

Pleasant Ridge Presbyterian Church  
Cincinnati, Ohio  
Worship for 1 August 2010  
18<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Lectionary Year C

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Old Testament Lectionary Reading: Hosea 11:1-11

Sermon: A Parent's Recollection

After having three weeks off from the responsibilities of the pulpit, I enter it today with a bit of intimidation on the one hand and a bit of John Wayne swagger on the other for the song going through my head is the Gene Autry tune, "Back in the saddle again." I do want to thank you all (especially The Reverend Dr. Robert Hoover and Mr. Mike Gillespie) for giving me that time to focus on the needs and additions to my family. Still, it is good to be back with you in this capacity. And with all this being said, would you pray with me?

*Opening Prayer: Triune God...take the voice of a mere man and the desire for cohesive thought...breathe on them by your Spirit so the voice that we hear is the very voice of God through the written Word of God and that in hearing we might understand and in understanding we might obey...Amen.*

It was the American photographer and environmentalist Ansel Adams who once said, "Not everybody trust paintings but people believe photographs." This is such an apropos statement as we enter into the Lectionary text for today taken from the Old Testament prophecy of Hosea where God is somehow panning the photo album of His own eternal memory bank recalling a young Israel (called Ephraim by the prophet) and the vivid images of his childhood. One needs not even to be a parent either to understand and even have such images of young children with those who care for them. "Who has not seen wobbly toddlers cheered by beaming adults? Or a child held to a mother's cheek? Or a parent shouting, 'Come back here!' to a kid who keeps right on running?" (Paul Simpson Duke)

In my own personal experience, the flood gates have been reopened with such images and photographs as we have recently welcomed in our newest addition to the family Ms. Rylee Nicole Yoda. For the past

two weeks, I have been flooded with thoughts of what this little one has and will bring our family. This being coupled with the time taken to reflect on and remember the journey that Master Aidan has been on these past three and a half years, everything seems to circumnavigate onto one point. I find myself chuckling in one sense and agreeing with in another the thoughts of one writer unknown who stated, when it comes to children, “Every baby starts life as a little savage. They are completely selfish and self centered. They want what they want when they want it: the bottle, mom’s attention, a playmate’s toy, their uncle’s watch. Deny them these once and they sizzle with rage and aggressiveness which would be murderous were they not so helpless. They are dirty. They have no morals. They have no developed skills. This means that all children, not just certain children, are born delinquent. The question that is raised is what are you going to do with these delinquents that live in your house, for whom you pay, that eat at your breakfast table, that tug on your tail, that grab for your hand, that stir your heart, and that move your mind? They turn you upside down and inside out...with a phrase...a song...a look...a goal...a paper...a grade...”

They stir your heart and they move your mind. This is to not even speak of their mother, my wife, who not only defies gravity but is, in the words of Erma Bombeck, “an enigma who is faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a Gold American Express Card, and able to leap three cars and drive in order to have you home before eleven. She’s an awesome force who has a hold on you that no other can explain. Although your father is often bigger, louder and pays the bills, she is the glue that holds the family together.”

And this parent/child reality and relationship, born in the recesses of the creative Spirit of God who breathed life into humanity and commanded them to multiply, is exactly the anthropomorphic lens (the attributing of human characteristics to God) that the prophet Hosea is using. If you have ever asked the question, “What is God like?” Hosea would in turn illuminate this very text. “The tender care of God for the people of God is portrayed as that of a parent with beloved children: teaching them to walk, bending down to them, lifting them up as infants to the divine check, feeling, healing, leading.” (Anna Case-Winters) We are given the snapshots of tender and perfect moments where, as the Reverend Stacey

Simpson-Dukes in light of this passage, states, “A mother bends over her baby’s crib, lifts his chubby body to her face, smells his sweet baby breath, presses her lips to his belly. His dark thick hair, his fat thigh rolls, his pink bow lips, she loves every inch of him, and entirely. Her love flows not simply because he is beautiful (although he is), but because he is hers; she made him. This mother’s whole being leans toward a baby, whom she adores, and she pledges everything she has to his nurture and care. She would do everything for this child. She would give up everything for this child, and she has.” God would do everything for this child. He would give up everything for this child, and He has.

To take a step back from the canvas of Scripture and view the landscape of the context though, we find that the most dreaded fate in Biblical times is stirring: conquest and exile. There is a perennial threat hanging over Israel with the looming collapse of the northern kingdom and the triumph of Assyria with their imperialistic aggressions on the rise. This is coupled with the reality that Israel is in “a time of unparalleled political upheaval and instability. The nation had six kings within about thirty years, a period filled with intrigue and violence.” (Notes from ESV Study Bible) To top it all off, the prophet of God Hosea has been charged with depicting Israel and Israel’s unfaithfulness to God in a number of photographs and images: a promiscuous wife, an indifferent mother, an illegitimate child, an ungrateful son, a stubborn heifer, a silly dove, a luxuriant vine, and grapes in the wilderness. Yet, what is revealed to them by the prophet (and us for that matter) is that none of this unfaithfulness and obstinacy is enough to exhaust God and His redeeming love that even outstrips the human capacity to comprehend. As I stated before, God would do everything for this child. He would give up everything for this child, and He has.

