

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost  
Hosea 1:1-11  
August 4, 2019

## The God who Bends Down and Lifts Up

What is God like? Who is this God whom we worship in this place?

If you ask children to draw a picture of God, you will likely get a drawing of a man in a long white robe, his beard reaching past his waist. That is, at least, how I pictured God when I was a child. Some of us never grow out of that way of imagining God.

We don't know a lot about the prophet Hosea. We know he had a troubled marriage, and that his wife Gomer was unfaithful to their marriage covenant. Hosea drew on the pain of that relationship to describe what it must feel like to be the God of Israel, who established a covenant with his beloved people, only to see them turn away and break God's heart.

Israel broke God's heart by seeking security through the worship of idols and through an alliance with its neighbor Assyria. Assyria required massive taxes which Israel's rulers extracted from the lower classes. As Israel turned away from God, idolatry and injustice reigned in God's place.

So, what is God like? Hosea portrays God as a spouse whose partner has broken their covenant promises. Hosea, who knows too well the pain of betrayal in his own life, imagines that God feels much the same.

Is that what God is like? A spouse who knows the pain of betrayal? A lover rejected? For Hosea, that is part of the picture.

But there is more. Not only is Hosea a prophet. He is also an artist who draws pictures with words. He invites us to look over God's shoulder as God thumbs through Israel's family album.

You know the kind I mean – the old-fashioned portfolio with the heavy binding and the yellowing pages -- the kind we pull out now and then to show the kids what they looked like when they were small – and what some of us looked like when we had lots of hair that wasn't gray. This is the photo album of "Ephraim," another name for Israel, God's own beloved children.

On one page we see a mother bending over her baby's crib. She lifts his chubby body to her face, touches his peach-fuzz head to her cheek, presses her lips to his forehead.

On another page we see the same child, a toddler now, wobbling on unsteady legs as he takes his first steps. His mother holds out her arms. You can almost hear her encouraging words: "That's it! You can do it! Come to Mommy!"

On another page a little girl is sitting in her father's lap. The tears are drying on her cheeks as she intently watches him fumble with the packaging on a band-aid. He is saying, "As soon as we get this on your skinned elbow, I will kiss it, and it will be all better."

These, too, are ways of picturing the Lord, says Hosea, who, being a true prophet, dares to speak in God's own voice:

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

**I was the one who taught Ephraim how to walk.  
I took them in my arms . . .**

**I was to them like those who hold infants to their cheeks,  
I bent down to them and fed them.**

That's what God is like, the prophet proclaims. God is like a wounded spouse, but God is also like the mother who lifts her baby to her cheek, like a father who bends down and offers one finger for his child to grab as she takes her first steps, like a parent who kisses the hurt and makes it all better.

Not everyone in this room grew up with parents like the one pictured in Hosea's poetry. Perhaps you did not experience the attention of a loving parent who bequeathed you both roots and wings, and to this day you bear the scars of that parental neglect or abuse. If that is so, I hope you are not put off by Hosea's picture of God. Perhaps, despite your own pain, you, like Hosea can picture a loving God bending down to you, holding you up, healing you.

For Hosea is not saying that God is entirely like human parents, with all their flaws and imperfections. Instead, he invites us into an internal struggle God is having within God's own heart.

The children of Israel whom God loves have turned their backs on God. God has called, but they will not listen. Like a child who runs out into the street despite her parents calling out "Stop." Like a teenager who gets behind the wheel of a car after the beer party, despite admonitions never to drive drunk.

As sometimes happens with human parents, God has had enough. The time has come to give up, throw in the towel, and let Israel stew in its own juice. Let them worship idols. Let them ignore the cries of the poor. Let them chase after lesser gods who promise security but will never deliver.

According to Hosea, God is just about to decide that loving Israel is just not worth it, when the photo album falls to the floor and God takes one more look at the children God loves. At that baby he held to his cheek. At that toddler he taught how to walk.

"I can't do it," God decides. "How could I?"

**How can I give you up, Ephraim?  
How can I hand you over, O Israel? . . .  
My heart recoils within me:  
my compassion grows warm and tender.  
I will not exercise my fierce anger;  
for I am God and no mortal,  
the Holy One in your midst,  
and I will not come in wrath.**

We know that Israel suffered greatly for her sins, and if you like, you can see her destruction as God's punishment, but in Hosea's oracles we see how much worse it could have been if God had behaved as a mere mortal. Instead we see God's anguish, and despite it all, God's steadfast love which will not let Israel go.

In the closing verses of today's reading, Hosea offers yet another picture of God. God is a lion who roars a summons for his people to come home. The earth shakes at the sound of that roar as God's people come trembling home. The roar that springs from God's anguish becomes the roar that calls God's children home.

Through it all, right up to this moment, God is the Holy One who bends down and lifts up. God is the Prodigal God whose steadfast love endures forever. This is the same God who emptied himself in the coming of Jesus Christ, the God whose anguish is repeated when those who claim to love him turn away and forget who and whose they are.

You and I are the people of God's New Covenant, established in Jesus Christ, and like our brothers and sisters of Hosea's day, we live in a nation that continues to break God's heart.

Instead of honoring God's command to treat the immigrant as our neighbor and to love that neighbor as ourselves, we have allowed the voices of fear and hate to dominate the public square.

Instead of choosing leaders who call forth from us our noblest instincts, we have chosen leaders who put party over country, sycophants who refuse to acknowledge that the emperor who lives in the White House has no clothes.

Instead of heeding God's call for the liberation of all people from the bondage of poverty, racism, and injustice, we remain silent as brown-skinned children are taken from their parents and put in cages by government agents under our employ.

Even Christians who are proud to call themselves "evangelicals" – bearers of good news – have traded integrity for seats on the Supreme Court and abandoned the principle that in even political leaders, character counts.

What would Hosea say to us? Has God's nature changed, or is God still the God who bends down and lifts up? Who holds the infants to his cheek? Who teaches the toddlers to walk? Whose heart breaks when those he has chosen to bear his love for the world forsake his ways and forget who called them out of darkness into his marvelous light?

Brothers and sisters in Christ, I believe that you and I are facing an existential crisis not just for our nation, but for the church of Jesus Christ.

Regardless of party affiliation, all Christians are called to bear witness to God's love for all people, not just for white Americans. We are called to speak the truth to power, even if the polls are against us.

We are called to throw open a window into God's coming kingdom and let the world glimpse what God's future holds. In that coming kingdom, the last will be first and the first last. The children held in cages today will be the first to enter the banquet hall.

You and I will arrive at the door of that hall of universal welcome, and Hosea will be standing alongside St. Peter, trying to convince him that God really does want us to come in, too.

For it is not fear of punishment that motivates the people of the New Covenant. It is gratitude for grace undeserved, for love that remains steadfast, for the Holy One in our midst who will not come in wrath.

What is God like? Hosea knows. God is the One who bends down and lifts up. There is no other God whose love endures forever, and no other God whose roar calls us home.