

God's Compassion and God's Anger

August 3, 2025 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Texts: Hosea 11: 1-11

One of the necessary, but potentially problematic, aspects of Christianity, and perhaps especially of preaching, is that we anthropomorphize God. There is really no other way to speak of God, at least to speak of our God, whom we believe is at once the immortal, invisible un-sourced source of all things, the ineffable, unfathomable reality that lies before, beneath, and beyond all reality, and as well, a God who loves us, listens to us, comes to us.

I say that this anthropomorphic necessity is potentially problematic, because we the human language we use, limited as it is, runs the risk of limiting God and acting like we know too much, understand too much. So let's keep that in mind, even as the prophet Hosea leans heavily into an image of God as a loving, frustrated, angry, compassionate, fed-up, tender mother.

This passage, in which Hosea mouths the words of God, unfolds in three parts, past, present, and future. Speaking of the past, using both the common name Israel, and the more familiar name Ephraim, God says,

“When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son.
It was I who taught Ephraim to walk;
I took them up in my arms,
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.

Such love and tenderness. Such delight in mothering, fathering, parenting. Such joy in relationship, and nurture, and the intimacy of parent and child.

But is there also not a hint of nostalgia there? A longing by the Divine for days that were beautiful, but which, as every parent learns, could not possibly last forever? Is there not an acceptance there of a different future that is yet to unfold?

And indeed it does unfold. So we move to the present moment, the moment of Hosea's message from God:

The more I called them,

the more they went from me;

they kept sacrificing to the Baals

and offering incense to idols.

I took them up in my arms,

but they did not know that it was I who healed them.

5 They shall return to the land of Egypt,

and Assyria shall be their king,

because they have refused to return to me.

6 The sword rages in their cities;

it consumes their oracle priests

and devours because of their schemes.

7 My people are bent on turning away from me.

I don't know if you have ever had such a child. That hasn't been my experience of life, but I have been a pastor and a friend and well, a human being without my head in the sand, so I've lived through this. I think of Sue Klebold, the mother of Dylan Klebold, one of the two 18-year olds who murdered 14 people and then killed himself at Columbine high school in 1999. Sue Klebold lives with guilt and shame and a sense of failure every day of her life. Like God here in Hosea, she asks, how could my child do this? How could my mothering, my love, have led to this?

It is interesting, though, to notice here that God doesn't ask, what did I do wrong? I suppose that would be taking the anthropomorphism too far. The waywardness here, the defiance, the turning away, is all on Israel/Ephraim.

You have to read other parts of Hosea to see this more fully, but Israel's rebellion against doesn't look like rebellion against God, at least from Israel's perspective. It's not an intentional turning away from God, so much as it is a turning toward some things that seem very nice. They turn toward security in their homeland. They turn toward fruitfulness and abundance. They turn toward autonomy and control of their own destiny. Indeed, I would note that the historical, archeological record shows that during the time of Hosea's prophetic ministry, Israel was doing great. Expanded borders. Growing cities. Rising population. Only in the eyes of God is this all seen for what it actually is; not security, but militarism and violence; not fruitfulness and abundance, but the oppression of the poor by the rich; not autonomy, but forgetfulness of who they are.

And then we turn to the third part of this passage, the future.

How can I give you up, Ephraim?

How can I hand you over, O Israel?

How can I make you [desolate]?

How can I treat you like [one rejected]?

My heart recoils within me;

my compassion grows warm and tender.

9 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.

Something has changed in God. This is no longer the almost naive loving parent playing with their child, basking in the joy and innocence of learning to walk, of lifting your child up to make a soft little raspberry on their cheek, of feeding her with a spoon, probably well after she could perfectly well do it herself, just because you want the tenderness and connection of that moment.

This is a God on the far side of life, of denial, of waywardness, of defiance. This is a God who is, you might say in human language, chastened a bit, a God who has, honestly, experienced anger and frustration and exasperation. But also, in the end, a God who remembers who she is.

Maybe you already see the parallelism here. It's as if God learns from God's own message. God calls upon Israel to remember and reclaim who they are – God's incomprehensively beloved child. And God is then self-called to remember who God is. "For I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst." God remembers that she is a doting mother, but still the divine doting mother. God remembers that he is a tender father, but still the divine tender father. Beyond our biggest, grandest, wildest idea of what love is, somewhere beyond that lies the divine love of God.

And maybe, just maybe, being the one loved in this divine mystery, getting a glimpse of such ineffable, unfathomable love, of eyes wide open love, maybe we can learn to love ourselves, love each other, and love this wayward world a little more like the God who loves us.