

The Love that Laments
Hosea 11:1-11
Luke 13:31-35

“How often I have desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing.”

Is it possible for the love that God is to lament, to grieve, to cry out in anguish? Given the world as we have ordered it, given our disregard and disdain for the love who made us, given the planet once pronounced “good” by its creator now careening toward extinction, I find it unfathomable that God would not lament. But the question dares a theological thicket, a centuries-long argument about whether God would cease to be God if God were affected and moved and changed by God’s relationship with the world God has created. In order for God to be God, according to the doctrine of God’s impassibility, God cannot suffer or feel the pain of God’s creatures. I can only liken this to an oncologist who might cease to be an effective healer if she were endlessly undone by her patients’ diagnoses; or a therapist whose anguish over a client’s predicament keeps him from being of real help. Could it be that a God who laments can be of no help, as the old theologians have insisted?

The question sent me in search of God’s emotional life in Scripture. There, with the help of Jack Miles’s biography of God once again, my attention was turned to God as a character in the biblical narrative rather than an object of theological scrutiny. In a chapter entitled, “Does God Love?” Miles rereads Scripture in search of God’s affective life. From the beginning, God hears the cries of God’s people in slavery; God knows and looks on and takes notice of their condition; and in response, God acts purposefully and faithfully. But reading the story as it is arranged in the canon, from Genesis 1 through Isaiah 39, Miles finds evidence only of God’s impassibility. “There has been little or no indication before [Isaiah 40],” Miles says, “that even as a personal god, a ‘god of,’ the Lord had the ability or, more especially, the inclination to eavesdrop on the human heart; to note fears, sorrows, confusions, and so on; to be the soul’s omniscient companion.” But beginning with Isaiah 40, God’s face changes, “Something happens to bring [God] from his condition of fierce and protracted affective latency to the lyric ardor that bursts upon us in Second Isaiah” when God says, “Comfort, comfort my people.... Speak tenderly to Jerusalem....”

The something, Miles says, has to do with God’s unrequited love for Israel, the sort of love that you do not “get” until it is gone, the kind of love that grieves your heart and causes you to cry out, to lament over what seems to be irretrievably lost. The eighth century prophet Hosea, writing two hundred years before Second Isaiah, captures the pathos of God’s initial burst onto the emotional scene by casting God first as a cuckold and then as the father of an alienated child. As God’s stand-in, God commands Hosea to marry a woman prone to unfaithfulness. They have a son whose name means “God sows,” a daughter whose name means “not pitied,” and finally another son whose name means, “I am not yours.” Then there follows the sort of rant that anyone who has been married to an unfaithful spouse has rightly uttered: a litany of the wrongs done, an imagination for what should be done in return, a spewing of anger that means to obliterate the other. That rant, it seems, is God’s rant about Israel put in the prophet’s mouth.

But then, as sometimes happens in abusive relationships, God tries to woo her back, imagines speaking tenderly to her, giving her vineyards and opening a door of hope in the valley. With words I have read at weddings, God says, “On that day you will call me, ‘My husband,’ and no longer will you call me ‘My Baal,’ [my idol]. For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be mentioned by name no more. I will make with you a covenant on that day...and I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness, and you shall know the Lord.”

Ironically, this book that first portrays God’s passionate love for Israel was written to counter the passionate pantheon of fertility gods that had stolen Israel’s heart. Much as I love Hosea, I have to admit the domestic melodrama in the first three chapters does not exactly become the God who made the heavens and the earth. Is God a being barely differentiated from a righteously enraged spouse who finally dissolves into tenderness? Or is God the judge whose justice and righteousness call us all to account?

On behalf of the old doctrine, it should be said that “the early Church had its reasons for turning its back on the dynamic, vulnerable, passionate pantheon of pagan deities.” According to theologian Kelly James Clark, “Not only did the Church believe that these gods had been shown up as shadows and parodies in light of the true God’s self-revelation. The Church also believed that these gods, for all their bluster and ongoing involvement in human affairs, could not answer the deepest human need: [the need for] deliverance from our enslavement to sin and death, not mere solidarity and fellowship in the midst of that enslavement.”

But it is also apparent that the doctrine of God’s impassibility as well as most of the doctrines that emphasize the distance, the lack of emotion and self-contained nature of God reached their ascendancy in the medieval period. “Indeed,” Clark observes, “the entire socio-political context that spawned such a belief was a feudal system with the monarchy distantly related to the peasants...by a system of peasant duties and occasional kingly benevolences.” We are heirs of this understanding of God.

