

“The Emotion of Divinity: A God Who Roars”

Hosea 11: 1-11 Colossians 3:1-11

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Say your teen-age daughter was supposed to be home at 10 pm and now it's 1:00 am in the morning. For the last hour you have been calling the parents of the friends that she was spending the evening with and all of their daughters are home and in bed. When she finally strolls in at 1:30 am in the morning wondering why you are still awake, if you are like me you will have mixed feelings. Part of you will want to hug her and say, "Thank God, Sweetheart, you are okay. And the other part of you will want to strangle her.

A friend told me when his niece came to visit for a couple of weeks here in D.C. It was a rough two weeks. His partner said, "Oh, she is all grown up and she can take care of herself." And he said, "I knew that was right, but no matter how hard I tried or no matter how early I had to be up the next morning I just could not get to sleep until I knew she was in the house safe and sound." After he had described this I got the sense that, as much as he loved his niece, he would rather pay for her to have an all expense vacation in Paris than to have her come and spend another two weeks with him in *loco parentis*.

Well, this is almost the exact image that the prophet Hosea uses for God. In the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of Hosea, Hosea describes his God as someone who loves Israel like a parent loves a child God is frustrated because Israel will not be obedient or faithful. "The more I call them, the more they stray away from me." Hosea's God says, "I ought to send them back to captivity in Egypt." And as soon as he says that, he says, "No, no my heart won't let me do it. I love Israel too much."

Hosea's God is the parent of a teen-ager and we are the teen-ager. Hosea's God is in *loco parentis* of a niece and we are the niece.

The question I want you to ask with me for a few minutes this morning and to think about is the question of whether Hosea's description of God is merely poetry?

Or is Hosea right. Does God have feelings?

Does the Divine have emotions?

Does God sometimes feel like gathering us up and hugging us tenderly and other times feel like strangling us?

Does Hosea's image of God represent something about who God really is?

Does the Divine feel? Does God, as Hosea suggests, roar with laughter sometimes and roars with pain at other times?

The early Christian Church said, no.

The early Christian Church of the second and third centuries was greatly influenced by the Greek philosophy of Plato and Aristotle who taught that if God is absolute and supreme then God must be self sufficient and impassable and immovable, incapable of suffering, and thus without emotions and feelings.

The early church declared *patripassian* to be a heresy. *Patripassian*, the idea that God is able to suffer, that God has passion, they said, this was a heresy. And mainstream Judeo- Christian theology for most of the Church's history imaged God as a God without passion and without feelings. Yes, God is love, but God's love is an unemotional, painless, non-ecstatic love.

More than anyone else it was the sainted Rabbi Abraham Heschel who challenged this image of a passionless divinity. The theologian Jurgen Moltman took up the same theme in his work. And what they said was that God is an idea. God as a philosophical theory, God as God may in principle be incapable of suffering. But as soon as God creates humanity and enters into a relationship with us, God becomes not a theory, not God in the abstract, not God in principle, but God becomes a lover. And you can't love without becoming vulnerable to both joy and to pain.

I want this morning to stand with Hosea and to stand with Rabbi Heschel and to stand with Professor Moltman. God is a mystery surely. But whoever or whatever God is I am convinced that God feels. That God enjoys and that God hurts.

God roars with pain and God roars with laughter. God roars sometimes with joy and sometimes with hurt. The Divine knows emotion.

And I say this, this morning in part because I am so aware these days that we live in such an emotional time and place.

Watching the Democratic Convention this past week, and I missed very little of it, reminds me about how many emotional issues, deeply emotional issues (and they ought to be deeply emotional issues) we as a people are facing. We have not dealt with the deep feeling, left within us as individuals and as a people as a result of 9/11. We should not suppose that it's over.

Jane and I read David Ignatius' review of the 9/11 report. It's in today's book review section of *The Washington Post* and you should not miss it. The review, which discusses the fury and rage of those who hijacked the plane, and our apparent inability and incompetence to protect ourselves elicits deep feelings in me. In whom won't it?

I woke up in the middle of the night and the other side of the bed was empty. I went down stairs and Jane had bought a copy of the 9/11 report. I walked into the living room and there was Jane sitting and reading the 9/11 report with tears in her eyes. We are not over this yet. This is a thing of deep emotion and feeling that we have not dealt with yet.

