

Intimate Partner Violence and the Image of God

A sermon on Hosea 11:1-11 by Nathan Nettleton, 31 July 2022

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Message

When we read scripture through the eyes of Jesus, we find a way free of the violent abusive images of God in some of the ancient texts.

Sermon

Our first reading tonight brings us close to the end of a little journey through the writings of the prophet Hosea. We've only heard two extracts on Sundays, but those of you who regularly attend our daily Vespers liturgy or use our daily Bible reading guide have heard another twelve parts, making up most of the book of Hosea.

Hosea rails against the people for their idolatry, their injustice, and their general unfaithfulness to God. For much of it, he depicts God as a betrayed husband, railing against his unfaithful wife, and our journey through these anguished and angry speeches has been pretty harrowing in places. Listen to these words which we heard Friday week ago, words which the prophet attributes of God:

Plead with your mother, plead—
 for she is no longer my wife,
 and I am not her husband—
that she put away her whoring from her face,
 and her adultery from between her breasts,
or I will strip her naked
 and expose her as in the day she was born,
and make her like a wilderness,
 and turn her into a parched land,
 and kill her with thirst.
Upon her children also I will have no pity,
 because they are children of whoredom. ...
Therefore I will hedge up her way with thorns;
 and I will build a wall against her,
 so that she cannot find her paths. (Hosea 2:2-4, 6)

But then, in the same reading, the voice suddenly changed tone:

I will now allure her,
 and bring her into the forest,
 and speak tenderly to her.
There I will give her gifts.
 There she shall respond as in the days of her youth. (Hosea 2:14-15)

I don't know about you, but I find it impossible to shut out the voice that says that this depiction of God sounds exactly like a classic domestic violence perpetrator. "You've betrayed me, you've disobeyed me, I'm boiling with anger, I'm exploding with rage, I'm going to humiliate you, I'm going to hunt you down and hurt you, I'm going to hurt your children, I'm going to shut off all your paths of escape, I'm going to destroy you. ... I'm sorry, I love you, I'll

never do it again, I promise, Look, I'm giving you flowers, I've changed, Let's fall in love again." And then there is a pause before the next violent explosion and the cycle begins again.

With a modern understanding of intimate partner violence and the psychology of abusers, a God who appears to fit that mould is not a God one can readily respect and worship, let alone a God we would urge anyone to imitate, or whose footsteps we would hope people would follow. Didn't the Apostle Paul say in our second reading that we "must get rid of all such things – anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language"? (Colossians 3:5) Hurt and anguish may be understandable, but rage that explodes into murderous violence is never justifiable in intimate relationships, or anywhere else really.

I'm going to come back to that thought and the questions it raises for us, but first I want us to look at today's extract, because there are some notable differences that might help us sort out the mess a little. Or maybe just confuse the questions!

The difference is not just one of those sudden flips that the abuser makes. It is a completely different perspective. The opening verses of today's extract said:

When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son.
But the more I called them,
the more they went from me;
they kept sacrificing to the Baals. (Hosea 11:1)

So instead of portraying Israel as an unfaithful wife, now Israel is being portrayed as a rebellious child, and therefore God is being portrayed not as a husband, but as a parent. And interestingly, at no point in this passage is God described as a father. The description portrays God as fulfilling parental roles which in that society would normally have been regarded as feminine and motherly roles.

God teaches the child to walk, takes the child up in her arms, leads the child around, lifts the child to her cheek and feeds it, feels warm and tender compassion for the child, and recoils at the thought of allowing severe punishment of her child.

The passage still portrays God as hurt and anguished over the child's rebellion, and there are still dire warnings of disaster, of a sword raging in their streets, and the people being dragged back into slavery. But this time, there is no suggestion that it is God inflicting these calamities on the people. It seems to be more of a warning of consequences rather than punishments. If you continue down this pathway, this is where it will take you.

In fact, not only is God not threatening punishments this time, but God can acknowledge the pain and anger while simultaneously refusing to act violently or destructively. This doesn't sound like the on again, off again, violent anger of the abuser we encountered in the earlier descriptions. Listen to God's words this time:

How can I give you up, my people?
How can I hand you over, O Israel?
How could I destroy you?
My heart recoils within me;

my compassion grows warm and tender.
I will not execute my fierce anger;
I will not destroy you;
for I am God and no mortal,
the Holy One in your midst,
and I will not come in wrath. (Hosea 11:8-9)

In the ancient Israelite law, rebellious children could be handed over to the magistrates at the city gate and sentence to death by stoning. This passage seems to be alluding to that practice, but these words of God sound exactly like the cries of an anguished mother who, despite feeling hurt and humiliated by the atrocities of her son, still clings to him and refuses to hand him over, saying “he’s still my son and I can’t let him go or stop loving him.”

So what are we to make of this? Within the one prophet’s writings in our Bible, we hear God portrayed in ways that tick all the boxes for a vicious perpetrator of intimate partner violence, and then, within a few pages, as a fiercely loving mother who is able to consciously process her hurt and anger in mature ways and choose always for tender love and compassion over any urge to punish. These images seem impossible to reconcile, and yet there they are, side by side in our Bibles. How can we embrace the attractive one when it comes to us hand in hand with the other one? Are we just cherry-picking the Bible, choosing what we like and sticking our heads in the sand about the rest, or is there more to it than that?

There is more to it than that. What we are doing is learning to read the Bible the way Jesus read it. And Jesus was far from being a slavish biblical literalist who said that every jot and tittle of the Bible is equally accurate in its portrayal of God.