Now, to be a bit more specific in the expositional reality of the Scripture, if there is a one, two, three punch within the Holy writ, this would be amongst them. We are invited first into the grieving heart of the Creator God who, in the midst of the child’s reality of sacrificing and burning offerings to other gods and idols, is recounting the very moments of this child’s formative moments. “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 by their arms, but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of kindness, with the bands of love,

and I became to them as one who eases the yoke of their jaws, and I bent down to them and fed them.”

(Hosea 11:1,3-4) Robert Brault may have captured such a parental reality in these words, “When you have brought up kids, there are memories you store directly in your tear ducts.”

As God is deep in remembrance, tear ducts fully engaged, we are moved to the second portion of the text which is the reality that all parents have to face: going through the trials and the struggles that children bring demanding a right response to the challenge. Ed Asner once said, “Raising children is part joy and part guerilla warfare.” This is probably illustrated best in a situation that I have heard of recently of a man observing a woman in a grocery store with a three year old girl in her basket. As they passed the cookie section, the child asked for cookies and her mother told her “no.” The little girl immediately began to whine and fuss, and the mother said quietly, “Now Ellen, we just have half of the aisles left to go through; don’t be upset. It won’t be long.” He passed the Mother again in the candy aisle. Of course, the little girl began to shout for candy. When she was told she couldn’t have any, she began to cry. The mother said, “There, there, Ellen, don’t cry. Only two more aisles to go, and then we’ll be checking out.” The man again happened to be behind the pair at the check-out, where the little girl immediately began to clamor for gum and burst into a terrible tantrum upon discovering there would be no gum purchased today. The mother patiently said, “Ellen, we’ll be through this checkout stand in five minutes, and then you can go home and have a nice nap.” The man followed them out to the parking lot and stopped the woman to compliment her. “I couldn’t help noticing how patient you were with little Ellen...” The mother broke in, “My little girl’s name is Tammy... I’m Ellen.” How often does God feel like that mother? The words of the prophet express the anguish of God when he writes, “They have refused to return to me...my people are bent on turning away from me...” God is speaking about the painful rejection of a child culminated in these very verses (remember Israel’s unfaithfulness). Such actions bring a divine response of anger not unlike that of most loving parents who are never angrier with their children than when they do self-destructive things.

And though the consequences of the rejection and betrayal of God would rightfully be destruction, we end our Lectionary text with the third movement where God turns to speak to His children saying, “How can I

give you up, O 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.” The wayward children are still the beloved children of God who bends down and lifts them up! Even in the midst of their trials and struggles of betrayal and unfaithfulness, God’s intentions are still redemption, restoration and return. It is God and God alone (the very one who loved, who called, who taught, who took them into His arms, who healed, who led with cords of kindness, who bent down, who fed) who circumnavigates on His only possible outcome for His children: compassion. “I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.”

But what does come instead, as the divine Father opens His eyes from this moment of a parent’s recollection, is the grace that can only be expressed in the roar of the Lion of Judah. “He will roar like a lion and when He roars, His children shall come trembling.” This Lion of Judah (the risen Christ of glory) roars for the return of His children. And not just for the children of Israel. We might have spent the majority of our time this morning looking over the shoulders of someone else’s relationship with their Creator, but if we are honest with ourselves, we must look at the story of our childhood which mirrors theirs to perfection: trials and struggles of betrayal and unfaithfulness. And because of this reason and this reason alone, the roar of the Lion of Judah is still roaring and can still be heard. “Some thought they heard it at Golgatha and again on the third day. It roars now over all that is ruined and over those who have done the ruining. To hear it and be lifted and turned and led by the sound of it toward home is to have more than enough reason to tremble with awe.” (Paul Simpson Duke)

Brothers and sisters, as we are about to come to the table of that very Lion of Judah, that risen Christ of glory, let us hold on to the absolute reality that, “This is not pious piffle. The risen Jesus is not The Man Upstairs (as some macho males like to say), a celestial gas, or the invisible honorary president of outer space. His resurrection was not an escape into the Great Beyond while the band played, ‘Up, Up, and Away.’ His breakthrough into new life in Easter morning unfettered Him from the space-time limitations of existence in the flesh and empowered Him to touch not only Nepal but also New Orleans, not only Matthew and Magdalene but also me. The Lion of Judah in His present risenness pursues, tracks, and

stalks us here and now. When we cry out with Jeremiah, ‘Enough already! Leave me alone in my melancholy,’ the Shepherd replies, ‘I will not leave you alone. You are mine. I know each of my sheep by name. You belong to me. If you think that I am finished with you, if you think I am a small god that you can keep at a safe distance, I will pounce on you like a roaring lion, tear you to pieces, rip you to shreds, and break every bone in your body. Then I will mend you, cradle you in my arms, and kiss you tenderly.’ The Lion who will kill all that separates us from Him; the Lamb who was killed to mend that separates – both are symbols and synonyms for Jesus. Relentlessness and tenderness; indivisible aspects of the Divine Reality.” (Brennan Manning)

In the name of the Triune: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.