

<i>Date Preached</i>	31-Jul-2022	<i>Date Initiated</i>	12-Jul-2022
<i>Where Preached</i>	SAK	<i>Appointed Readings</i>	Proper 13, Yr C

" '[M]y compassion grows warm and tender.' "



"Who is *your* God?" It's a striking question. It's usually asked—in a devotional book or during a spiritual retreat—in a probing sort of way: to get us to examine our lives and see the 'idols' that may be crowding out or supplanting God. These might be work or pastimes or status or money or possessions. Both St Paul in our Epistle reading and Jesus in our Gospel lesson zero in on the idol of *greed*: the endless, insatiable accumulation of *more* as a hedge—or so we'd like to think!—against unhappiness or want. But fear not! This won't be some stem-winder of a sermon on greed.

Rather, I ask the question "Who is *your* God?" in a more straightforward way: What is your image ... your conception ... of God? Scripture certainly supplies us several to choose from. ¶There is God-as-Liberator, Who, having rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt, leads God's people into the promised land ... clearing the way for them to settle in a land "flowing with milk and honey" (*e.g.*, Exod 3:8). ¶There is God-as-Avenger: the God Who loses patience with God's creatures and punishes them for their transgressions—destroying almost all creation in an epic flood; and afflicting a selfish King David for his transgressions. ¶There is God-as-Good-Provider, Who provides nourishing manna to those wandering in the Sinai wilderness; and raises up a good King David just when Israel needs him. ¶And around the time of the American Revolution, the idea of God-as-Clockmaker was in vogue: the detached God who built the universe, set it in motion and then, in effect, put us on a shelf—neither caring about nor responding to whatever happened 'down here.'ⁱ

For me, however, the most compelling conception of God ... the image that embraces or subsumes all the others ... is of God-as-Parent: the God Who interacts with us much the way good mothers and fathers raise their children. God-as-Parent is a dynamic, attentive God, Who knows us through-and-through: Who knows when we need to be fed ... when we need to be held ... and when we need to be given a time-out. A good parent meets each new idea or question or challenge a child presents with thoughtfulness and love. And when we fail or flounder, God-as-Parent responds with patience and firmness: calling us on our shortcomings and guiding us to correct them ... but, also, never ceasing to love and forgive us.

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"I don't care for the 'God of the Old Testament.' 'That' God is too vengeful ... too spiteful ... too distant ... too cold." It's a concern pastors and priests hear not infrequently. Putting aside, for a moment—and we'll come back to it—the fact that there *is* only *one* God, of *both* testaments ... I love today's reading from the Book of Hosea, for it confronts our Christian discomfort with the 'Old Testament God,' directly.

For several weeks now, we've been hearing God's myriad warnings to Israelⁱⁱ: Its immoral, idolatrous, saber-rattling ways have become noxious to God, and God seems about ready to cut the cord. But here, in today's reading, we have what some call God's "divine soliloquy": a pause in the action ... not unlike Hamlet's "to be or not to be" speech ... in which God-as-Parent takes stock of God's feelings for God's children.

- God first tenderly recounts all that God has done for those whom God calls "my son" (and "my daughter"ⁱⁱⁱ): rescuing them from slavery; supporting them when they were weak and protecting them from danger; teaching them to walk and nuzzling them at God's own cheek.
- Then, as in the life of every parent, comes the exasperation: Despite all this, God rails, they insist upon defying Me ... upon turning away from Me. And, fine, I'll let them! *Let* them return to the Egypt of their captivity. *Let* them suffer the oppression of foreign invaders. See if I care!
- But then comes the turn—the 'parental pivot'; the middle-of-the-sleepless-night melting of a hollow resolve. No mother can stand by and coolly watch her child fall victim to pain; no father can calmly stomach the suffering of a daughter or son. No, says God, I cannot give up on you, O Israel; I cannot hand you over to your foes. It is not Who I am; My compassion is just too great. I will put away my wrath and my weariness ... and call to you once again, like a mother lion calls to her cubs, so you may come running to me and I can welcome you home.

This is the unconditional, unmerited ... even, I think, the irrepressible—uncontainable ... love that God has for God's children. No son has asked for forgiveness. No daughter has said she'll try to amend her ways. No child has even offered an excuse—*however* flimsy—as to how things could have gone so wrong.

But such is the grace of God-our-Parent that God never stops seeing and responding to us. Yes, we break God's heart when we forget all that God has already provided us and whine that we need this or that; but God looks *past* our ingratitude. Yes, God rejoices with us when we experience the marvelous or miraculous; *and* in God's wisdom, God knows that today's delight may become tomorrow's dilemma. Yes, God forgives us again and again when we break the rules God has taught us and mistreat our fellow creatures; but God's response is always *mercy*: a yearning for us to do better next time. And yes, sometimes God must stand by, in anguish, as disaster befalls us ... but it is then that God holds us all the more tightly in God's "bands of love."

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We join the company of good Christians across ages and continents when we wrestle with some of the distasteful, unlovely and even seemingly *unloving* things God does in the Old Testament, for they frustrate the sweet, benevolent image of who *we* want God to be: the 'super mom' or 'hero dad' of every child's fantasy, who never raises a voice or loses a temper and gets us out of every jam.

But the complicated Parent-God of Hosea is the *same* God Who gives us Jesus. It is the *same* Parent-God 'of the Old Testament' ... forever enduring and forgiving all the ways we, God's children, surprise, vex and disregard God ... precisely this *same* God Who, in boundless love and mercy and grace, comes to this world to companion us ... heal us ... liberate us ... and raise us to eternal life: the *same* God-Parent Who, in fact, gives God's own *life* for ours.

So, like all children, we may struggle mightily to comprehend why God-our-Parent acts as God does in the Old Testament. But even in our child-like quandary, let be soothed by the warm embrace and tender caresses of God-our-Parent's never-failing compassion.



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ⁱ Classically, this conception of God is known as "deism," whereas the conception of a God Who is active and accessible is known as "theism."

ⁱⁱ In Hosea, technically, the Northern Kingdom of Israel (as opposed to the Southern Kingdom of Judah).

ⁱⁱⁱ The text reads only "son," but there is no reason to think God excludes or denigrates the female in any way.