And then we are in a war. And it is a war, as I suppose every war is, that is a matter of deep emotions and feelings. Deeper I think because it is a war that we initiated. It is a US-first strike war. And no matter where you come down about this war it is a matter of deep feeling, deep emotion and it should be. There are other concerns and issues that we are struggling with that seem to me to be so highly emotional... the meaning of family and of marriage in our society at this point in history. Questions about the full acceptance of gay and lesbian people. These are very emotional issues.

And it seems to me, and I don't believe that others can be missing it, that we are living in a time when the safety nets are failing. One of the high points of my day is to walk from Capitol Hill to Foundry Church in the morning and then to walk home again at night. It's my time in the day to think. And I have been doing this now for a couple of years. When I first started walking home in the evening or late night I may have been asked by one or two people for some change. And now it feels like it's more like a dozen or 15 people every night on the street.

Less and less resources seem to be available for ministries like Emmaus Services for the Aging and So Others Might Eat and McKenna's Wagon. Our own Walk-in Mission for the homeless here at Foundry Church is overwhelmed. I think Peter discovered that we all ready used up our whole budget for the year for

the Walk-in Mission because the numbers have doubled and tripled of people who are coming to us for help.

I find these to be very emotional matters. It just seems like there is so much of it. There are so many things about which we have such deep feelings.

I feel like I ought to somehow remain calm and collected and self-sufficient in the midst of all of this emotional stuff. I ought to be like Plato's and Aristotle's God who is omniscient and omnipotent, all-knowing, all-present, all-powerful and who is able to remain impassive and immovable in the midst of all of this. But really I suspect that we ought to be more like Hosea's God, the God of scripture and history, the God who roars.

Moltman says: The sole omnipotence which God possesses is the all-mighty power of suffering that is feeling love. The only way that God is omnipotent is that God is omnipotent in suffering and in feeling love. That is God's power.

That is what will heal the world if it is going to be healed. That is what will transform the world if it is to be transformed. And if we are agents of God's healing and transformation it comes from our own suffering and feeling, caring and loving.

I suspect that we sometimes get emotional about petty things, small things, because we are not letting ourselves get angry and emotional about the big things. This isn't the case here at Foundry but I've spent quite a bit of time in my ministry working with churches that are having difficulties.

Often the churches are having difficulties because of really very meaningless conflicts and battles among the people of the church. I am convinced the reason those things get so out of control and out of proportion is because they are not passionately engaged in the really big things that we as God's people need to be caring about.

Our Church Council here at Foundry faced a hard decision this past month. Some people in this church had worked hard over the years to get us to the point where we could have a full-time Minister of Missions. And Jennifer came and she did a wonderful job.

Then Jennifer had a baby and became a mother and asked if she might work less than full-time in order to take care of her family. She was doing such a great job as Minister of Missions that the church said, "Of course, why not?" And then just recently Jennifer decided to go on to other things and the question became whether we should continue the position, the Minister of Missions position, as a part-time position as we did to keep Jennifer or should we make it full-time again.

So the Council had to make this decision. We were looking at what the financial implications would be for the budget next year. I had mixed feelings. In the final analysis I think I tend to be a fiscal conservative. I was not quite sure what to do and so I did what I ought to do more often which is I kept my mouth shut altogether and I didn't not participate in the debate. The council worked it through and the council wrestled it through. And the council decided that Foundry Church needs a full time Minister of Missions.

Then, I thought to myself how do I feel about this? And this is what I decided: that the reason a full time Minister of Mission is important at Foundry Church is because mission is what keeps us so healthy.

Foundry is the healthiest church I have ever served. We spend the least amount of time here fighting and arguing and feeling bad about petty things and meaningless conflicts of any church I have known. I've been in churches where that consumes the congregation's life. And it just does not happen here. And I decided if it doesn't happen here it's because our commitment to missions helps us keep concentrated on the pain and the hurt that really matters. The kind of things that make God roar with pain when they exist and make God roar with joy when we have addressed them and ministered to them.

Our focus always needs to be beyond ourselves. God hurts when humanity hurts and especially when humanity hurts one another. God experiences great joy when we are a people of peace and caring and service. Let us be a people committed to correct injustices, our committed to peace, committed to feed the hungry, committed to be sure that no one ever feels in any way lessened because of their ethnicity or sexual orientation or physical abilities. That no one ever feels like there is something wrong because of the way God made them.

When we are caring about the world God loves with deep feelings, then we will be healthy and strong.