

## **A Sermon for the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost**

July 28, 2013

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Rob and I are home from a wonderful trip to Washington State and Utah. We drove over four thousand miles in the three weeks since we last saw you. It is not the miles we traveled that are relevant to what I bring to you this morning, but the magnificent variety in the landscape that surrounded us.

We were, at times, in landscapes that can only be described as surreal...like a half-hour ride on interstate 80 in western Iowa where we were – quite literally – encompassed by hundreds of wind turbines...soaring skyward, with blades slowly turning...sometimes in concert and sometimes in varied rhythms. Grounded as we were on our strip of pavement between rolling hills awash with growing corn, it still felt as though we were somewhere in a futuristic world.

At times we travelled through verdant, beautiful and welcoming landscapes...like the miles and miles of Montana where the Clark's Fork of the Columbia River seemed to say, "I'll come with you for awhile." It bubbled along beside the road – sometimes on one side and sometimes on the other – as the tree covered mountains lifted their peaks toward a blue sky dotted with puffy white clouds. And before there was time to mourn the end of the delightful companionship with the river, the flat, peaceful, crystal blue expanse of Lake Coeur d'Alene came into view.

In Utah, the rock formations were stark and strange, their layers sometimes perfectly horizontal or sometimes jutting at sharp angles. Pondering even for a moment how they came to be the way they are, one cannot help but sense the pain of the earth as they were heaved into birth.

And then there were the places where all that the eye can see is brown. Where there were no visible signs of human habitation – or even animal habitation – for miles and miles on end. The high desert – where the stone is brown and the land is brown and even the vegetation is more brown than green. The air was tinged with haze and heat that made even the sky seem brown. Those were the places that felt harsh...unwelcoming...dangerous.

I was thinking about this morning's readings while we were experiencing this veritable buffet of God's creation...and I was thinking of our trip as I read through the passages one more time before preparing this sermon. I cannot tell you how tempted I was to take a detour around Hosea. The words Joe read to us just a few moments ago feel like that harsh, unwelcoming, dangerous part of the landscape.

Hosea was a prophet who lived about 750 years before Christ. We are all fairly familiar with the fact that the life of a prophet was not an easy one...the prophets were constantly called upon to tell people exactly what they did not want to hear.

Prophets often communicated their message through symbolic action. And that is exactly what Hosea did in this morning's reading. He despaired at the refusal of his people to turn from worship of the Canaanite god, Baal...to love and serve Yaweh. And so he lived out – in real time – the metaphor of marriage so often used to explain Israel's relationship with God. Hosea took a wife of what can only be described as "ill repute." She was promiscuous...just as Hosea believed Israel was being promiscuous in its Baal worship. Hosea's three children bore names of shame... the first named Jezreel, for a palace where the royal family of Israel was slaughtered; the second called *lo ruhamah* which means "not loved;" and, the third called *lo ammi* which is literally "not my people." Can you imagine? "Hi. I'd like you to meet my children: Slaughter. Not Loved. Not Mine." In the metaphor, God is (of course) the husband, who enters into a covenantal marriage with a woman who is unfaithful (Israel). One can assume that Israel's unfaithfulness to both God and the promises made will produce – at least in Hosea's prophecy – nothing good for generations to come.

Up to this point, we are doing fairly well. We have, at least, a glimmer of understanding as to why the word "whoredom" is uttered three times in the first two verses. We can understand the need to teach – or prophesy – through metaphor in order that a message finds resonance with those who hear it. We can acknowledge that this all happened long ago, in a context vastly different from our own – and know that we are not being called to follow "God as the jealous husband" as an example for our own lives.

And then the final verse does a big "never mind" for all that has come before because the people of Israel will be as numerous as the sands of the sea, and in that very place where it was said, "You are not my people" it will be said to them "Children of the living God." It is here that we must accept what the biblical scholars have determined...the final verse speaking of God's boundless love was no doubt added by an editor whose life and times and relationship with God were in a far more grace-filled context.

And so, at least, we have done our due diligence with the harsh landscape of Hosea. What we have learned by traveling through it may be murky. Yet we have been able to see that Hosea loved God, and wanted desperately to bring his people into right relationship with God. He did what he felt called to do – in a manner that might be understood – to warn his people of the consequences of worshipping a false god. And we were blessed with the addition of the words of someone who came later – that ancient editor who perceived God as we do...ever loving, ever accepting, ever forgiving.

After Hosea, the Gospel message this morning feels like incredibly GOOD NEWS!

The disciples have witnessed over and over again the importance of prayer in Jesus' life. They may have been thinking – as so many of us do – "But, I don't know

how to pray.” So one asks Jesus to teach them...and Jesus does. And we learned, too. Very comfortable landscape. Yet even in the most familiar landscape we can often see something new...hear something new...feel something new.

