

## 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

**Hosea 1:2-10; Psalm 85; Luke 11:1-13; Colossians 2:6-15**

**Hosea 1:2-10** is one of the most dramatic prophecies in the Old Testament. This prophecy is not in words only, but is acted out. Such acting-out was a popular form of prophecy, in which the prophet engages in symbolic actions to dramatize his words; it is, in essence, “putting his money where his mouth is”. Isaiah did this by giving his children symbolic names (Isaiah 7:3, 14; 8:1, 8), Jeremiah wore a yoke to symbolize Judah’s coming submission to Babylon (Jer. 27-28), and Ezekiel tells of his grief at his wife’s death to share with Judah God’s grief in destroying Jerusalem (Ezek. 24:15-27). But nobody’s action prophecy was as dramatic and as personally life-impacting as was Hosea’s.

Hosea was a prophet in the northern kingdom of Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II (793-753 BCE). In Hosea 1:1, the prophet also names four kings of Judah whose combined reigns were from 792-686 BCE; this may imply that Hosea’s prophecies were so disturbing to Jeroboam and made the prophet so rejected in Israel that he escaped to Judah, living his final years in the southern kingdom. Hosea was a contemporary of the prophets Isaiah and Micah in Judah.

The acted out prophecy of Hosea is found in Hosea 1:2-10. God instructs Hosea to take a whore as his wife. He chooses Gomer, daughter of Diblaim. Outside of her father, nothing is known about Gomer except that she is “a wife of whoredom”. She might have been a cult prostitute who had sexual intercourse with men as an acting-out of the escapades of the Canaanite gods Ba’al and Astarte (Ashera) whose frequent sexual unions guaranteed the fertility of the lands. On the other hand, she may have been simply a harlot. But whichever she was, God instructs Hosea to select a prostitute to be his wife because “Israel commits great whoredom by forsaking Yahweh”.

God then instructs Hosea to have children by Gomer. He does so, and names the first “Jezreel”, the second “Lo-ruhamah” and the third “Lo-ammi”.

The names of Hosea’s children are significant. “Jezreel” was the name of a most beautiful and fertile valley where Gideon won a great victory for the Lord. It is also the name of that valley’s chief city where the Israelite general Jehu assassinated King Joram, Joram’s mother Queen Jezebel, and all the kin of the house of Omri and Ahab who had ruled the northern kingdom for 27 years. Jehu had then become the new king of Israel, founding a dynasty that would reign for 98 years, of which Jeroboam II would be its next-to-last king (his son, Zechariah would reign for only six months). By naming his son Jezreel, Hosea is reminding Israel of its magnificent beginnings as God brought the Hebrews into the Promised Land and this fertile valley and under the judges, defeated their enemies. But God is also reminding them of the bloodshed, destroying of dynasties, and violence that was begotten by violence. As Omri had overthrown the previous Israelite monarchy, Ahab had sought to convert Israel from loyalty to Yahweh to that of Ba’al and the Jehu dynasty had been birthed in the bloodshed that had destroyed the Omri dynasty, so “the house of Jehu” would be ended by the violent death of its final king, Zechariah. What goes around comes around as violence begets violence.

The second child of Hosea and his first daughter was named “Lo-ruhamah”. That name means “no mercy” (literally, “she has not received mercy”). By naming his daughter in this way, Hosea was proclaiming to King Jeroboam and to Israel that the northern kingdom was now outside the mercy of God, for God had withdrawn his mercy in the light of Israel’s unfaithfulness to the “marriage covenant” between Himself and them. Intriguingly, Hosea is careful to point out, “But I will have pity on the house of Judah (the southern kingdom) and I will save them by the Lord their God; I will not save them by bow or by sword or by war or by horses or by horsemen” (1:7). The northern kingdom of Israel will be destroyed by Assyria, but God would rescue Judah from Assyria, and would do so not by military power or strategy but by God’s direct intervention. And this, of course, is exactly what happened (II Kings 17:5-23; 18:13-19:37).

The third child of Hosea was named “Lo-ammi”. This is the most powerful name. Lo-ammi means, in Hebrew, “Not My People”. This is a direct reversal of the traditional formula used in Israel to describe its relationship with God, “I shall be God to you, and you shall be my people” (Exod. 6:6-7; Lev. 26:12; Deut. 26:17-19). Now, Hosea declares through the name of his third child, “You are not my people and I am not your God”! Israel has been divorced from God! God has cancelled the covenant between God and Israel because of Israel’s “lust” after other gods, other nations (treaties with Assyria that eventually rob them of their independence), and political and economic systems that reward the powerful with wealth and control while oppressing, exploiting and dominating the people. God can take their harlotry no longer, and now separates himself from the northern kingdom forever. Their demise at the hands of Assyria is now only a matter of time!

