

**“The haunted God” a sermon preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on Sunday 31 July 2016, based on Hosea 11:1-11.**

I want to express gratitude for the writings of an OT theologian, Walter Brueggeman. Much of what I am about to say relies heavily on what he has written about the reading in Hosea.

Parents and children. How we wish sometimes we could have power to direct our children, especially through the teenage years. It has always been so.

My sister, a little older than me, told me recently of a conversation my father had had with her fifty years ago about how hard it was to get Kerry to take the conventional path. “The boy just wants to do his own thing!” he had said with exasperation.

I wonder how many conversations my parents had had, behind closed doors, at the end of the day, about what was going on with their son, why one day he seemed compliant and another day resistant. Hours of talking, strategizing, exasperation, exhaustion. Their own lives and feelings and actions affected by their son to whom they were tied, often perhaps reluctantly.

“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.”

With imaginative force, Hosea’s poem takes us into the troubled heart of God, into God’s own bedroom conversations about Israel, the son. For Israel was God’s first born son. The first born son who had certain entitlements. But also certain responsibilities, to uphold the honour of the father and the family.

In the first verses, the father reviews the long history of their relationship, the tender care the father has showed the son. In a patriarchal society, the father has exhibited amazingly warm attentiveness. The relationship begins in Egypt with the freedom from slavery in the Exodus. But the son has been wayward and refused the father by acting out other loyalties.

The father has remained patient and kind. He taught the little child to walk. He carried the little child in his arms and attended to every fall, every scar, every scab, every wound, and every fear. The father supported the little child with embraces of love, held him close, stooped low to attend to him, and fed him. The father has guarded and guaranteed the son when the son was a little vulnerable child.

Tender grace. Then the tone changes. This vulnerable little child has become a troublesome teenager. He has refused his father's care. He has tried to make a military alliance with the Assyrians, and then disastrously with Egypt who were their original slave-owners.

In the eighth century BCE, Northern Israel entered into alliances that, in Hosea's view, violated the covenant with YHWH. Israelite society is devoured by militarism.

"My people are bent on turning away from me."

The son rejects the life-giving relationship with the father. So when the foolish son calls for help, God will not answer.

Brueggeman calls this a shrill rant, the kind a teenager can evoke from even the most caring parent, the parent completely exhausted with the son, willing to leave the son to the consequences of his rebellious choices. In tough love, Israel is abandoned to its self-destruction. Then the tone changes again.

God looks inward. God wonders what is happening within God's self. God self-reflects. God has an unresolved interior life, and we are taken into it.

In the middle of the rant, it is as if God says: "What am I doing?" "Who do I think I am?" "Is this really who I am?"

The father realises that the one against whom he rants is his well-beloved first-born son. "How can I...?" Give up, hand you over, treat you like Sodom (Admah), like Gomorrah (Zeboiim)!

God recognizes the unacceptable conduct of treating his well beloved son in such a harsh, rejecting way. Who am I as a father, as a parent?

"My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. For I am God and no mortal."

I am different from my ranting. I am different from my emotional reactivity. I realise now I have been less than I am, less than God, in my response to my son.

God fully regrets the angry reaction to the son:

I will not act that way again;

I will not destroy again.

Why? Because of who I am. Because of my identity: "I am God."

I am not a macho that deals in destructiveness. I am the Holy One. More is expected of me. More is promised from me. I will turn what could be rage into relationship building actions. I have a covenant with the first-born. I will not go against my better self.

A divine about-face. The father plans a huge homecoming for the son from Egypt, Assyria, and all places of loss. The son Israel will be restored to its home. Because the father has remembered who he is. He remembers his own best self.

Here then is God, torn between emotive rage and self-disciplined faithfulness. This is no dispassionate, objective, distant God. A God of deep and complex emotional honesty, a haunted God, a God whose feelings swing between warm tenderness to acceptance of the son's freedom.

What does it mean to be made in the image of this God? How do we imitate this God in our life?

We live in a society of intense immediate interaction – facebook, instagram, twitter. We quickly and conveniently put out our feelings about this or that event or experience. It happens in public discourse as evident in presidential elections in the US. It happens when we are tired of this or that, when we are frustrated by this or that. We leave the world of self-discipline and self-restraint. We yield to ranting, to targeting the other, to blaming the other.

And as the language is cranked up, cells of sameness are created, to strengthen our view so we can stand against the other. Like-minded people speaking only to like-minded people, little gatherings, little cliques, little factions, so we do not have to face ourselves.

The passage calls us to self-criticism, to considering what of ourselves is contributing to what is happening, to paying attention to what is happening inside us. The self-reflective self is a product of covenantal love. Discipline is a reflection of covenantal relationships. And that of course is what makes democracy possible.

It's what makes church possible.

It's what makes family possible.

It's what makes marriage possible.

Being capable of more than reactivity.

God comes to God's self. God invites us to come to ourselves, made in the image of God, made as people of God, made as people of covenanted discipline, in which we can be honest about ourselves.

In what I am doing, in what I am saying, am I being true to my true self, to the image of God in me?

Without such self-critical reflection, the future can only continue the past. Without self-critical reflection, we will not be the people of God.

Moving from rant to reflection to relationship, from over there, to in here, from them and those and the different ones, to genuine dialogue.

And that relies on who we imagine we are, whether we see ourselves as people made in the image of God.

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