

Everyone is different, but one of the greatest joys for me, is holding an infant. That relationship carries with it the greatest sense of immortality, recognizing that God is not done with us yet, there is hope for Creation in this new life. At the same time, a child represents the greatest sense of our mortal limitations, because this is an independent life, with freedom of will, who will make their own choices and decisions.

Years ago there was a Public Service Commercial on TV, with a Teenager sitting in a laundromat, when a young man bursts in. Gaunt, his face and arms scarred from drug use. He threatens the people there, stealing their money; then as the teenager looks up, he recognizes the robber has his same face, as the thief yells at his younger self "This was not supposed to be our life!" The commercial was meant to keep kids from using Meth and other drugs, but pulls at the heart strings of every parent and grandparent for the dangers facing their sons and daughters, nieces and nephews, in a world that promises excitement, but hides the costs and dangers. Hosea speaks the words of a broken-hearted God, experiencing all the feelings of being a parent. This is a passage written by a Parental-God to Human-parents.

This poem takes us inside the Spirit of God which is doing more than Brooding over the Waters. In the first part, God reviews our relationship, naming the generous tender care that the Father has for his son. This could just as easily be Mother / daughter, or Mother / son, but not in an Ancient Patriarchal culture like Old Testament Israel. As comparison, think of Ancient Israelite culture as being like the Taliban. No, in fact for Israel at that time, this Book of Hosea would be embarrassingly affectionate / intimate for any Father, even more so to be written of GOD; with identification of Israel as my "First-Born Son" which would have carried immense entitlement, as well as responsibility to honor parents and family.

Israel is described as being born, or better adopted out of Egypt, with emancipation from slavery. But as dramatic of Salvation as that first act of claiming, the toddler has perpetually acted out, refusing the Father for the child's other desires, craving other wants. Still the Parent has been patient and kind. The Father carried this child in his arms, taught the child to walk, held him close with embraces of love, and fed him. Everything in these verses is about gracious generosity and love.

By verse 5, the child has become a rebellious adolescent.

The teen-ager shows no vulnerabilities, resents all attentions of the Father, turning instead to military alliances with Egypt (who previously had bullied and enslaved Israel), then to Assyria. According to Hosea, that alliance turns Israel from the Life-Sustaining Covenant of trust with God, to a quest for military power and dominance. These Verses become a shrill rant from a caring parent. Until the father is completely exhausted with the son, and in the origin of tough-love the father is willing to abandon him to his own self-destructions.

WHEN Suddenly at verse 8 God shifts from that external relationship of no longer wishing to be FATHER, God turns inward for a moment of critical self-reflection, as God probes God's own Spirit. Realize how odd this is, because Orthodox Faiths Historically and Popular Religion today affirm that God has no unresolved interior life, but here the poet grants us Divine Self-Reflection in which God recalibrates. There is movement, from the Father's generous love, to exhausted tirade, to God catching himself up short, as if saying "What are you doing?" It is the Father-figure coming to himself, just as the Prodigal in that story "came to himself recognizing how much better off his father's hired servants had life than he."

The father comes to recognize the one against whom, he is angry is The Beloved first-born son. As a result, the Father asks himself 4 Probing Questions, each exactly in parallel:

How can I give you up?

How can I hand you over?

How can I treat you like Admah (the ancient name for Sodom)?

How can I treat you like Zeboi'im (the ancient name for Gomorrah)?

It is as if, despite how bad the child has been, the Father recognizes his own behavior was unacceptable: as a loving God. These are serious questions on God's part, as the Father recognizes his actions toward his son are not what he wants to do or to be and claims them as inappropriate.

The Father responds immediately to his own probing: "How can I?"

I am a father with warm and tender compassion, that is who I am.

More than that my heart recoils, it churns in dismay!

The Father resolves that GOD must be totally different, from this ranting conduct toward one he loves.

The Father is disconcerted by his own out-of-control reaction to his first-born son.

Which in turn leads to new resolve in Verse 9 with Parallel affirmations:

I will not act that way again!

