on their sinful ways.

And yet. In the midst of God’s soliloquy, God says, “My compassion grows warm and tender.” God will never give up on Israel. No matter what. God knows what God has signed up for in creating humanity. God remembers the covenants. God remembers the promises. But also, God knows what it means to be a parent.

If Israel is the prodigal Son, God is the prodigal parent, welcoming Israel back with open arms, with the roar of a lion, whether Israel deserves it or not.

This willingness to take on the role of parent is a little contradictory to how we imagine God. If we close your eyes and think of images of God, metaphors in the Bible of God, we might think of God as creator, as warrior, as something powerful. After all, in the times when the Old Testament was written, that is what all gods were expected to be like.

And yet, our God is different. Our God is a God who takes on the role of vulnerable parent, willing to take on all of the successes and challenges of parenthood, knowingly taking on that risk because God knows that relationship with humanity is worth the heartache.

John Calvin referred to God’s willingness to be vulnerable in relationship with us as the “accommodation” of God. He argued that because there is such a radical difference between God and human beings, it was necessary on God’s part to make certain accommodations to communicate with us at all. With respect to Scripture, Calvin comments, “As nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to ‘lisp’ in speaking to us.”*[[2]](#footnote-3)*

God willingly takes on the role as parent, knowing that it requires some accommodation — some willingness to give up something of God’s self in order to have a true relationship with us. God is willing to take the chance that humanity will always mess up, that we will always be prone to turn away, in order to have a relationship with us.

Otherwise, God is a dictator; an authoritarian. Otherwise, we have no agency, no free will. This text in Hosea shows us an alternative to an authoritarian God. It shows us a God who runs after us.

The psalm that we read earlier, Psalm 139, is one of my favorites. I love the images it contains — God as a knitter; God as a seeker. And every time I read it, I’m reminded of *The Runaway Bunny*, that classic children’s book by Margaret Wise Brown.

The story begins, “Once there was a little bunny who wanted to run away. So he said to his mother, ‘I am running away.’ ‘If you run away,’ said his mother, ‘I will run after you, for you are my little bunny.” The book continues through different scenarios in which the little bunny finds countless ways to leave his mother. And every single time, the mother is persistent that she will run after the bunny. If the bunny becomes a trout in a stream, then the mother will become a fisherman and fish him out. Towards the end of the book the little bunny says, “Shucks. I might just as well stay where I am and be your little bunny.” The story ends with the mother’s response, “Have a carrot.”

Like the mother bunny, the psalmist in Psalm 139 describes a God who is inescapable. A God who will seek the psalmist out, even when he intentionally runs away from God.

“Where can I go from your spirit?

Or where can I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, you are there;

if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

If I take the wings of the morning

and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

even there your hand shall lead me,

and your right hand shall hold me fast.”

God’s love for Israel is inescapable. God’s parenting of Israel will never end.

I recently saw a meme on FB that challenged ministers to test their congregation to see how well they knew them. The meme asked, “How well do you know your pastor? What is your favorite saying while preaching?” I accepted the challenge and posted it.

I got a few silly answers from people who knew me well - “teeth” from an inside joke I have with a Memphian; “glitter” from another person who knows my extreme distaste for the craft material. “I reckon” and “#blessed” from some beloved Covenant members with senses of humor. But *I* knew what some of my phrases are. And I’d wondered if they’d caught them.

At the risk of ruining all future sermons for you, my two phrases are probably the word, “Friends,” — because that’s what I consider you to be, friends — and “the same.” The same is a little different. No pun intended. I say “the same” because I think it’s important to remember that for a book that is so ancient, it still has so many truths to speak to us today.

As I said in my sermon on Amos, the same God who loves Israel and so holds Israel accountable, loves us and therefore holds us accountable.

And so, in today’s text, the same God who remembers fondly Israel’s infancy, its stumbling first steps, and its first forays into freedom, that same God remembers us in the same way. We are God’s beloved. God remembers our creation. God recalls watching us grow in strength and wisdom.

But also, God remembers the times we’ve misstepped. God weeps at the individual and corporate sins we commit —from those in our day to day lives to yesterday’s horrific shootings in El Paso and Dayton. Because yes, friends, while we were not the shooters, we are still a part of the machine that churns out mass shooters weekly. This sin is on us, too. God grieves that these tragic events still happen every day in our nation. God is frustrated that we can’t get it together to make them stop. God mourns the choices that we continue to make. Our sins are just as bad as Israel’s.

And so, what is God to do with us?

How can I give you up, O Covenant?

How can I give you up, Staunton?

How can I give you up, America?

How can I give you up?

God remembers the promise to Israel, which is extended to us:

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.

So, friends, let us follow Israel’s lead in verse 10.

Let us go after the Lord,

who roars like a lion;

When the Lord roars,

Let us come trembling back to God and listen for how God is calling us lead and to act and to live.

Like the baby bunny in the children’s book, let us remain right where we are, in the safety of God’s love and protection, God’s expectations for us and God’s grace.

Have a carrot.

All praise be to God. Amen.

1. Paul Simpson Duke; Feasting on the Word [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. John Calvin; Institutes. Book 1, Chapter 13, Section 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)