

Shameless

Today's lections speak of passion and perseverance.... passion that is unbridled and unashamed; perseverance that looks like weakness but is strength.

In Hosea, we meet God in all God's passion – as the grieving lover, the angry and spurned spouse, the discarded partner. God's anger is palpable; betrayal's embitterment leeches from God's commands in an instruction to the prophet Hosea to make his family life a parable of disloyalty.

The setting is the northern kingdom, which has fallen from the prosperity which outsider Amos challenged in our reading last week. Hosea, unlike Amos a northerner, follows close on that earlier prophet whose words had warned of what was to come. Now the land is scarred from warfare with Assyria, four kings have been assassinated in 14 years and the people are left reeling.

God appears to be reeling too. This is what is meant by a *jealous God*; only the language of marital infidelity can capture the pain and agony of God who watches a lover and partner consort with others.

Perhaps you'd rather think of God as detached, objective, dispassionate; the Prime Mover; the First Orderer. Think again. Only a passionate God enamored of abundance and beauty could create such a wonder as our world; only a passionate God could breathe passion into people and move them to acts of courage and risk; only a passionate God could inspire the understanding of love as strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. The passion of God for God's people, fiery in flame, unquenchable by flood, is what unloosed the prophetic tongue, inspired the psalmists' song, and drove Jesus to what we call his own passion – a tortured and heinous death on an ugly tree.

God of Passion, spurned lover, what have we done?

The first chapter of Hosea only gives the mildest of hints about the people's infidelity. The land is mentioned, in verse 2 as having committed great whoredom. In v. 11, which the lectionary misses out, the promise of restoration is given, a restoration that includes possession of the land.

I spoke of Ellen Davis' observations about the land in the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament, last Sunday. She writes about how the land, the economy and the well-being of the human family are all linked throughout the text.¹ Walter Brueggemann says that the book of Hosea is about the mistaken notion that nature's economy runs separately from God's economy.² The sins of God's people, the betrayal that so wounds God, are the sins of an economy that exploits the natural world and fattens

¹ American Public Radio, *Speaking of Faith*, "Land, Life and the Poetry of Creatures", 3 June 2010.

² Jenkins, Willis (2010) "Hosea 1:2-10" in Brown Taylor, B. and Bartlett, D.L., *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, volume 3, p. 272.

some of the human family while starving others. The infidelity at the heart of God's sorrow is the breaking of the marriage between humanity and creation, a wedding of nature and grace.

The most astonishing part of God's passion in the Hosea text is not the depth of it, though that does startle those of us who have a more anodyne view of God. The most astonishing part is that after inflicting the prophet with an unfaithful wife and innocent children with hideous names – *Not Pitied; Not my People*; after raging like a pierced bull and howling like a coyote; God turns and says: *You will come back to me... You shall be called 'Children of the living God.'* God's passion reaches past anger and seeks restoration.

Is God weak in having us back? Or is love -- strong as death, fiery in flame and unquenchable by flood (Songs of Songs 8:6-7)-- the victor? Where is the shame in that kind of love?

How do we relate to this passionate, persevering God?

As Jesus did. We pray. As he taught us: perseveringly, passionately. That we might harness God's passion to our own and participate in God's ever restoring, ever renewing love for the land and all its inhabitants.

In the Free Church we take pride in creating ever new ways to speak and sing of God. We are poets and playwrights, songstresses and hymnwriters. Week by week, many of us slave over words seeking to capture a good enough turn of phrase to lift the soul towards God. We disparage ideas of 'authorised' worship and 'legal' liturgies, and have been known to deride priests who lead worship by reading from the permitted book. But in so doing, we forget a simple truth: that familiar words said often make a home in the heart, where they soften stone and fortify frailty. We are formed by our prayers, by the hymns we sing and by the words that stick.

So, asked to teach the disciples to pray, Jesus gives one prayer. A complete prayer: words that reach from earth to heaven, a slender reed bearing the weight of God's passion and ours. And he tells us to pray persistently; to ask, seek and knock; for God's deepest desire is for us to know the peace and purpose of living in harmony with God and with each other, to give us the gifts we need for abundant life.

