

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Fourth Presbyterian Church
Trinity Sunday
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Tough Love

Hosea 11:1-12; Luke 23:32-34a

You may know the story of Bruce Nolan,
whose career in TV news had been stalled for a while.
One day, when he is passed over for a coveted position as evening news anchor,
Bruce completely loses it,
and complains that God is treating him poorly.

Bruce, played by Jim Carrey in the movie *Bruce Almighty*, gets God's attention.
So God, played by Morgan Freeman, actually contacts Bruce
and offers him all of his powers
if he thinks he can do a better job.

Bruce accepts the challenge and goes on a spree,
using his new-found abilities for selfish, personal use
until he realizes that the prayers of the world are going unanswered.

At one point, Bruce attempts to address the entire backlog
by clicking "Reply All" to the prayers in God's inbox
and answering a simple "Yes" to all of them.
At this point, of course, the world begins to spiral out of control.
Bruce Nolan learns that it's not so easy being God,
which could also serve as a general summary of the message
of the prophet Hosea:

It's not easy being God,

especially when you're the Lord God,
the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,
the God who led the people of Israel out of bondage in Egypt
and established a covenant of love and fidelity with them at Mt. Sinai,
and led them into the abundant blessing of the promised land,
only to experience the pain of unrequited love.

It's not easy being God,

especially when you are God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ
who revealed your great love by coming into the world
in the flesh of the only-begotten Son of God,
only to be rejected by your covenant people
who team up with the Romans
and nail your love to the cross.

It's not easy being God,

when people are people, stiff-necked and incorrigible,
always giving into their baser selves, forgetting who is the source of all blessing,
becoming addicted to pleasure and power.
And so God's love must become tough.

When we hear of Tough Love,
we think of parents with their headstrong, wayward children,
or of setting firm boundaries with an addicted or unfaithful spouse.
We in modern, Western culture
know well the human epidemics of waywardness, addiction, and infidelity.

So we are not surprised that these were problems in Hosea's day.
We understand why the prophet
would liken the people of Israel to an unfaithful spouse
and headstrong, wayward children

Hosea clearly sees that the Northern Kingdom of Israel is on its way down.

For many generations, Israel and Judah have lived in relative peace,
culminating in the long and prosperous days of King Jeroboam.
But now the Assyrian Empire — spanning modern-day Syria, Iraq, Turkey, and Iran —
begins crossing borders and unleashing a bloody reign of terror
upon the nations of the region.
Israel and its neighbors are terrorized into submission and required to pay tribute.
The kings of the nations became mere puppets of the Assyrian king.

After the death of King Jeroboam,
Israel falls into a state of virtual anarchy.
There are kings on the throne, to be sure,
but the quick succession of five kings who followed Jeroboam
come to the throne by telling lies and shedding blood.

So Hosea begins to speak out
against the self-serving plots and conspiracies of the kings.
Hosea is disgusted by their unabashed grasping for power
apart from any sense of basic human morality,
let alone respect for the all-but-forgotten Sinai covenant.
He rails against the kings' political promiscuity
and their infidelity to the covenant.

Referring to the northern kingdom as Ephraim,
his favorite name for Israel,
the prophet laments,
*O Ephraim, you have played the harlot,
Israel is defiled.*
For Hosea,
even with these scoundrels on the throne,
there is no legitimate king in the country at all.
*They made kings, but not through Me, [says the Lord]
They set up princes, but without My knowledge.*

But Hosea is clear that the kings are not the only culprits.

The people are getting the leadership they deserve.

Israel has become a hot mess of conspiracy and fraud,
in which everyone is watching their backs
and looking out only for their own good:

*All of them are hot as an oven,
and they devour their rulers,
All their kings have fallen;
And none of them calls upon me.*

The land has lost its bearings,
and the people, their common sense.

They even seek to make alliances with the despotic nations around them.

Do they not remember what happened the last time they got involved with Egypt?

They became enslaved and the Lord had to rescue them.

But now, Hosea laments,

*Ephraim is like a dove, silly and without sense,
Calling to Egypt, going to Assyria...*

...they sow the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind...

*I am the Lord your God
From the land of Egypt;
You know no God but Me,
And beside Me there is no savior.*

But the people are stubborn.

They want their kings to make these dubious alliances with unsavory nations.

So Hosea predicts disaster:

*They shall return to the land of Egypt,
and Assyria shall be their king,
because they have refused to return to Me.*

How has Israel come to this?

