

**God's Passionate Love**  
Hosea 11:1-11  
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Imagine that over a few years a foreign power invaded Nebraska numerous times killing tens of thousands of our citizens, devastating our crops, and forcing us to swear allegiance to them and pay a heavy tax. What would be the traumatizing effects upon our psyches? How would we make sense of the world?

Just such a situation did face the people of the nation of Israel in the eighth century before the Common Era. And one of the people who responded to the catastrophe and tried to help the people was the prophet Hosea.

Hear now these words of the ancient prophet of Israel:

When Israel was a child, I loved him,  
and out of Egypt I called my son.  
The more I called them,  
the more they went from me;  
they kept sacrificing to the Baals,  
and offering incense to idols.

Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk,  
I took them up in my arms;  
but they did not know that I healed them.  
I led them with cords of human kindness,  
with bands of love.  
I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks.  
I bent down to them and fed them.

They shall return to the land of Egypt,  
and Assyria shall be their king,  
because they have refused to return to me.  
The sword rages in their cities,  
it consumes their oracle-priests,  
and devours because of their schemes.  
My people are bent on turning away from me.  
To the Most High they call,  
but he does not raise them up at all.

How can I give you up, Ephraim?  
How can I hand you over, O Israel?  
How can I make you like Admah?  
How can I treat you like Zeboiim?  
My heart recoils within me;  
my compassion grows warm and tender.  
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.

They shall go after the Lord, who roars like a lion;  
when he roars, his children shall come trembling from the west.  
They shall come trembling like birds from Egypt,  
and like doves from the land of Assyria;  
and I will return them to their homes, says the Lord.

For the Word of God in scripture,  
For the Word of God among us,  
For the Word of God within us,  
**Thanks be to God.**

One of my college textbooks introduced Hosea this way:

Hosea . . . was raised in a period of opulence, prosperity, opportunism, and scheming during which the rich and powerful availed themselves of all opportunities to live luxuriously. Hosea was God's messenger to a complacent, self-indulgent, and apostate people.

After the death of Solomon the United Kingdom of Israel and Judah was split in two, with the southern kingdom of Judah and its capital in Jerusalem and the northern kingdom of Israel with its capital in Samaria. Over the next couple of centuries the situations of both kingdoms waxed and waned as a variety of rulers, some good but many bad, governed the countries who sometimes warred with each other and sometimes joined together in warring on other nations.

In the childhood of Hosea, the northern kingdom of Israel went through its greatest period of peace and prosperity under a relatively stable royal dynasty, but all of that changed dramatically when the great Assyrian Empire began to spread into the territories of southwest Asia. One of the histories of Assyria informs us that "no sovereigns were ever more despotic, more covetous, more vindictive, more pitiless, more proud of their crimes." And that their armies "set forth the most terrible expeditions which have ever flooded the world with blood."

So, charming people.

At the time the Assyrians began to threaten Israel, the nation also went through a period of internal instability with a series of weak kings who were often murdered by their associates.

So, the good times came crashing to a halt. After a series of invasions the nation was eventually defeated and its people carried away into exile where they were assimilated with other populations and forever disappeared into the sands of history, for these are the famed “Lost Tribes of Israel.”

As this catastrophe was unfolding, Hosea appeared as the messenger of God and tried to respond to the trauma in innovative ways to give the people some sense of how to understand and respond to what was happening.

Hosea had gone through his own personal difficulties. He married Gomer, feeling that God had instructed him to. They had children and gave those children symbolic names, as prophets sometimes did. Then Hosea discovered that Gomer was unfaithful, and he separated from her. She seems to have then descended into poverty and out of desperation became a prostitute. Hosea then received a word from God telling him to take Gomer back, and Hosea did.

Hosea interpreted his own life experience as revelatory about the character of God and God’s relationship with the people. God loved the people with a passionate love and entered into a covenant with them. Yet, the people eventually were unfaithful and became promiscuous, giving their worship to false gods and idols. Despite being angry, God still loves the people and will take them back again, restoring the passionate, covenant relationship between them.

