

Thankful Memorial, Chattanooga
July 24, 2022
Year C, 7 Pentecost, Proper 12
An ancient promise for modern times
The Rev. Leyla King

Hosea 1:2-10
Psalm 85
Colossians 2:6-15
Luke 11:1-13

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

These days it feels as if every time I approach our sacred texts, I feel desperation at the disjunction between the promises of our faith and the reality of our world. To dwell daily in the scriptures while also dwelling daily in the news cycle is a surreal, disorienting and deeply depressing experience.

For example, Psalm 85, verse 10, is one of my favorite bits of scripture. The psalmist describes the kingdom of God, the times and places in which God's will reigns supreme, in this way: "Mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other." I love this image where good values that so often exist in tension with one another finally come together *without* that tension in God's kingdom – where forgiveness is possible even when we are rightly held accountable for our actions, where justice never rubs up against *in*justice and so real peace exists alongside righteousness.

But how far away are we from God's kingdom right now? Take some headlines from this week alone.

In Florida, there's a sentencing trial going on for the young man who killed seventeen people at a high school in Parkland in 2018. The man pled guilty and seems remorseful but his attack was vicious and deeply traumatizing to that whole community, indeed to the whole country. Jurors now decide his fate – life in prison or the death sentence – with many of the victims' families supporting the harshest punishment.¹

What outcome could the jurors decide that would honor both the truth of the victims' experiences *and* the mercy that is so integral to life in God's kingdom? Whatever conclusion they arrive at, how can it possibly reflect a world in which "mercy and truth have met together"?

Or, perhaps you followed last Thursday's episode of the Jan. 6 hearings. Instead of making us more unified as Americans, this process of truth-seeking has made us ever more fractured. None of Psalm 85's kissing is here: the "righteousness" that committee's proceedings seek to attain has destroyed any sense of peace in our country.

In Luke's gospel, Jesus teaches us to pray for things that seem ridiculously unattainable in this context. "Hallowed be your name," we pray. But instead of making it holy, we use God's name as a weapon of division. "Give us each day our daily bread," we pray. But among us are those who lack basic access to food, health care or opportunities for sustaining work, whose "daily bread" is denied them by failing systems. "Forgive us our sins" as we forgive others, we pray. But how ready we are to approach our fellow human beings with distrust instead of mercy, with criticism instead of grace, while, unrepentant ourselves, our sins drive us further and further away from God. "Do not bring us to the time of trial," we pray. But every day is a trial, it seems. Every day brings new crises, new, horrifying consequences of our behavior. "May your kingdom come," we pray. But how much we work *against* its coming.

Jesus goes on to promise that when we pray to God for what is good, it will be provided. “Ask, and it will be given you,” he says. “Search, and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you.” But how many of us, these days, feel as though all that is before us are closed, hard doors and even harder hearts? How many of us feel as though our prayers are going unanswered?

Into such a desperate situation speaks the voice of an unlikely prophet: Hosea. Now, it must be acknowledged that the analogy that this ancient text uses to symbolize God’s relationship to God’s people is highly offensive to our modern ears. We who know a thing or two about the sinfulness of patriarchal systems and the violence of sexism and gender stereotypes rightly recoil at the opening metaphor that would have held very different meanings for Hosea’s original audience.

But if we set all that aside long enough to dig into the meat of the text, perhaps Hosea can help us see the light of God amid this present darkness.

Because, like us, ancient Israel found itself facing one crisis after another. The armies of Assyria bore down upon them to destroy their small kingdom. The leaders of the country were corrupt, concerned only about political maneuvers that would keep them in power. The people of Israel had turned against God by worshiping things other than the one true God, and against one another by failing to provide for the poor and outcast among them.

Perhaps that sounds a bit uncomfortably familiar? And as we know all too well, the natural consequences of such sinful behavior are severe: God “will no longer have pity on the house of Israel” and will leave them to the destruction that they have brought upon themselves.

And this is where Hosea’s questionable analogy holds meaning, even for us today. Whether ancient or modern, God’s people, like an adulterous spouse, keep betraying the covenant we have made with the Lord. In word and deed, again and again, we fail to live as lovers of God. And oh how we suffer for it.

But, in the face of our unfaithfulness, God is faithful, for ever and always. And because God’s longing for us is so great, because God’s love for us is so overpowering, nothing we do will separate us from it. No matter how far we have fallen, God’s grace can yet raise us up. No consequence of our sinfulness, no crisis of our own making is too great an obstacle for God’s love. The opening chapter of Hosea names this truth as the bold thesis statement for the whole book: “and in the place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’ it shall be said to them, ‘Children of the living God.’”

This is God’s faithfulness to us: we are never forsaken. Thank God, we will never be left alone to deal with the consequences of our sin.

So if you, like me, find yourself despairing over the multiple crises that unfold before us, over the lack of control we have in the systems that fail us, over the injustice and anxiety, the fear, frustration and futility that gnaws at us daily, cling to the good news that we find in these scriptures. Even in the places that feel desperate, we are yet “Children of the living God.” Even in those times when it feels as though God’s anger at us is both righteous and unending, it is met by God’s mercy and our “salvation is [yet] very near.” Even in the desperation that might come upon us, when it feels as though our prayers are unheard and unanswered, we can yet trust that God’s Spirit is ever with us,

until our Father's kingdom is come here on earth and we rest in our Mother's abiding and unquenchable love. Amen.

¹ according to [this NYTimes article](#)