But the prophecy doesn’t end there. Hosea concludes this horrible message with these words. “Yet the number of the people of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which can be neither measured nor numbered; and in the place where it was said to them, “You are not my people”, it shall be said to them “Children of the living God”. The people of Judah and the people of Israel shall be gathered together, and they shall appoint for themselves one head; and they shall take possession of the land, for great shall be the day of Jezreel” (1:10-11).

The prophecy has come full-circle, as has Israel’s life – from out of Jezreel back to Jezreel. Israel must receive the most bitter of punishments for their great sin extending over 200 years as a nation – the sin of religious harlotry, political oppression and economic exploitation. But there is dawn after the darkness. Yahweh will act to reunify Israel and Judah under one Messianic king, they shall take possession of the land once again, and the Davidic nation of Israel will live as God intended them to live, becoming a blessing to the world!

**Psalm 85**, though short, has three distinct movements to it that encapsulate how God acts to revive God’s people, so that they become imitators of God in their effort to work for justice in the world.

The first movement begins, “Lord, you were favorable to your land, and restored the fortunes of Jacob. You forgave the iniquity of your people; you pardoned all their sin” (vss. 1-2). It reminds the reader of the psalm (and God Himself) of God’s saving acts toward Israel in the past.

It may refer to a specific act of divine pardon and blessing, most likely Israel's release from Babylonian captivity and the freedom of the captives to return to Israel.

The second movement (vss. 4-7) introduces the lament. "Restore us again, O God of our salvation, and put away your indignation toward us" (vs. 4). The poet weeps over the plight of Israel, and all that they have suffered through their captivity to Babylon. But then he moves to assure the Israelite community that God is about to act in a way that will liberate the Hebrews from their sad estate and restore them to God's intentions for them. With such an assurance, the author moves to the final – and dominant – movement of this psalm.

"Let me hear what God the Lord will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts. Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land" (vss. 8-9). God is about to act, and we will be both witnesses to that action and recipients of it so that we will be transformed ourselves!

How will God bring his glory to the nation and its people? God will bring his glory through so working among the people that they will be transformed and both their national policies and personal actions will restore Israel to the shalom to which they had formerly been called.

"Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky. The Lord will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase. Righteousness will go before him, and will make a path for his steps" (vss. 10-13).

There are four specific words the psalmist uses to describe the covenant bond between Israel and God that will not only reflect God's actions toward Israel but the people's actions and the actions of their political, economic and religious systems toward each other and toward other nations. Those four words are steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness and peace.

"***Steadfast love***" is the Hebrew word, *chesedh*. It is not translatable into English (that is, there is no English equivalent of this Hebrew word, although the word "grace" comes closest to it). *Chesedh* is used in two ways in the Old Testament. It either describes God's redeeming, unconditional, totally embracing love toward us. Or it is used to describe our redeeming, unconditional, totally embracing love toward one another. It is that latter meaning that is used in Psalm 85:10.

"***Faithfulness***" expresses the Hebrew concept of "walking humbly" before God and each other (viz. Micah 6:8), the idea that the essence of authentic faith is relationship – a faithful relationship of compassion, commitment and deep caring for each other that permeates the entire way we relate to other people. Thus, people are not objects whom we use to accomplish our ends, but folk made in the image of God whom we cherish for whom they are, not for what they can do for us. Likewise, God is not an object we manipulate or seek his favor in order to get our desires met, but rather one with whom we need to be in a dynamic and loving relationship.

"***Righteousness***" is the Hebrew word, *tsedeq*. This word (and the concept lying behind it) is particularly hard for us English-speakers to understand because the word "righteous" has

undergone such profound change. Today, the English word “righteous” means acting in accord with divine or moral law; free from guilt or sin, or morally right. Consequently, it describes private moral behavior. *Tsedeq*, on the other hand, meant compensatory equality, public justice, clemency and compassion. It can be as easily translated “justice” as it can be “righteous”, but it is often used in tandem with the Hebrew word, *mishpat* (which is also translated justice). *Mishpat* meant the legal acting out of justice (as in a law-court), while *tsedeq* meant the ethical use of justice (as in compassionate mercy toward the poor and the victims of the misuse of power).

“**Peace**” is the fourth characteristic and the most important of the four terms used by the psalmist here. The Hebrew word translated “peace” is, of course, *shalom*. It is used in scripture to describe the entirety of a people, nation or culture living under God. *Shalom* is occurring when “right religion” is being practiced when a nation’s beliefs, values and practices bring people and their society into an active, dynamic love relationship with God. It is occurring when both the people in their everyday lives and the political institutions of that society are acting justly and mercifully, especially toward those who could become powerless. It is occurring when poverty is being systematically eliminated throughout the nation and by that nation’s intentional action and wealth is being shared.