The prayer is complete. The intimacy of God is entered; the holiness of God is invoked; the kingdom is established as our heart's true home. We ask for all that we truly need: food, forgiveness and fidelity³ – what is essential to our lives as physical bodies, as a body relating to other bodies in community, and as the body of Christ.

These simple words open worlds. If you have a copy of this year's URC Prayer Handbook, *Gathered to the Heart of God*, you may have noticed that the first prayers are midrash on the Lord's Prayer, written by our Susan Durber. These prayers begin to reveal the depths in the simple, complete prayer Jesus has given us. We could have

³ James A. Wallace, CSS.R. (2010) "Luke 11:1-13" in Brown Taylor, B. and Bartlett, D.L., *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, volume 3, p. 289.

spent this 20” immersed in those prayers and be all the better for it. I highly recommend them.

Others also have plumbed the depths of Jesus’ Prayer. Neil Douglas-Klotz studied the Aramaic words in which Jesus spoke the prayer and uncovered buried treasure from that first language: a sense of divine birthing and breathing which fills creation and the invitation to participate in the being of God in the world. The roots of the word *nethqadash* for *hallowed* evoke images of clearing or sweeping and preparing the ground for an important plant. A man or a woman bends a head over a special place where seeds are sown, in devotion and perseverance to nurture growth.⁴ Hallowing the name of God prepares us for growth.

Arha meaning *earth* evokes by its sound the sigh of the human as it feels the support of the earth underfoot and *remembers to treat it as another living being, rather than an object to be exploited. Behind that [word], the old Hebrew roots carry the meaning of all nature, all natural gatherings of mass and form produced by the universal force AR – power with movement. From this root, we also get our word ‘ardor’.*⁵

God’s passion embodied in the earth; desire and responsibility; letting go and taking on -- in its original language of Aramaic, the prayer implicates us in the kingdom. It is our banner song, the place where passion is born and perseverance pays off.

The words make a home in our heart, and make God’s heart our home.

This begs the question that may be on your mind: Which words make a home in our heart? What language should we use? We notice the difference between Matthew’s and Luke’s version of the prayer and wonder about that. And we wonder: If familiarity enables formation, why do we use a modern version of the Lord’s Prayer in worship? Many of us were nurtured on the language of ‘thee’ and ‘thine’.

Sometimes words get so familiar that we fail or forget to drink deeply at their well; they become rote and shallow. A new translation can startle us into awareness of dimensions we had failed to notice: the intimacy of personal address, the clarity of our need. And a new translation may simply make more sense. The Lukan version *save us from the time of trial* better expresses our understanding of God than *lead us not into temptation*, which is an inadequate translation of the Aramaic according to Douglas-Klotz⁶ and a theologically flawed statement of God’s intention and action. And we must remember: words familiar to us may not be accessible to others. We are finding this more and more as we move towards living in a post-Christian society. The words that have the most meaning for us – like faith, grace and sin – have little, no or peculiar meaning to others outside the church. We struggle to find a meeting point, words that bear hope to a people who don’t know their need of it. It is our awareness of the need constantly to seek to communicate the faith that has moved churches like ours to use more modern language for the Lord’s Prayer in public worship, that its more accessible language will lodge in our children’s hearts and

⁴ Douglas-Klotz, Neil (1990) *Prayers of the Cosmos: Meditations on the Aramaic Words of Jesus*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, p. 17.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

carry the message and meaning into the world and that seekers who come into this holy place may hear the invitation to abundance of life: to food, to forgiveness, to fidelity from the hand of our passionate, persevering God.

Passion and perseverance. God's love for us is shameless and unrelenting, more powerful than the love of partner or parent, lover or friend. It bears the worst we can dish out, our betrayals and infidelities, our idolatries and ignorance ...and still it seeks us out. The howling anger abates, forgiveness is extended, and the invitation is issued again, and again, and again. *Come home, beloved children. Come to life.*

And we respond:

Our father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come; your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial, and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.