

“Our Violence, God’s Faithfulness”

Sermon by Oby Ballinger

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Hosea 11:1-9

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.

A century ago, tens of millions of Europeans died trying to destroy each other with barbed wire, mustard gas and trench warfare. They called it “The Great War”, a “war to end all wars”, and when peace accords were finally signed it became an annual holiday called “Armistice Day”. The term comes from two Latin words: “arma” and “sistere”, meaning “stand still”. Armistice Day, the day when arms will *finally* stand still. Such hope for what seemed possible on the other side of human carnage.

But the arms have not stood still in all the century since. How many wars have been fought after “the war to end all wars”? After the Second World War, [the November 11th holiday was renamed “Veterans Day”](#), perhaps a surrender to the idea that there would *always* be war, and thus always veterans and their loved ones who carry the wounds of war in bodies, minds and spirits. Poet and farmer Arlin Buyert, who served in the Navy in the Vietnam War, begins [a poem](#) saying, “Oh the load we carried / home from 'Nam.” He finishes, “Now I hear the chopper,
taste sweat on my lips,
smell blood in the dirt,
see bone on the road
as I walk my children to school.”

How many times has humanity said, “no more”, or “never again”? And how many times have those vows been broken? How many holocausts after the Holocaust? I learned to sing [“Prayer of the Children”](#) as a teenager, with its lessons on genocide in the former Yugoslavia. And what about the prayers of children killed by drones in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, those massacred in Mexico, and on and on. Not just overseas, either. *Our* country sees—regularly!—the warlike massacre of children, parents and elders as part of what we’ve come to accept as everyday life. Two friends of mine have lost members of their families to gun violence in the last two months. Could we find our way back to Armistice please?

“The sword rages in their cities,” God says, according to Hosea. The sword “devours because of their schemes. My people are bent on turning away from me.” “The more I called them, the more they went from me, they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols.” We don’t worship the Baals now, but we bow down to the higher powers of coercive violence, deadly war, assault weapons and handguns. How many millions—and counting—have been sacrificed on those altars? “My people are bent on turning away from me.”

Hosea preaches in the kingdom of Israel several hundred years after the civil war between Rehoboam in the south and Jeroboam in the north. Idolatry has continued unchecked, including the Baal worship

that we heard Elijah try to stop last week. Now conquest is imminent by Israel's mighty neighbor Assyria, despite the efforts of Hebrew leaders to ally with Egypt. Israel submits itself to competing powers, rather than to God. Hosea prophesies into the geopolitical whirlwind, giving voice to God's swirling emotions in the face of the people's infidelity. God is of two minds here—like the parent of a rebellious grown child who should know better. "I love you, but I will leave you without rescue, submitting you to the natural consequences of your rebellious choices. You've made your bed with Egypt, Assyria and the Baals—now sleep in it." God would write off Israel altogether—out of the Promised Land, out of the covenant, out of God's heart. These people of violence have had it coming for hundreds of years.

And yet. God also cannot forget the tenderness with which She created them. Hosea uses images of God mothering her young, cradling, feeding, snuggling, teaching, and calling from danger. Hosea testifies to mercy in the Almighty, unable to live forever with a hardened heart. The Good News comes in the final verse of this passage: "I am God and *no* mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will *not* come in wrath."

Hosea captures both judgment and forgiveness, not because of any deserving but because of God's own nature. According to one commentator, "Hosea saw behind the wrath of God a love that would not let the people be wiped out," (James Luther Mays). This is a God who treats us according to our original goodness as children of God, not according to our sinful behavior, worshipping war, weaponry and violence. God grieves our wrongs, but doesn't give up on being our God. Grace comes in that God sees the end of wrongdoing, and remembers instead the child-innocence with which we trust ourselves to the Creator.

Shakespeare describes such enduring love in his Sonnet 116, part of which reads:

"Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds,
or bends with the remover to remove: O no!
It is an ever-fixed mark that looks on tempest and is never shaken;
it is the star to every wandering bark....
Love's not time's fool...love alters not with brief hours and weeks,
but bears it out even to the edge of doom."

This is the very definition of divine love: timeless, unshakable, and eternally yearning for repentance. This kind of God is worthy of worship.

How then will we respond to a God of such breathtaking, even foolish grace? What do we do with God's faithfulness in the face of idolatrous human violence? Will we take advantage of God's generosity and love—wasting more because we can, wasting our lives and those of others? Allowing a culture to thrive where precious human lives are not treasured but poured out as offerings to deadly, false gods? Or will we truly worship this God in awe and humility? Will we seek the peace on the other side of war, collaborating with neighbors, strangers, and would-be enemies to create a world envisioned by "armistice", a world where "arms stay silent"? Can we do what makes for peace and an end to war—creating not just the absence of conflict, but the presence of justice? There are plenty of places to go with such an impulse, in terms of laws, ordinances, and at-home practices. But one question must be answered first: will we respond in loyalty to God's undying, forgiving, renewing love? Amen.