

At first glance, the reading from Hosea seems both straightforward and poignant. God speaks as a parent about Israel, reminiscing about their closeness in the early days. “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.” God was like a tender parent who teaches their child to walk, or who lifts the child up to touch cheek to cheek. Yet Israel, as it grew, was attracted to other gods and made alliances that were disloyal to Yahweh. Now they are reaping the harvest of their foolish choices—“Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me. The sword rages in their cities . . .” God is not punishing them out of anger or vengeance; these are just the consequences, like if you wear shorts to school, God’s not going to bring you pants. You insisted on putting on shorts in 35 degree weather; now you live with your decision.

Only of course the consequences are much more dire, even tragic. Hosea prophesies in the Northern Kingdom of Israel, literally in the final months before it falls to Assyria in 721 BCE. Israel lies between two great powers, Egypt and Assyria, and Israel’s king had foolishly tried to ally with the Egyptians against the Assyrians. Some Israelites have already been deported to Assyria, and as we know, soon the entire nation will fall. Hosea sees the king’s geopolitical strategizing as an outgrowth of his unfaithfulness, since he had already been encouraging Baal worship.

In Hosea’s prophecy, therefore, God witnesses the natural consequences of Israel’s infidelity and grieves over it, as one does over a teenager or adult child whose mistakes you see but can no longer prevent or soften. Then suddenly God is wracked with compassion, saying, “How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? . . . 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.”

What has happened? According to the laws of treaties and vassals and lords, God should walk away from Israel. In fact, if we were to extend the metaphor of parenthood, this is the point where the parent really just has no more power, and can no longer mitigate the misguided actions of the child. But this is where metaphors of law and of parenthood break down, because God is simply not willing to be limited by them. God is sovereign, not trapped by laws. It is God’s holiness -- God’s separateness and radical difference from the ways of the world -- can account for a love that keeps God present to Israel even as Israel turns away. How can God be faithful without a partner in faithfulness? Just watch, and watch yourself, too.

Now, I just said that metaphor broke down at this point. The government/legal metaphor has no provision for a patron sticking with a vassal who has found another lord, however self-destructive that change may be. The parenthood metaphor has no provision for a parent continuing to participate in the child’s life when the child has enough power to walk away. But I have, if not a metaphor, a story or a literary figure anyway who may help us see the nature of the step God is taking.

Till Eulenspiegel is a character in German folklore renowned for his tricks. Sometimes his tricks were just vulgar or mischievous, but sometimes they functioned as sort of a mirror for the people he played them on. For instance, in one story, he goes to a city and scatters pebbles as if they were seeds in front of city hall. Asked what he’s doing, he says that he’s sowing rogues (scoundrels). Asked why he doesn’t sow pious people, he answers that they would not grow in this city. The city fathers indignantly expel him, and he goes to another city and does the same thing, until finally he’s not allowed in any city so he goes on board a ship, from which

he drops his pebbles into the harbor, “planting rogues” where they can never be uprooted.

We don’t know what Till saw as wrong in this town. But when the townspeople try to stop Till, saying that they have enough rogues already, they’re inadvertently admitting that the town is full of scoundrels. When they ask him to sow seeds for pious people and he retorts that those would never grow in this town, they also expose themselves as fools, because obviously you don’t get pious people by planting rocks. The so-called fool exposes the truth by getting the townspeople to react to his absurd behavior. He incarnates and magnifies the corruption of characters in the text. The audience to the story laughs because they have seen the townspeople in a new light, as defenders of half-truths or even lies, who ought to have known better.

This may be a bit hard to follow, but what I’m saying is that the story doesn’t mean anything on its own. It’s actually kind of anticlimactic. The story only means something when the audience hears it and reacts to it. In the same way, I think God’s soliloquy in the reading from Hosea doesn’t mean anything on its own. It gets its meaning when we, as Israel, hear it and react to it.

God reminisces about tender times with Israel, then sorrowfully presents the current reality, that Israel has abandoned God and is going to be crushed by adversaries with whom they had unskillfully negotiated. Then God *asks*, “How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?” Those are not declarations of some specific course of action; they are rhetorical questions that aren’t going to get answered. They are articulations of God’s unreasonable and unrelenting love for Israel, an attachment that will not dissolve. “Love faileth not,” as the King James Version has it.

What happens when Hosea's audience hears it, or what happens when we hear it? I'll tell you what doesn't happen: we don't get any insight into how God will intervene and change everything so that we're rescued from a dire predicament. Indeed, that didn't happen. Assyria did invade, and the ten tribes were dispersed. Our government is locking up immigrant children, June is in fragile health in the hospital, and Simpson College does have serious financial challenges. But we also hear that God is right there, right on top of our unfolding train wreck, God's heart pulsing with compassion and tenderness for us and the kids and patients and students. And I think that means that in a thousand and one invisible ways, God is offering grace, whether in the form of small reliefs, or unforeseen options, or simple kindnesses that keep someone afloat for another day. If you overhear God saying to Godself, "How can I give you up?" you may have the eyes to see a grace that's being offered to you, or another way to move forward, because you see that God is still involved. Hosea can't tell us what's going to happen or what God is going to do, but Hosea can tell us that God is very much in the game.

This passage ends in hope. Geopolitically, Assyria annihilated Israel; later Babylon annihilated Assyria, and after that, Persia wiped out Babylon. Alexander the Great blah blah Rome blah blah. There's lots of recorded history about what went down with nations, and there was real suffering and real sorrow. But while that all was happening, neighbors shared food and cared for each other's children. Didn't make it all right, but it kept us going. And guess what, those ten tribes re-emerge in the New Testament as the Samaritans—a lower grade of Jew, not appropriately observant, descended from Assyrians as well as Israelites, and altogether objectionable to right-thinking people in the surviving tribe of Judah. And they are despised; they are antagonistic to Judeans. But to everyone's surprise, Samaritans are A-OK

with Jesus, and within the community that Jesus builds, Samaritan ceases to mean enemy or outcast. The survival and restoration of a people after hundreds of years may not be very satisfying to us as modern people, but in the literature of the Bible, it is deeply meaningful—the evidence that God had never given up on Israel, and sustained them in unexpected ways over the years until they could reunite in the community that gathered around Jesus.

Hosea evoked God's tender love for Ephraim, and we should marvel at the endurance of that story, its viability and validity over generations. Kingdoms fall and kingdoms rise, but God makes Godself known to us and offers grace and sustenance regardless of the condition of the kingdom. If we can hear that tender longing and stubborn love, it is there for us, and for all to whom we are sent.

Faithful God, you have continued to love your people despite our faithlessness to you. Receive our thanks for never giving up on us. Amen.