

Angry Prophets and Cheerful Martyrs: Defending the Faith from the Faithful

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Texts: Hosea 9:1-9; Acts 24:1-23

If it were not for the sex on the barn floor, the first four verses of the ninth chapter of Hosea would sound a bit like our very recent experience with the food found in the gate area of airports – the wine does not satisfy and the bread is as dry and tasteless as grief itself. But we recognize not only the text but also what is behind it, frustration over the itching ears of a faithless people and fear for their lives and their salvation. The language marks the difference between pastor and prophet, for it goes beyond even what is to be expected of a text bordering on the apocalyptic. It is a true rant, filled with unspent rage and knowledge of bitter suffering to come. It speaks to us of a judgment as hot as a much sinned against husband's killing anger, a judgment that will not be delayed or even ameliorated by memories of past tenderness. Marriage is the base metaphor for the covenanted relationship between the Lord and his people, Israel, and Israel has played the part of the whore, not the loving wife.

The charge is that Israel has been indiscriminate in her attentions. She has not held herself apart only and always for her Lord, but for gain's sake has let others have access to that which she should guard for her Lord's sake. While we may understand, even in this day and age, the murderous rage of a husband whose wife has played the prostitute, there is no brief for a husband who dispenses his own justice. The text is grossly offensive to modern sensibilities in this regard. But we can easily identify with a misuse of the heart, with a casual disregard for the integrity and the wholeness of one who we have promised to love and honor and cherish (if no longer obey), for the whole of one's life, forsaking all others.

The over the top language of the description of Israel's betrayal of her Lord, though harsh, is warranted if only because Israel was chosen from among the nations to be the community through which God worked salvation for the nations, and Israel has not been worthy of that choice. It is all judgment this language, there is not a hint of mercy about it, because this prophet speaks an angry warning to a people about to trade life for death, simply for a few shekel's worth of gain.

Thinking on the nature of this Society, and the goings on in the church for the last decade and more, likely many of us here have seen ourselves in the role of Hosea. We would see ourselves, and maybe others do too, issuing intemperate warnings to a people apparently not just willing but eager to sell their faith for the opportunity to identify with a secular culture that is increasingly narcissistic and carnal. Let me raise two concerns. First, the offense is not against us; it is against the Lord. And while we have been faithful in those issues that test the Church at this present moment, as disciples and sinners we also have played the role of harlot in the baptismal covenant we share with Christ.

Second, there may be a place and a time to play Hosea, but it is in the long run not a hugely effective strategy for bringing the wayward and disloyal home to Christ and his Church

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maintaining a safe and faithful haven for those who do not generally stray. We can take the role when it is offered to us, but prophets have always been dealt with pretty straightforwardly by those insulted by the truth. If we want to play at prophecy we should expect to be chased naked from the public square as was Isaiah or be thrown off the walls surrounding the city as was the Greek Cassandra. Prophetic thunderings are immensely satisfying in the short run for the prophet; we all love to be right in the face of great wrong. But the prophetic approach is hard on the body and the spirit of the prophet and in the long run, seems to accomplish little but a backwards explanation of the situation in which God's people find themselves when their world lies in ruins around them.

Let me suggest that we take Paul's approach, rather than Hosea's. I cannot say, thinking on what Paul suffered over the course of his ministry and at the time of his death, that it is any less damaging to the body to be an apostle than a prophet, but perhaps it is easier for the spirit, and more effective in the building of the body of Christ. So when confronted by our own who are seemingly ready to put their trust in anything other than that which is revealed in God's Word, I suggest we lean towards offering a cheerful defense of the faith rather than an angry prophecy about what comes of ditching it.

Paul's cheerful defense arises out of betrayal, even as does Hosea's angry prophecy. We can, in fact, see betrayal at multiple levels in Paul's story. Paul has returned to Jerusalem with the fruits of his ministry to the Gentiles. When that ministry was first approved by the church in Jerusalem, Paul was told that Christian Gentiles need not adopt circumcision as a sign of the covenant, but avoid food sacrificed to idols and sexual immorality. In addition, he was to collect an offering for the poor of the church of Jerusalem as a sign of the oneness of the Church. Paul has returned to report on what has been a successful tour in the mission fields – congregations have been planted throughout the Greek speaking world and the collection he has taken up is satisfyingly large, although, frankly, those rich Corinthians could have contributed a lot more.