Hosea appears to be the first person in the history of our tradition to view the relationship between God and the people in this way—as a covenant like marriage. And to view his own subjective experience as revelatory for what Rabbi Heschel called “the inner life of God.”

But if you only read Hosea 11, you miss the terrifying aspects of this text. First, Hosea, and by implication God, are very angry. And their anger is repugnant to us. For example, in chapter 2 the prophet demands that the children plead with their mother to “put away her whoring” 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.

Very different from the compassionate love of chapter 11. And terrifying. The Bible is filled with texts of terror, and we must be careful how we use it.

Biblical scholar David M. Carr asks, “How . . . can one imagine [God] as such an angry, jealous, violent, out-of-control husband?” Carr also points out that “Hosea’s image of

redemption—[God] promising to take her back—can look like the cycle of abuse sometimes seen in human relationships.” In this story Israel could be God’s battered wife.

And so the book of Hosea presents us with both terrifying texts of anger and violence and beautiful words of compassion. What are we to make of it?

David M. Carr is professor of Old Testament at Union Theological Seminary in New York City and his recent book *Holy Resilience: The Bible’s Traumatic Origins* will help to guide our summer sermon series. Carr contends that much of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures were written in response to trauma—think for example of the New Testament texts as attempts by those writers to grapple with the crucifixion of Jesus.

The writers of scripture were themselves traumatized and were trying to respond to their personal traumas and the collective traumas of the people. Carr believes this is why the scriptures of the biblical tradition survived when the scriptures of many other ancient cultures did not. Triumphal stories of kings and creation narratives abound in the scriptures of ancient cultures, but those stories don’t help later humans grapple with the suffering of their own lives. The Bible survived because it did grapple with suffering in complex and authentic ways, and so humans have continued to turn to the Bible over thousands of years in order to respond to the traumas we experience.

Carr argues that Hosea wants to provide the people with some sense of control over their lives. If they understand all the evil that is befalling them as a people as their own fault, then that gives them a chance to fix the situation by changing their behavior.

Recent trauma studies inform us that this is a common way for traumatized people to think, but it can also continue the damage.

Carr believes that the Book of Hosea does, despite its flaws, reveal a difficult truth. He writes, “people often go through life with inaccurately positive pictures of the world and their role in it. . . . But life can show the limits of a worldview and/or theology that is relentlessly upbeat.”

Historian Simon Schama writes that the Hebrew Scriptures are “not a rehearsal for grief but a struggle against its inevitability.”

This summer our worship will focus on how we develop resilience to respond to vulnerability, suffering, and trauma. We’ll look at stories from the Hebrew Scriptures to see how our ancient predecessors developed resilience. And what we will discover are both good and bad options.

The anger and abuse and self-blame of Hosea are common in traumatized people, but they aren’t healthy responses. But compassion does build resilience. Compassion is a form of vulnerability to others that creates possibilities for healing.

Walter Brueggemann wrote that “Compassion . . . announces that the hurt is to be taken seriously, that the hurt is not to be accepted as normal and natural but is an abnormal and unacceptable condition for humanness.”

And part of why the Book of Hosea is so important in guiding us to a God of love, is that in this very passage God rejects anger and violence and chooses instead to treat the people with an unconditional grace. If we have rejected a notion of a wrathful God and have instead embraced a notion of a deeply loving God, it is because that change in theology has been driven by the text of scripture itself and by our experience of Jesus.

The last few months Sara has often told me how much Kamaal has been overwhelmed by love for Kate. So, this week I asked Liz if she had any good stories of Kamaal's parental love.

She told me that before Kate was born, Kamaal prepared a list of colleges she might attend and was ranking them according to various criteria. At the top of the list were various out-of-state schools, because he thought she'd want to move away from Omaha and have an experience of the wider world.

Then, after Kate was born, Kamaal edited the list, and the University of Nebraska-Omaha suddenly was at the top of the list. Kamaal even suggested that he could build Kate a tiny house in the backyard for her to live in when she attends college at UNO.

When we are in trouble, what we require is faithfulness and unconditional love. The kind of love that protects us, comforts us, helps to strengthen us and hold us together. It's the kind of passionate love a parent has for a child. That's the kind of love that will save us.