In order for a nation or people to truly experience shalom, all three structures of society – its religion, its political order and its economic institutions must be centered on building a relational culture (“steadfast love” or *chesedh*), working for equitable justice for all (both *mishpat* and *tsedeq*), and economic equity (“faithfulness”)! That is what this psalmist is declaring that God will do for God’s people *through* God’s people! This psalm is a description of the shalom community, of what God can bring and would bring upon Israel if they would embrace shalom for the systems and the people of Israel.

**Luke 11:1-13** include Luke’s account of the Lord’s Prayer. But to understand this prayer in the unique context in which Luke places it, one must recognize what has gone on just before he teaches it to his disciples.

In the previous chapter, Jesus talked about God as Father (10:21-22). In that statement, he describes God as “gracious”, trusting Jesus and willing to invest in Jesus “all things”. Thus, in this earlier statement, Jesus uses the image of father to represent God. Now, in this prayer, by the very requests made of God, Jesus expands on what he means by calling God “father”.

In the Judaism of Jesus’ time, a father was primarily seen in his patriarchal role. That is, what was celebrated about fatherhood was the magisterial role of the founder or the “great father” of the clan. He was the ruler of that clan who officiated over and ordered the life of that clan or family. The father might be caring or compassionate, but he was primarily seen as the “great father” who ruled that family.

On the other hand, when Jesus began his template prayer with the word “Father”, he is describing an entirely different kind of family ruler. He is one who is not only concerned with the economic and political greatness of that family (“thy kingdom come”), but one who is

concerned with its daily sustenance (“give us each our daily bread”), seeks to be forgiving of the sins of each person of the family, concerned with the dynamics of the family so that each forgives as freely as they are forgiven, and wishes all of them to avoid “the time of trial”. Thus, the God who is described in the Lord’s Prayer as “Father” is not so much the great patriarch (although he is that) as he is described as generous, compassionate, caring and faithful to his children.

The Lord’s Prayer, as presented in Luke, is considerably briefer than it is in Matthew. It is given as a simple, direct and succinct prayer, honoring God’s holiness, calling for the kingdom’s actualization on earth soon, requesting sins to be forgiven, and for protection in “the time of trial”. And it reveals a compassionate, caring God. Thus, it reminds those who pray that, in reality, our needs are very simple and very direct – and all God asks is that we rest those needs in him – the caring Father.

The next section of Luke (11:5-13) deals with perseverance in prayer. It includes the parable of the persistent host at midnight (vss. 5-8), insisting on borrowing food from a friend for his guest. It then includes Jesus’ saying, “Ask and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened” (vss. 9-10).

Finally, Jesus concludes, “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him” (v. 13b).

This text is saying two things. First, we are to be persistent in prayer. We are not to give up nor become dispirited in our prayers or ministry just because matters don’t seem to be working out. We are meant, instead, to keep on keeping on, and to keep on praying, no matter how impossible and unachievable it seems to be.

Second, Jesus indicates that what we get may not always be what we asked for but, rather, what God intends us to receive. He says, “If then, you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him” (11:13).

That is not what one would expect Jesus to say. The syllogism he is constructing would require him to conclude it, “how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask him” (as Matthew has Jesus say in Matt. 7:11 – which is likely the “corrected” and therefore later version of Jesus’ original statement).

But in Luke (where the more original and less consistent saying is preserved), Jesus promises the Holy Spirit. In other words, Jesus is telling us that you won’t always get from God what you ask, no matter how persistent you might be. Rather, what you will get is what is best for you – the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

**Colossians 2:6-15** continues Paul's exploration of a biblical understanding of power centered in Jesus Christ and the consequent call to the church to publicly engage the world. He has been arguing that the effective living of the Colossian Christians in their pagan environment will come only by both right action (i.e., engagement in public life) and by right theology (i.e., their gaining a biblical understanding of how God is at work through Christ in the world). Paul has undertaken that exploration of biblical power by examining the work Christ has done both on the cross and from the throne upon which God has placed him. The apostle has brilliantly argued that Jesus is the true Caesar of the world and has reconciled all governments into one holy kingdom of God (even though they don't recognize that reality yet). Further, God has given to the church the task of exercising the power that Jesus has invested in them, not by imitating the states and economic powers use of control and domination, but by imitating Jesus in being a suffering servant in our engagement of the world and its systems. It is in the light of these insights that Paul then moves to the epistle lesson for the 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time.

Paul begins this passage with a call to the church. "As you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ" (2:6-8).

Paul calls the Colossian Christians to remain centered and grounded in Jesus Christ, the monarch of the universe who is monarch through his suffering. They are not to allow themselves to get bound by any "human tradition" that is "according to the elemental spirits of the universe", but instead, are to remain focused on the suffering Lord of the universe, Jesus Christ.