Despite his success, Paul was not welcomed with open arms by the church in Jerusalem. Some of its leaders were unhappy that Paul's teachings concerning circumcision and the dietary restrictions, meant in their minds only for Gentile Christians, were being adopted by some Christians of Jewish descent. They likely felt that he had betrayed the restrictions implicitly placed on his teaching of the Jewish faithful. And, of course, Paul himself was suspect as he had been consorting with Gentiles for all the years of his ministry. So the elders required he present himself to the Temple for purification rites, and that put him within easy reach of the authorities. If this was not an out and out betrayal of Paul to unfriendly authorities, it was certainly a failure to protect one who had worked tirelessly on behalf of Christ and his Church. Paul's enemies were the establishment elite, Sadducees who did not profess a belief in the resurrection of the body, and Pharisees, who, as Paul notes, did believe in the resurrection but not that of the unrighteous, meaning, Gentiles. The formal accusation against Paul is that he created a riot in the Temple and his sectarian activities have undermined the faith. Again, betrayal is at the root of the real accusation, for it was Paul, then known as Saul, who had been sent out years before by these very same people to destroy the infant Church. Instead, as Paul, he became the Nazarene's most enthusiastic disciple and effective missionary, vastly expanding with the help of his Lord's Spirit the scope and the breadth of the body of Christ.

Paul's response to the flowery rhetoric of the Roman lawyer brought to make accusation against him is I would contend the model for our response from this time forward to the circumstances of this day. It is, as Paul himself claims, a cheerful defense, but by cheerful do not think ineff

muddled by an unjustified optimism. Paul is a careful exegete not only of the Scriptures and the faith but of the circumstances of the world. He has not betrayed his faith but has held to the teachings of his ancestors and was in a purified state at the time of his arrest. He demolishes his opponents' accusations and points out to the lawyer his lawyerly faults on the question of the law. He has not done what he is formally accused of doing, and the accusation itself is hearsay since the only witnesses to his actions in the Temple are Asian Jews not present at his indictment. Paul clearly understands that the deck is stacked against him. His is a cheerful defense, not because he looks at his current situation through rose colored glasses, but because his life and the world itself is lit by the light of the resurrection, the validation of Christ's own preaching and teaching, passion and death on the cross.

The Church of Christ in every place and time is bedeviled by attacks from within its ranks as well as from without, from its enemies. Even as we as individuals betray our Savior, routinely even, so will the Church betray her Groom. Both Scripture and history teach that there has never been a time when the Church on earth has existed in an ideal form. Her own adherents routinely betray her in practice and even in the willful warping of belief itself, often giving unintentional aid to the true enemies of the Church. But the Church will endure. Those attacks from within and without the Church will ultimately fail though they may create all sorts of short-term mayhem in the meantime. The easiest thing for us to do is to respond to the betrayal that creates that mayhem with intemperate and angry prophetic thundering of the end of the Church as we know it. That betrays the hope in which we all live, the hope of the resurrection. Even though we offer a true description of our circumstances, in the end we burn down with our anger what we are instead to build up with enthusiasm, the all too human, all too fallible institutional Church, the body of Christ as we experience it.

We Lutherans call ourselves theologians of the cross. A cheerful defense of the faith is not the substitution of a theology of glory for the opportunity to suffer with Christ for the faith. It is, rather, a willingness to endure that suffering but to do so knowing that Jesus' death on the cross was the sacrifice that brought salvation to a world marked in multiple ways by the betrayal of God. Our sad faithlessness is surmounted by the absolute faithfulness of Jesus Christ. Our grief for our sin is vanquished by the joyful reception of forgiveness made possible by Christ's mercy. It is not our ministry to nail others to the cross, but rather to illuminate for them the joy that is the God given outcome of the resurrection.

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