

Hosea and God the Mother

If you have ever deeply loved someone who seemed bent on self-destruction, you have a glimpse into the heart of God from this passage from Hosea.

If you've been betrayed by a lover, you have tasted the same bitter drink God has.

If you've watched someone you love brought into a court room in shackles...if you've lived in a home with a parent you dearly love but who has created a home that is steeped in the chaos of addiction and dysfunction, or a home where those who are supposed to nurture you instead abuse you, you've shared a bit of God's experience...an experience Jewish scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel calls the divine pathos.

The divine pathos is the intense emotion God feels towards humanity. Not everyone would say God experiences that sort of pathos – that emotion.

There is a church doctrine in some traditions that's called the Doctrine of Divine Impassibility. It says that God cannot be moved by circumstances in creation...that God can't suffer and that God doesn't feel intense emotion.

That couldn't be further from the truth. And this passage from Hosea shows that vividly.

Heschel says that the prophets are people uniquely able to sympathize with God...the prophets feel what God feels. And then they tell their hearers what their sin is doing to God.

You sometimes hear people talk about the wrathful God of the Old Testament. And it is true that what God feels is often anger. God hates the evil that humans do.

If you have loved someone whose life choices cause you immense pain, you know that what you feel is a complex mixture. There is anger and a lot of fear... typically we respond with some sort of consequence that we hope will change the person.

But underneath those complex emotions is often devastating heartbreak. Sorrow for the person we love...sorrow for what could have been...sorrow for our relationship with them.

That is what Hosea is portraying here. God is utterly crushed by a people that God has so lovingly created, nurtured, and cared for...a people that God rescued from slavery and led to the promised land...yet a people who have repeatedly prostituted themselves before the altars of false gods.

You might also notice that Hosea is portraying God in a very maternal way.

The image we get is of a mother, kissing a baby's cheek, bending lovingly over an infant while the baby nurses at her breast. We see a mother who stretches out arms as a toddler takes those first unsteady steps.

Obviously, fathers can be nurturing too...but these are very maternal images, especially when you consider the culture and typical male and female roles of that culture. This passage just blows a lot of any stereotypical images of a harsh God right out of the water.

Probably two of the most straightforward of all the prophets are Hosea and Amos. They were both prophets speaking to the northern Kingdom of Israel at roughly the same time.

Hosea feels God's deep heartbreak and sense of betrayal by Israel's idolatry and unfaithfulness. In Hosea's first act of prophecy, God instructed him to marry Gomer, a prostitute. This was to be a lived testimony to Israel's unfaithfulness...Israel is equated to a prostitute.

The whole book goes back and forth between God's anger and vow to punish Israel and God's utter heartbreak and vow to forgive and restore Israel.

The prophet Amos – my favorite prophet – is more about Israel's injustice towards one another, especially the poor. He lambasts the rich for their ongoing accumulation of wealth and their complacency, even while others go hungry. And the divine pathos Amos most often presents is anger. But at the end of the book, even Amos reveals God's promise to forgive and restore Israel.

The divine pathos revealed by the prophets really shapes a huge chunk of the old testament. People will sometimes contrast the old testament God with the new testament God revealed in Jesus. They'll say the OT God is the wrathful God and the NT God is the God of grace.

But the divine pathos of the prophets reveals a suffering God. A God whose anger arises out of utter grief.

And we begin to realize that the suffering God on a cross was not a completely new development in the story of God. God has suffered from the very first time humanity chose to be their own god in the garden.

And God has done so willingly. God could claim sovereignty and righteousness over being a willing participant in the suffering of humanity brought about by human sin. But God does not.

God has suffered every time a child has gone to bed hungry while the wealthy gorge themselves. God has suffered every time a human hand has been raised in violence to another.

God has suffered every time humanity fashioned an idol or worshipped a god whose image was one of ruthless power and a distant uncaring god.

God has suffered when humanity has failed to love either God or neighbor.

An often-repeated phrase in the Old Testament is that God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding with steadfast love. God's judgment on evil is always in tension with God's mercy and forgiveness. And ultimately, even the message of the Old Testament is that God's mercy wins.

Yet, what is God to do about evil? If God is not only merciful, but also good, evil can't just be given a free pass.

In the story of Israel and Judah, God allowed other nations to defeat them. The fall of Israel and the exile for Judah were times of punishment and purification. But God promised that a remnant would survive and from that remnant, a whole new kingdom would arise.

In the end, God absorbs evil in the person of Jesus, on the cross. And shows us what has been true all along – our sin leads to the suffering, and even death, of God. The resurrection then is God's total victory over evil.

Some of the violence in the Old Testament is simply difficult to deal with. It can't all be neatly tied up. But in many cases, like the flood or the exile it's a pattern of death and resurrection. Death and resurrection is how God deals with evil.

So where does that leave us now? How does this connect to our lives? For that matter, how do the prophets in general connect to our lives? And it's not exactly like evil has gone away.

Well, for one thing they tell us that the divine pathos continues to be one of sorrow and grief when we chase after that which is not God and when we mistreat others, especially the poor and downtrodden.

They tell us that our sin does have consequences...God does judge evil. But the prophets also tell us that ultimately, God's mercy wins out. And if we had doubts about that, the cross reveals that for all time. God chooses to take the weight of evil on God's own body.

And it is that mercy that has the power to change us. Judgement can get us started...when we are confronted by the harm we have caused to ourselves and others, Christ speaks to us from the cross and calls to us to repent...to turn back. And then we find that mercy that has always been there, waiting for us to fall into it.

Waiting for us to nestle into God's care like we would a loving mother, waiting for us to fall into God's love and God's forgiveness.