I will not destroy again!

But the reason God will not move violently against God's disobedient sinful child, is that the Father has come to fresh recognition of his own identity "I AM GOD!" I am not some Macho guy who emotes destruction. I am the Holy One, of whom more is expected and more has been promised.

As Holy One, I will turn ordinary rage into viable relationship.

More than that, as The Holy One of Israel, I made Covenantal commitments previously.

I will not go back against who I AM.

As a result, the Father plans a huge homecoming for the Son from Egypt, Assyria and all places of dispersion. We often think about Human FREE WILL, but here Israel will be welcomed home and restored by the WILL OF GOD, because God has remembered who God Is, reacting NOT to the recalcitrant Son but according to God's own Best Self.

Hosea is an extraordinary claim, that dares to take us inside the conflicted heart of God, to see one who is acting in faith torn between Exhausted Rage and Self-Disciplined Fidelity. With this text before us, we need to sit in silent awe to ponder God. This is not the stringent God of Orthodoxy, who can be reduced to foregone conclusions; not the God of Popular Spiritualism who is our best friend, Buddy Jesus. Instead this is a God of Deep, Complex Emotion and Honesty, willing and able to violate all conventional God-talk.

Which now leaves the question: "What does it mean to be created in the Image of God?"

We live in a world of instant communication. With Electronic Communication our thumbs express faster than our minds. With "All News All the Time" we are bombarded by speculation of what is happening. We regularly escalate differences into absolutes, and we are left without self-discipline, or reflection. Such fatigue frequently yields to all out rants, making "others" the target of our assaults. The problem is that The "SELF of the SELFIE" is incapable of Self-Critique. We are too fatigued, too connected, too eager to score to ever consider who we are and who we want to be. The disappearance of self-reflection is a betrayal of our Covenant that requires integrity, freedom, discipline; without which, costly fidelity becomes impossible. More than that, a loss of self-critique makes DEMOCRACY all but impossible, because Democracy depends upon a critical, thinking population capable of more than a reactionary response of my PARTY Right or Wrong.

The Gospel of Luke describes the Disciples watching and learning from Jesus. AND what Jesus does more than anything else is to PRAY. Often we look at prayer as being like Wish-fulfillment, instead of writing a List to Santa, or Blowing out Candles, we bow our heads. But what Jesus models here, is that Prayer is not about what we request!

Prayer is about our relationship with God, that in everything we are prayerful.

We give thanks for what we receive.

We dedicate ourselves to forgiveness, BECAUSE we have been forgiven.

Faith is NOT about requesting Millions or Youth or Other Luxuries, but looking to God for our DAILY NEEDS.

To illustrate our relationship with God, and how loving of a God we have, Jesus tells this story about a neighbor coming at night seeking help. Years ago, when our children were young, in the middle of the night the dog began barking. Not wanting to disturb our family or neighbors, I quieted the dog down and we all went back to sleep. I got up on Saturday morning and came downstairs to find the kids watching television and my wife making coffee. When suddenly it registered that there was someone asleep on our couch! I gently roused this sleeping stranger. Bewildered he asked where he was. I told him and gave him my cup of coffee. The stranger described having grown up in this neighborhood ten years before, but that last night he had been at a Wedding Rehearsal Dinner, and the other Groomsmen had thought it funny to get him drunk. Knowing the house he had come in through our back door and crashed on the couch. We made certain he was now okay and sent him on his way. Now, for future notice, you do not tell a local pastor you were at a Wedding rehearsal the night before, because there is a network among ministers, and 20 minutes later the young man was right back at our house being accompanied by the father of the Bride and the local Priest, to apologize and make restitution for what he had broken entering our house. Nothing more was said, until Christmas-time when one of the church's college kids sought us out to share that there was a story going around among the kids home for break, that if you have had too much to drink, go to the Pastor's house, they will make certain you are safe, they will not call the police, and they will even give you a cup of coffee before sending you out into the world. In REFLECTION, we decided that was a pretty good identity to have.