

Homily for Morning Prayer

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Text: Hosea 8:1-14

Hosea's prophecy is of the same order as the parable of the Prodigal Son except for Hosea God is the loving, faithful husband who yearns for the return of Israel, his unfaithful wife, who has prostituted herself in her wayward acts of political alliances, religious apostasies and social sins. Or it might be understood as an anti-Song of Songs. O yes, Israel might well claim that she was not rejecting YHWH but "enriching the tradition." After all, Israel was not like that austere land of Judah inhabiting a region of dry deserts where it was only natural to perceive exclusive dependence on the One holy and ineffable "I AM." Israel's land was lush and fruitful, flowing with streams, yielding abundance. Here you had to recognize the importance of promoting fertility. You had to learn from and be open to your neighbors and to the "new insights" they provided. These neighbors were not, after all, without discernment into how the land worked and how a prosperous life was to be cultivated and enjoyed: you needed the blessing and the work of Baal and his consort.

Israel complained that she was not swallowing Baal hook, line and sinker. YHWH was still revered. But Oh! the pleasures to be found in the cult prostitutes which pleasures simultaneously fructified the soil. How could there be anything wrong with these practices when it all felt so right and good! So "Israel," cries Hosea, "is a half-baked cake" (7:8). Our Lutheran Confession would say they are "*incurvatus in se*," curved back in on themselves. Their agenda is their pleasure and the fulfillment of their desires not the word of the Lord.

So comes the judgment. It begins like a solemn feast. The trumpet blows. But instead of announcing a solemn feast of a new year full of promise, it is the beginning of a new year of judgment, a dirge of solemn rejection. The golden calves set up at Dan and Bethel, in the very heart of the Holy Land, YHWH's gift to his people to worship YHWH alone and abide by his covenant have been metamorphosed into the very embodiment of their apostasy: foreign nations are their allies, not God; the law of God has become an alien thing to them; they have taken refuge in prosperity and in the increase of altars but they have forsaken YHWH. Yes, it all looked perfectly normal and reasonable. But at its heart it was nothing but desertion and infidelity. Assyria circles over Israel like a vulture. Assyria circles over Israel like a vulture. Israel doesn't know that it is in its death throes even as she pursues what appears to be a robust religiosity, economic prosperity and vigorous foreign relationships. In just a few years Israel would be utterly wiped away. The whole nation would vanish forever from the pages of history. It seems that the Holy One of Israel had been goaded to this extremity letting fall like a sledge hammer the warning given by Moses:

"You were unmindful of the Rock that begot you, you forgot the God who gave you birth. YHWH saw it and spurned them ... for they are a perverse generation, children in whom is no faithfulness." (Dt 32:18-20)

The names of Hosea's children rang out ominously, Lo-Ruhamah ("no pity) and Lo-Ami ("not my people"). Our Lutheran Confessions call God's judgment and wrath his alien work which is meant to drive us to despair so that the sweet Gospel sounding in our ears will melt our hard hearts and move us to accept his love and mercy, his real work, his work of salvation. In the mouth of Hosea YHWH is virtually devoid of mercy and divorces his people and every man, woman and child, every priest and layman, king and commoner alike, will all perish in the destruction of his avenging and blazing wrath. "Compassion is hid from my eyes," say YHWH Sebaoth. "They have sown the wind and shall reap the whirlwind." (13:14, 8:7)

So we can only read this prophet's word and shudder, stand in awe and maybe even weep: the judgment of the Holy One of Israel lies upon Israel, she is consigned to utter destruction! Can anyone read the words of this prophet and the terrible judgment he speaks on his people and not cry out, "No let it not be so! Lord, save your people from their folly!" Can it be that we can fall so far that we are beyond his mercy, his pity, so that we are no longer his people?

It's easy enough to apply much of this judgment to the present distress in the churches. But then we would miss the point. Are we, as the Church, complacent and at ease in Zion? Oh we suffer with budgets and cranky people and difficult personal circumstances. But do we suffer because we are striving to live up to the demands of our faith? And if we are not, just what might we expect to meet at the hands of YHWH the God of Israel who could no longer abide faithlessness? We have followed Paul in the daily lectionary in the Book of Acts for these last few weeks. Here is one who was faithful, probably in a way few of God's saints have been, and yet he suffered. You know well the passages in his epistles where he had to defend his ministry. Few of us have experienced the least of his deprivations. He suffered, but he suffered for his faithfulness. Job also has been our companion for some time. His bodily suffering was secondary to his suffering due to his faith as he struggled to justify God's way with him.

Is it possible that in this day and age God would judge his Church, his people and bring on a calamity of Biblical proportions because of our complacency and our unwillingness to say exactly what it is that the Lord demands of us as his people? These are all fearsome thoughts. I can hear my own thoughts now as they turn to vindicating myself with certain actions and behaviors. I'd like to say, "Lord, I've done this and that and this other thing. I pray the daily office, I contribute, I work hard for your people. But just how deeply has your life, O Lord, penetrated into my life and my hearts of hearts? Just what is it that reigns and rules there? Who really sits on the throne of my life?"

Where is the Gospel in this seemingly unremitting judgment? Hosea is a suffering prophet as all the prophets: he lives God's suffering as he takes to himself an unfaithful wife who spurns his love and protection. The people have their spurning of God set graphically before them in Hosea's marriage but Hosea's marriage also embodies God's unwavering fidelity and love.

Hosea foreshadows the embodiment of God, his love and his faithfulness in Christ whom God sends into the world as a bridegroom to gather his bride the Church. He is the suffering bridegroom who loves his people to the point that he lays down his life for his beloved bride

"that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the Church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish." (Eph 5:26-27)

This prophecy calls us to regain the perspective of being God's pilgrim people who are not at home in this world and who have their eyes set on a city not made with human hands. As his pilgrim people we are hearers of the prophets who call us to daily repentance and who also are nourished now in these latter days by God's work of salvation in his Son Jesus our priceless treasure. We set ourselves under his Word, we come with empty hands and silent mouths that he might fill them with that precious food and drink from heaven which alone can satisfy our souls, quiet our troubled consciences, overcomes our idolatries, fill us with the endless power of his love and forgiveness and under gird us with the strength of his own eternal life that we might grow into being that "spotless bride, holy and without blemish." Living repentant lives recreated in and hidden in Jesus Christ the last work of Hosea's prophecy, which read like a benediction, can be fulfilled:

"I will heal their faithlessness; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them. I will be as the dew to Israel; he shall blossom as the lily, he shall strike root as the poplar; his shoots shall spread out; his beauty shall be like the olive, and his fragrance like Lebanon. They shall return and dwell beneath my shadow, they shall flourish as a garden; they shall blossom as the vine, their fragrance shall be like the wine of Lebanon."
(14:4-7)

And let the people say, "Amen."

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