A prayer that has been prayed for two thousand years...by how many people, do you suppose? How many times do you think you have prayed it in your own life? And how many ways? This is the universal prayer of those of the Christian faith, and yet its forms are many. Going into an unfamiliar church, we often wonder, “Is this a “debts” or a “trespasses” place?” Some of us who attended a wedding in a Roman Catholic church yesterday remembered – too late – that our Catholic brothers and sisters do not say “for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory.” The Book of Common Prayer, from which our liturgy comes, has two versions of the prayer side by side – in the Eucharistic prayers as well as Morning Prayer. “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us,” the less familiar version says. And, “Save us from the time of trial, and deliver us from evil.” Different versions, different words, used by different denominations...and sometimes our own denomination, as any of you who have attended worship in one of our larger diocesan gatherings have experienced. And yet...it is the same prayer...the form given to us by Jesus, just as it was given to the disciples...an everlasting response to the plea, “Lord, teach us to pray.”

Why these words? And why this form? Jesus seemed to bring together in a few simple sentences our relationship – our covenantal relationship – our relationship of mutual promise – with God.

“Father, hallowed be your name.” Venerated...sacred...you alone are the holy one. Exactly the message Hosea longed to convey to the Baal-worshippers of Israel! “Your kingdom come.” A statement, not a question...not “will your kingdom come” or “I hope your kingdom will come” ...not “your kingdom come someday and someplace.” Bold. Assertive. Because we know. Because we are part of that kingdom. Because the God incarnate who taught the prayer was the embodiment of God’s kingdom here and now.

“Give us each day our daily bread.” Here is what we need. We need the sustenance we receive from you alone. We promise in receiving the Eucharist to bear Christ in the world, but we rely on God’s love to keep us going...day after day after day. As Jesus said, if a hungry child asks you for something to eat, you would not think of giving her a stone. How much, much more we can trust we will receive from God!

“Forgive us our sins” – because we know we will sin in a myriad of ways and we know forgiveness lies in God alone. “for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.” To us is given the ability – the gift – the challenge to express very human forgiveness for very human mistakes and misdeeds.

“And do not bring us to the time of trial.”

There is a very common notion that stressful and trying times are somehow God's way of testing us. Personally, I am not sure why God would need to create scenarios to test us. We seem to do a right fine job of inserting ourselves into all manner of situations that are difficult enough. We don't intentionally put our children or our friends in difficult predicaments just to see how well they will perform. Why would God do so??? "Do not bring us to the time of trial" it seems to me, is not about pleading with God **not** to test us, but asking God not to leave us when we find ourselves right smack in the middle of the stress or distress we have created.

That is the end of what we have come to call The Lord's Prayer recorded in the Gospel According to Luke. We glorify you, God. We need your support. We sin, and ask your forgiveness. We will forgive those we feel have wronged us. Be with us in our times of misfortune.

Simple. A lesson from the teacher with a capital T..... And did you notice that never once does it say "I" or "me"? No, this is the corporate prayer to end all corporate prayers – one we always say in community and in communion with others. It is a prayer that often so moves us that we reach out and take the hand of the person next to us. It is a prayer given *to* all, *for* all...even FOR those who will never say it. Because, of course, God created us all, and loves us all...feeds us all and forgives us all. It is a perfect example of why we, as Episcopalians, believe in COMMON worship... God in Christ has called us into community, not set each of us up to maintain our own private piety, but called us to love one another and serve one another and pray with one another.

Pray, and pray, and pray some more. Pray when we are together *with one voice* – and pray when we are alone in our own voice, yours and mine. "Ask, and it will be given to you," Jesus said. "Search, and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches, finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened." Did you hear that? Ask. Search. Knock. Verbs...bold and assertive verbs...just like PRAY. I don't think we need to journey down the path that explains how what we ask for, and what we are actually given – what we seek, and what we ultimately find – or what is really on the other side of that door when it opens, may not be what we had in mind. What we do is trust...that God in love and wisdom will answer...will be there...will help us find our way.

And so we are not unlike Hosea's tribe – too often worshipping all the wrong things.. And not unlike the Colossians, worrying about which rules were more important than others...to whom Paul said God made you alive together with Christ when he forgave us all our sins...And we are not unlike the disciple who just wanted Jesus to teach him **how** to pray.

Jesus taught the disciples to pray, in a simple, confident and forthright way. And then he threw in the little parable about the man who needed bread for his company

in the middle of the night. A simple story about a man in need, and his friend, who was not happily inclined to be roused from his bed. In the end, it is persistence that resolves the situation. I wonder sometimes...when it comes to prayer, who is it that is being persistent? Are we - in truth - so dedicated, so determined, so persistent in our calling upon God that God finally hears us? Or is it God who is persistent – and patient – in being ready to receive us in prayer?

When the landscape of our lives seems harsh and unwelcoming and even dangerous, we have been given – by Jesus himself – the gift of a prayer to share with one another. We travel together, and in community we are carried into safe and welcoming and verdant community with God. This prayer is so much a part of who we are that it is the last thing we say together before the bread is broken at the Eucharist. To God be all glory. God's kingdom has come. Feed us. Forgive us. Save us and deliver us. Forever and ever. Amen.