Hosea has an answer:

they have neglected the knowledge of the Lord their God,
and turned to the gods of the land,
the gods of fertility and prosperity offered by the Canaanites:

*They served their idols,
which became a snare to them...
Thus they became unclean by their acts,
And played the harlot in their doings*

How could they forget what God has done for them?

The Lord, deeply pained by Israel's infidelity, complains through Hosea:

*It was I who knew you in the wilderness,
in the land of drought;
But when they had fed to the full,*

*They were filled , and their heart was lifted up;
Therefore they forgot Me.*

So the Lord's pain turns to anger:

*...I will 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.*

Hosea saw a people who had become drugged,
anesthetized by a powerful cocktail:
they sought prosperity by worshiping the idols of Canaan,
then returned to the rituals of the Temple to be forgiven by the Lord.

They sought God's forgiveness time and again
with no intention of ever changing their ways.

How deeply Hosea must have felt the agony of God's spirit!
How sympathetic to God's broken heart,
to be "able to convey such dreadful words against his own people
whom he loved so deeply."
*I will tear open their breast,
and there I will devour them like a lion,
as a wild beast would rend them.*

These words, however
turn out to be neither a final judgement nor an actual prediction.

According to Rabbi Abraham Heschel,
"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 God's anger, but profound is God's compassion."¹
The poetry of Hosea
reveals the dramatic tension in the heart of God,
between God's anger and God's love.
Clearly, it's not easy being God.

The people deserve to be wiped out.
But the Lord chooses to be patient instead:

*I will return again to My place,
Until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face.
And in their distress they seek Me, saying,
Come, let us return to the Lord;
for he has torn, that He may heal us;*

*He has stricken, and He will bind us up.
After two days He will revive us;
On the third day he will raise us up.*

Even so the Lord doubts the people will return to him:

*What shall I do with you, O Ephraim?
What shall I do with you, O Judah?
Your love is like a morning cloud,
Like the dew that goes early away.*

*Therefore I have hewn them by the prophets,
I have slain them by the words of My mouth...*

Hosea reveals a God who is not emotionally detached ruler,
no clockmaker who has built the clock, wound it, and now steps back
to allow it to run on its own.

**God is the sensitive, loving parent, fully involved,
who threatens consequences to his wayward children
but still goes on pleading for their return,
longing for reunion,
desiring reconciliation.**

The Lord vacillates, sometimes violently, between passionate love
and heart-broken threats of punishment.

*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.*

*How can I give you up, Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, O Israel?*

What Hosea shows us
is God's "cardinal, fundamental emotion...
the eternal and basic disposition" of God.

"The decisive motive behind God's strategy in history
...is love"²

God's anger is a contingent response to the circumstance of the moment,
while God's love is the enduring reality of the divine heart.

So don't ever let anyone tell you
that the Old Testament God is a God of wrath,
while the New Testament God is a God of love.
It's not that simple.
When they say this,
send them to read Hosea.

Indeed, it is the God of Hosea we meet at the cross.

As Jesus, the Son of God,
the decisive revelation of God,
hangs dying, looking out on the covenant people
who are awash in their delusions of power and prosperity,
he prays to heaven,
*Father, forgive them;
for they do not know what they are doing.*

Jesus looks down from the cross
not only at his accusers and executioners,
nor only at his fearful, grief-stricken disciples.

Jesus looks across all time
and beholds the fickle faith and unreliable love of all humanity,
and the relentless apostasy of his people, the church,
who though they have entered into a covenant of trust and mutual responsibility
with God,
continually neglect the covenant,
as they chase after prosperity in the land.

So at this moment,
as Jesus hangs on the cross
and looks across the centuries from his moment of agony for your sake,
what does he see in your life?

What is it in your life that elicits the words from his lips
*Father forgive them,
for they do not know what they are doing.*

We are God's covenant people,
fully fed and living in the abundance of the land.

But have we forgotten the covenant?
Are we spending so much time and money
on our cars and clothes,
our houses, and our vacations...
...that we have nothing left for God?

That is, are we so busy turning prosperity into an idol...
...that we are forgetting the only One
who can save us from ourselves?

It was the Lord who taught us how to walk,
who lifted us as an infant to the cheek...
...how will we return God's steadfast love?

God waits patiently...for now.

¹ The texts and comments in the section that follows are adapted from Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets: An Introduction* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962) 40-46ff.

²Heschel, 47