

“The Heart of the Matter”:
A Sermon Preached at Knox United Church (Parksville, B.C.)
on August 1st 2010 (10th Sunday after Pentecost/Sacrament of Holy Baptism)
by Foster Freed

Hosea 11: 1-11

As those of you who know me are well aware, I’m not the sort of person who likes to indulge in bold predictions. But given time enough and a touch of grace, I think the following predictions are pretty likely to hold up.

I predict that both Lillie and Gabriela, at some point in the future, will do something perfectly wonderful: something that will astonish and delight their parents, something they could never have foreseen!

I predict that both Lillie and Gabriela, at some point in the future, will do something perfectly puzzling, something that will leave their parents scratching their heads!

I predict that both Lillie and Gabriela, at some point in the future, will break someone’s heart.

I predict that both Lillie and Gabriela, at some point in the future, will endure someone breaking their heart.

And yes, I predict that both Lillie and Gabriela, at some point along the way, will find themselves entertaining—however briefly—the big ticket questions including the biggest ticket question of them all! What’s it all about? What’s the point of this whole business we call life?

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Some 27 centuries ago...some 2700 *years* ago...a prophet by the name of Hosea was sent to the people Israel: a people who were no strangers to astonishment and delight, no strangers to puzzlement, no strangers to the breaking of hearts, and definitely no strangers to the asking of the big ticket questions, including the biggest question of them all, the one about the fundamental meaning of this whole business of living and dying.

And the fact is: Hosea, the prophet, was not only a keen observer of this ancient people, but a passionate participant in their corporate life. As Merry pointed out in her introduction to today’s reading, one of the truly noteworthy facets...

...some would call it not only noteworthy but downright scandalous...

...one of the noteworthy facets of the book in which Hosea's prophecies are collected, involves the marriage into which Hosea enters, enters at God's bidding! And while no one is really clear as to whether Homer's wife was involved in cultic prostitution, run-of-the-mill prostitution, or was simply unfaithful for one or more of the reasons people have always chosen to be unfaithful, the bottom line is that Hosea came to regard his wife's unfaithfulness—and his continued love for her—as a sign, a metaphor, indeed his human way of participating in God's stubbornly faithful love for unfaithful Israel. Nor is that the only aspect of the book that is liable to scandalize us!

For the better part of the book's 14 chapters, Hosea does what the ancient prophets did best: he railed. In the name of God, indeed with the very Word of God on his lips, Hosea railed against the cruelty, the injustice, the disparity between rich and poor, and the neglect of the things of God that surrounded him to every side. And the more he railed in the name and in the Spirit of the Holy One, the more it became obvious to Hosea that God's final Word could never be a word of rejection. Reproach: absolutely! Judgment: but, of course! But not utter abandonment...not complete repudiation...not final rejection.

All of which comes to a poignant climax in that 11th chapter Merry shared with us. Having spoken against Israel in language that is haunting in its vehemence, having virtually succumbed to despair in the face of continued rejection...

...my people are bent on turning away from me...cries the prophet!

...in the face of utter rejection from the people, something remarkable and different and new erupts from this same prophet's lips. Still speaking on God's behalf, the prophet anguishes:

*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...

*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....*

I will not come in wrath.

Well: I warned you up front that there was much in Hosea that might well scandalize our delicate minds! And surely any of us who are accustomed to approach

God in a detached, rational way, cannot help but be unsettled by this image of the Holy One: image of God engaging in what appears to be an in-house debate: should I or should I not vanquish them? Should I lead with my anger or with my compassion? Which will it be? Whatever else we might want to notice here, this much seems clear: this is not the God of detached philosophic contemplation! Nor the God of which the author of the book Hebrews writes: “the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow”. How can an unchanging God appear to be so uncertain? So restless? So vacillating? So terribly overcome by emotion? What kind of “god” is this?

And, of course, it goes without saying that this would be of no concern to the likes of you or me, were it not for the inconvenient fact that the book of the prophet Hosea, far from being a mere ancient relic, continues to find a place within the living faith tradition in which you and I participate. My New Testament professor, Lloyd Gaston (may he rest in peace!) once suggested that Christianity was the only religion whose scriptures were already waiting for it in the cradle of its birth, by which he meant the fact that what we call the Old Testament was fully formed by the time Christ came along. For what it’s worth, however, my own somewhat more unorthodox take, is that Christianity’s cradle was an exceptionally crowded one: including not only its Old Testament heritage, but also the no less rich heritage of Greece and Rome, especially Roman law and Greek philosophy.

And the irony, or so I hunch, is that many of us in this day-and-age find it easier to incorporate the Greco-Roman facet of our heritage—especially the analytical, philosophical cool we inherit from ancient Greece— than we do the heritage of ancient Israel, with its obscure narratives, its less than relevant legal codes, and its wild-eyed men and women of prophecy. And yet the irony is that Messiah Jesus came to his contemporaries wearing not the garb of the workman like priest, not that of the coolly detached philosopher-observer, but that of the passionately engaged prophet. Like Hosea, Jesus was well acquainted with prophetic denunciations of injustice and hypocrisy! He too knew how to cry out in the name of the Holy God! And he too knew how to weep: to weep not only in the face of his people’s anguish, but to weep for the anguish of his God.

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In her introduction to this morning’s reading, Merry made the point that Hosea is sometimes referred to as the “prophet of faith”. In my own research over the past week, I was reminded that Hosea is also sometimes referred to as the “prophet of love”: the one who (in the very process of experiencing the breaking of his *own* heart) was able to testify to the anguish that shakes the very foundation of the universe when God’s own heart is broken.

And I’m reminded here: reminded of an insight that I stumbled across many years ago involving the raising of a child: a child like Gabriela, a child like Lillie. The insight—I regard it as a crucial one—is simply this: every child, as one of their basic

needs (right up there with food, clothing and shelter) deserves to have at least one adult in their life, at least one adult in their life, who is crazy about them. Let me repeat that.

Every child...every child who arrives on this whirling dervish of a planet...deserves to know that there is at least one person in their corner, one person who is absolutely head-over-heels crazy about them! And maybe, just maybe, the whole point of our Old Testament heritage (the stone we builders always seem to be tripping over!)—certainly the indispensable point made by the prophet Hosea when seen in the light of Christ—is that humanity as a whole (and each and every human being without exception) is surrounded by the love of One who is crazy-in-love with us, unwilling to let go of us, determined never to wash their hands of us.

And let's be clear that such love is not the sloppy, sentimental love that turns a blind eye to wrong-doing! Let's be clear that such love is an inherently tough love: a love that yearns to bring out the very best in the beloved. A profoundly parental sort of love: a love in which even anger, far from negating that love, is a manifestation of love. A love that is willing to be stretched to its limits. A love that is prepared to be tested daily! And yes, a love that is willing to go to any length—even death on a Cross—to make abundantly clear that this is a love that will never die.

Friends in Christ! We are gathered here this morning not only to name that love, not only to pro-claim that love, but—above all—to claim that love in a deeply personal way for Lillie Grace and Gabriela Siobhan: in the very process of doing so, recalling that God, in God's love, is not finished with any of us. Not now. Not ever!

And glory be *to* God, whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Glory to God, in the Church and in Christ Jesus! Now and forever! Amen!!

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