I suspect I am not the only minister who wrestles with the witness I bear to you when your life is in pieces and you are asking me, as though I were an expert, “Where is God?” My instinct, given the scanty evidence, is to say that God hears, God knows, God notices, but more: God weeps with you, God’s heart breaks with your breaking heart, God grieves and cries out with you. This is the God I know in Jesus Christ. But the witness of the old theologians begs to differ. Translated into a circumstance we can understand, they might say as King says, “It is one thing to confess that God has seen and known firsthand what life is like in our prison cell. To be sure, there is a certain comfort in that confession. It is another thing, however, to know—as the early Church did—that in entering that cell, God brandished the key to unlock its door and lead us out. For the latter, we need not only a fellow-sufferer who understands, but a Creator and Redeemer whose deity is made manifest in and through his humanity, whose power is revealed in his death and resurrection.”

Still I wonder: is God’s power to save us from death compromised by God’s feeling for creatures who must suffer and die? Or does God’s feeling for us intensify God’s saving purpose in human history? Miles says of the change in God’s face, as the exile came to an end, that God has discovered, for the first time, what it is to love Israel. God “takes her back, and whether or not [Israel] has changed when [God] does so, [God] has unmistakably changed, There is an utterly new tone in [God’s] voice.” The God who alone was faithful to Israel is the God who comes to love Israel more profoundly in the face of Israel’s unfaithfulness. The fleeting feelings of their fertility gods do not avail: God alone loves Israel with a love that will not quit, even in the face of humiliation and unfaithfulness.

But then as Hosea continues, God the spurned lover of the unfaithful beloved turns out more truly to be the almighty powerless father of God’s rebellious child, Israel. The tenderness and pathos of God’s words are almost unbearable, the images universally recognizable to every parent who has loved a child: I loved him; I taught him to walk; I took them up on 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.” The love is not that of a lover but of a parent who is inextricably bound, as we said last Sunday, to a rebellious daughter or son.

In response to the child’s rebellion, God punished the child harshly, perhaps out of anger. But in the aftermath of anger, the tone of God’s voice utterly changed, God worries that the punishment has gone too far. My mother used to say when she spanked me, “This hurts me more than it hurts you,” a sentence I found hard to believe. Much later in our life together, with tears in his eyes, my father said to me that he was afraid their punishment had broken my spirit. I think that is how it was with God in relation to Israel’s suffering in exile. Second Isaiah says as much: “Behold, I have taken from your hand the cup of staggering; the bowl of my wrath you shall drink no more....” So what follows in Hosea, once he turns from the metaphor of marriage to the relationship between parent and child, is not a rant but a lament: “How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? ...My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.”

No doubt I read the words of Hosea through the God I know in Jesus Christ. In his suffering love, we see into the very heart of God. As he has compassion on the crowds, weeps at Lazarus’ death, laments over Jerusalem, grieves in the Garden of Gethsemane, so I see the God who has compassion, weeps, laments, grieves, even as I behold the God who is about to unlock the key to the cell that is the grave. Whatever it was that happened between God and Israel in the null point of the exile, I cannot help but believe the heart of God

was broken and God's was love kindled in such a way as to hasten love's incarnation, as to make room in God's love for you and me.

"Great parent," writes poet Ellen Bass in a poem entitled God's Grief:

Great parent
who must have started out
with such high hopes.
What magnitude of suffering,
the immensity of guilt,
the staggering despair.
A mind the size of the sun,
burning with longing,
a heart huge as a gray whale
breaching, streaming
seawater against the pale sky.
Man god or beast god,
god that breathes in every pleated leaf,
throat sac of frog, pinfeather and shaft—
god of plutonium and penicillin, drunk
sleeping on the subway grate,
god of Joan of Arc, god of Crazy Horse,
Lady Day, binging us to our knees,
god of Houdini with hands
like a river, of Einstein, regret
running thick in his veins,
god of Stalin, god of Somoza,
god of the long march,
the Trail of Tears,
the trains,
god of Allende and god of Tookie,
the strawberry picker, fire in his back,
god of midnight, god of winter,
god of rouged children sold
with a week's lodging
and airfare to Thailand,
god in trouble, god at the end of his rope—
sleepless, helpless—
desperate god, frantic god, whale heart
lost in the shallows, beached
on the sand, parched, blistered, crushed
by gravity's massive weight.

God in flesh, love that laments, who longs to gather us still under your wings as a hen gathers her brood, but we are not willing. Amen.