Jesus quotes the prophets often, but he is quite consistent in favouring images of God as being a God of unshakable love and mercy over images that suggest a dangerously angry violent God. Sometimes Jesus is especially obvious in the way he even edits his quotes, and it was obvious enough to get him into serious trouble on occasions.

In his first sermon in his home town of Nazareth, he quoted a popular passage from Isaiah – the Spirit of the Lord is upon me and has anointed me to proclaim good news, etc.etc – but he deliberately cut it short and left off everyone’s favourite line about “the day of vengeance of our God.” And to make it clear that it was no accidental omission, he elaborated on God’s care for the gentiles, and the crowd were so outraged that they were ready to throw him off a cliff. They’d come hoping to hear a sermon that assured them that they were God’s favoured ones and that a fiery punishment was coming soon upon their enemies, not to hear some rebellious son of a carpenter tell them that God loved their enemies as much as them.

One of the most horrifyingly blood-soaked books of the Bible is the book of Joshua. It describes the violent invasion and colonisation of the lands of Canaan, and the genocidal policies employed by the Israelites against the indigenous inhabitants of the land. This book is so important to Israelite self-understanding that it is still quoted today to justify the repression of the Palestinian peoples and the expansion of settlements in the occupied territories. Not only was it a favourite of the Israelite people, but you might expect it to be a favourite of Jesus’s, because it bears his name. “Jesus” is a translation into English, via Greek, of the Hebrew name Joshua, or Yeshua.

And do you know how many times Jesus is recorded as quoting from or referencing the book of Joshua? Zero. Big fat conspicuous zero. Not even once does Jesus acknowledge, let alone endorse this book that bears his name but which depicts God as a genocidal warlord who orders the indiscriminate slaughter of men, women, children, and animals. On the evidence available to us, Jesus wanted nothing at all to do with that book and its ugly portrayal of God.

One of the things we are told that Jesus did after his resurrection was begin to open the minds of his disciples to understand the scriptures and to recognise him in the scriptures. And of course, the New Testament hadn't been written yet, so the scriptures referred to are the Hebrew Bible. It seems that it was only after they had seen him absorb the hostility and violence of the crucifixion and return without even a trace of resentment or vengefulness that they could begin to see the theme of non-violent love and mercy that starts small in the Hebrew Bible but grows stronger and stronger as the pages unfold. And yet, so deeply embedded were the expectations of a vengeful warrior messiah, that even on the day of his ascension, some of his disciples were still asking, "Is now the time when our enemies will be vanquished and Israel will be on top again?"

Our second reading tonight, as for the last few weeks, came from Paul's letter to the Colossians, and just two Sundays ago we heard from that letter that Jesus "is the image of the invisible God," and that "in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross." (Colossians 1:15, 19-20)

Jesus "is the image of the invisible God," and "in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." All the fullness of God. Not just God's nice side. All the fullness of God. So if we want to know what God is like, all the fullness of God, then we look at Jesus, "the image of the invisible God."

And if we come up against two conflicting images of God, even if they come to us straight from the pages of the Bible; even if they come to us in the words of one and the same prophet, then we resolve the clash, the incompatibility, by asking which one looks like Jesus, sounds like Jesus, walks like Jesus. Which one shows us a God who is pleased to reconcile to himself all things by making peace through handing himself over to human violence on the cross, and absorbing all our hatred and hostility and bitterness in his own body while praying for our forgiveness and never once threatening fiery vengeance?

The Bible contains some horrific images of a violent vengeful God because it is an accurate record of our evolving understandings of God, and there are several reasons that we have in the past understood God that way. Many ancient peoples believed that God was like a celestial puppet-master who controlled absolutely everything that happened, and therefore if an army invaded or a natural disaster happened, it meant that God had ordered it. If you hold that belief, then you have no choice but to believe that God is the type of God who sometimes punishes brutally. It is a belief that Jesus openly rejected: "Do you think this tower collapsed and crushed those people because they were worse sinners than everyone else? No I tell you." (Luke 13:4-5)

The biggest reason for viewing God as angry and violent is that we humans are constantly projecting our own image onto God. In a violently abusive and oppressive world, we are constantly deluding ourselves that the only reason we are that way is that God is that way and

we are doing his business on his say-so. Far too many of the perpetrators of intimate partner abuse are card-carrying Christians who quote the Bible indiscriminately to authorise their reign of terror. But they are not reading the Bible through the eyes of Jesus, or according to the teaching of Jesus.

It is important that we still read and understand the parts of the Bible that are based in these old violent understandings of God, because if we don't remember where we have come from, it is much harder to see which direction the current path is heading, and it is much harder to understand many of the teachings of Jesus if we don't remember what he is reacting to and challenging.

Jesus teaches us that when we see the image of our own violence attributed to God in the pages of our Bibles, we need to look again and listen for another voice. In some parts of the Bible it will be little more than a still small voice. In the book of Joshua or in the violent jilted husband diatribes earlier in the prophet Hosea, it might be little more than the voice of sheer silence. But listen still for the whispering voice of the Spirit of Jesus, a voice that grows ever louder until it reaches its crescendo as Jesus cries from the cross, "It is finished."

Follow that voice, and it will lead you to the beloved mothering God whose compassion burns warm and tender and who will not give up on any of us and will not come in wrath. Follow that voice, and it will lead you into all truth, and the truth will set you free.