

“Restored But Altered”

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Scripture: Hosea 11: 1-11

(Apology for abundance of masculine language)

So I'm trying to explain to my mother in a telephone conversation this week that I was not being flippant when I responded to her question about my sermon topic this Sunday by saying simply, "God." "What are you preaching on this week, dear," she'd asked. "God," I'd replied. There had been a pause, a silence while she waited for me to continue. Then, when I did not, "Oh, I guess you are too busy to talk to your mother right now, so call me back later." "No, Mom, I'm not too busy to talk I'm just preaching about God, that's all." "Well, honey," imagine a slight chuckle here, "isn't that what you ministers preach about every week? Surely you have something else to say." And so it went and, afterwards, I thought to myself that we ministers don't always preach about God actually. In fact, we most often preach about ourselves, humanity, and our sinfulness in one form or another. Salvation and pardon get lots of play. Prayer sometimes. Forgiveness...mostly on God's part. The Holy Spirit with careful wording, so as not to go overboard into the realm of evangelism. And Jesus! Lots of sermons about Jesus. But not so much about God. Maybe that is because God by God's self...God prior to any notion of the Trinity...is mostly found in the Old Testament texts and there, rightly or wrongly, God does not always fare so well in the reputation department. The God of the Old Testament is often seen as judgmental and punitive; wrathful and controlling...capable of wiping out whole towns by plague and fire or part of the earth itself by flood waters. On the positive side, New Testament retrospect focuses us upon the Creator God and the Shepherd God; nudges us from the condemning words of the prophets to the hopeful and restorative prophetic voices.

Here in Hosea, we meet the God I told my mother I was preaching about. God, the parenting and prodigal God, who cannot allow the destruction of his beloved children in spite of their wandering, betraying and blatantly disobedient behaviors. Father God, who acknowledges that judgment should wipe them out and banish them for good, and yet, out of his great love for them, opts instead for restoration. And, God opts instead for restoration out of his *memory* of their childhoods, their beginnings to which he was essential. God who roars like a lion in his anguish over these wayward children, and then bends low to pick them up and bring them safely home again.

This is God, who predates the entrance of his own son into our world, giving and loving unconditionally because it is in his nature to do so. It is hard for us to imagine the situations and mindsets of these early believers who encountered God without benefit of Jesus Christ. And even more so, considering God apart from Jesus is not an easy task...in fact it is an impossible one for they are one and the same as we have come to know God personally. The Colossians text that Dennis read tells us that this is so: "your life is hidden with Christ in God; all in all" we are instructed. And yet, when we speak of Christ, as we often do...we sometimes run the risk (by the way we consider Christ) of obscuring this God in Hosea. And maybe this is a fact because we are so focused on ourselves and our own lives that we identify with Jesus in his humanity; grab the sacrifice and salvation for our sakes and never look back. But, looking back, remembering the God of our history in the Old Testament before God took the form of Jesus on earth and among us literally, there was God, roaring and bending low.

When Christopher Hitchens, infamous atheist and author of *God Is Not Great*, declares that believers have "made up" God because they want to be loved more than they believe they

deserve to be, he is not thinking of this Hosea text. For when God determines to save us (Ephraim) despite our undeserving selves, it is not because God is thinking about something good or hopeful in us...even the teeny tiniest glimmers of goodness that maybe, possibly, might come to fruition someday...not that...but because of God's own self—who God is, not who we are or might become. God does not say, “I will save this woman because, bad as she is, undeserving as she is, she may someday be better.” God is not focused on the disposition or behavior of any one of us at that moment of decision...for we, in fact, are not deserving. God decides out of God's self...out of God's own character and nature...to restore us. God says, “I am God, not man/mortal.” This “God, not man” distinction is critical to our grasping the character of God here because were we to “make God” like ourselves we could not fathom God's nature. The Hebrew even renders this translation with God saying, “I am God, not the best of men.” Even the best of us cannot imagine forgiving, restoring each other to relationship with ourselves if a man or woman has grievously offended us, hurt us neither asking forgiveness nor expressing remorse. Certainly not imagine welcoming into our homes one who has hurt us repeatedly, and repents only to hurt us again. We declare that we are not capable of that kind of graciousness and forgiveness. And we are correct. It is not in our human character/nature to do that. But it is in God's nature to pardon and forgive us regardless of offense and numbers of offenses when we turn to God for restoration. “Guilty one” writes CH Spurgeon in the 1800's, “your pardon lies in the character of God.”

And what is the character of God offered to us in Hosea? At least here, we might refer to it as “the bending down God.” Twice, in this text, those images of God's reaching down to us are given as God remembers, “...it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms,” declares God...and... “I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them.” We can envision as well as empathize with this activity when we remember picking up children, either our own or others, for the sheer joy of lifting them up to squeeze them, welcome them, cuddle them. Or perhaps you remember bending down to pick up a crying child, a hurt child, in order to offer comfort and reassurance. Perhaps, even you remember *being* that child to whom someone bent low to your level, eye to eye, in order to meet you either in your excitement or your pain. Today, instead of personifying such a gesture, we are invited by the prophet, Hosea, to remember that God has done all those things with us as we have walked our individual journeys in life.

Perhaps my mother is right. Don't all ministers preach about God every Sunday? And so to do so in such apparent simplistic fashion as Hosea reveals God might be thought of as, well, a bit flippant...or at least not especially sophisticated for such an educated and faithfully seasoned congregation as is represented here. We would certainly not allow Christ to pre-empt God for we know they are one and the same. We also know that first God so loved the world and then he gave his only begotten son. The supreme act of this bending low God. But let us acknowledge thanks to Hosea, that Jesus emerges from this “bending low God”, this God who bent down again precisely when he became one of us, in the flesh. It is this “bending low God” who reaches to us this morning and compels us to keep our eyes upon God who continues to bend down to meet us, pick us up and restore us.

“So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God.” This from Colossians.

Set your mind and your heart upon our God above who bends low in grace and love and

mercy...who bend low in Jesus Christ. And remember that God does this in spite of our undeserving selves. God does this in spite of our betrayal. God does this because God love us, remembers us even before we were born and, so, will not abandon or destroy us.

In closing, I have chosen to show the final segment of The Lion King because that is who Hosea's God is: the lion king. Please don't email me and complain that I am suggesting this tale is a religious one. If you see symbolism, that is your perspective to come to by your own choosing. I just want to suggest an image here and to build upon Hosea's God who roars. Roars in anguish over his sinful children who have turned away from him. One commentary suggested that God roars from a wound. How often have I sat with families, parents, myself included, who effectively roar from wounds inflicted by our children? "How could my child do such a stupid, stupid thing," says a father whose teenager takes a life-changing risk. How could he make such a dumb decision; she choose such an irresponsible and irreversible action. How can they do this to us? Why do they do this to us? And now she'll never be the same. He'll never recoup that. Even, now I'll never see him again. The mistake was long term." We are angry. We are bereft. We roar with cries and shouts and vows and ultimatums. We roar....and then we remember who they are to us. Remember all those aspects of them that we cherish. And, like God has done with us, we bend down to them and call them home. We are all changed, altered, by the experience. But we are also restored by God who has bent low to us.

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