Paul is not suggesting that the Colossians not theologize or think through their faith. Such reflection is necessary to "grow" a mature faith. Rather, he is warning them not to be seduced by that "human tradition about the elemental spirits" – or, in other words, the heresy to which they have been introduced (see the epistle lesson commentary for the 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle C) that teaches that angels associated with stars control their destiny (cf. 1:16; 2:18). Rather, Paul moves to a stunning rebuttal of those who have sought to seduce the Colossians by making one of the strongest Christological statements that occurs in this letter.

"For in Christ the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority" (Col. 2:9-10). If one might find Paul's earlier statement about Christ (1:15-23 – see commentary for the 16<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle C) somewhat obscure, there is absolutely no ambiguity in this passage. There is no deity in the stars, in pagan religion or even in the Roman emperor – because the whole of deity is found in Jesus Christ. In other words, Jesus doesn't share deity with others – not even with God – for he is "God of very God". And the inevitable result of Jesus being God is that he is "head of every ruler and authority". One cannot manipulate this passage to suggest that "principalities, powers, rulers and dominions" refers exclusively to spiritual forces, angels, demons or to otherwise spiritualize away this statement. It is as unequivocal as it can be: Jesus is head of every ruler (including the Roman emperor) and every authority (including Roman law). It is out-and-out a political statement, and to seek to interpret it in any other way is to work havoc with what Paul is stating!

In the light of this stunning and unequivocal statement, Paul then moves to define the work Christ has done for each of us individually and for the world at large. First, he stresses the work Christ has done for us as individuals.

“In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross” (vss. 11-14).

This passage seems confusing until one recognizes that what Paul is doing here is using the rite of circumcision (beginning life as a Jew) as a metaphor for the rite of baptism (beginning life as a Christian). Paul is not attacking the concept that circumcision was necessary for full Christian conversion (as he does in Galatians); there is, in fact, no evidence that those who were teaching the heresy with which the Colossian church was wrestling were Judaizers, teaching the necessity for circumcision (and, consequently, obedience to the Jewish Law). There is nothing in Paul’s letter to suggest that circumcision as integral to salvation was an issue to the Colossians.

Rather, what Paul is doing is this. He is saying to the Colossians, “You all know that the Jews practice circumcision (it was common knowledge throughout the Roman Empire), and you know that circumcision is the rite by which a boy enters Judaism. Well, baptism is a comparable rite for us Christians, the means by which anyone – female as well as male – witnesses to his acceptance by Christ.”

Paul develops the individual dimensions of the salvific work Christ has done for us as the Suffering Monarch of the world by his careful reference to the rites of circumcision and baptism. Circumcision was the initiating rite of the “old covenant” of Judaism; it indicated a cutting away of the pagan lifestyle of domination, oppression and exploitation, a profound change of heart for the recipient, and of being included in God’s people both spiritually and politically/economically (Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4; 9:25, 26; Ezek. 44:7, 9). Likewise, baptism is the initiating rite of the “new covenant” of Christianity; it likewise symbolizes a rejection of the pagan effort to dominate and control, a profound change of heart brought about by the intervention of Christ in our lives, and becoming members of the body of Christ (cf. v. 13; Acts 2:38; Rom. 6:4; I Cor. 12:13; Titus 3:5; I Pet. 3:21). In “nailing our sins to the cross”, Jesus has provided for our salvation, made all believers children of Abraham and released us from the standards and priorities both of Rome and of the Temple. Therefore, as the baptized, we are free to live as an extension of Christ in the world.

And how are we so to live? Paul then moves to his development of the corporate and societal dimensions of Christ’s transforming work. “Christ disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it” (vs. 16).

There it is again! Paul plainly states that Christ has “disarmed the rulers and authorities” – the political powers of Rome, the philosophical and society-shaping powers of Greece, the religious

powers of the Israelite Temple, the economic powers of the marketplace. There is no spiritualizing of this statement at all. Paul's intent is clear, as he pins the political, economic and religious powers of his day, demonstrating to the Colossian Christians that these "powers" are meant to live under the authority of Jesus.

The metaphor Paul uses is particularly powerful. It is the metaphor of a conquering Roman general, parading his "booty" of a defeated monarch, army and captured goods into the city of Rome to present to the emperor. Jesus is the conquering general-emperor, bringing a defeated Rome, Greece and Temple priests before God as they finally bow before him and submit themselves to Jesus' authority.

This material is indeed bold material. It is startling in what it claims for Jesus Christ. But what does that have to do with our life and work as children of the new covenant, symbolized in our baptism? Paul will develop that in the epistle lesson for next Sunday – the 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time.

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