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“When God Roars”

**A sermon by
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Hos. 11:1–11; Ps. 107:1–9, 43; Col. 3:1–11; Lk. 12:13–21

Maybe it was because she thought we were old enough to know better,
and we were;

or maybe it was because she was scared silly that we were stepping
off the curb to our deaths;

maybe it was a little of both.

But I clearly remember the last time I heard my mother roar.

We were at the airport, picking up my father,
who was returning from a long business trip.

Perhaps we were a little late in arriving, or perhaps his plane was a little early.
Either way, we never made it to the airport gate as planned.

We were walking across the parking lot to the terminal quickly,
a mother with only two hands and three children,

when we spotted our father standing in front of the airport proper,
clutching a suitcase in one hand, and waving excitedly with the other.

Now my brother and I had been raised to know better, as I said at the beginning.
We had been instructed from an early age, to always hold someone's
hand before crossing the street.

And we knew well the stop, look and listen jingle that Jimminy Cricket used to
sing:

"First you stop, then you look, then you listen hard,
You can make any street, safe as your back yard.
I'm no fool, no siree, I'm wanna live to be 93.
I play safe for you and me, cause I'm no fool."

Furthermore, to drive the point home, my mother had made a teachable moment
of every encounter with roadkill.

Be it a raccoon, opossum, cat, dog or squirrel,
she would slip into her sing-song lament with didactic overtones,
"That poor little squirrel! He must have run out into the street
without his mother!"

As a disclaimer, I must say that it wasn't my fault entirely.

My brother was the one who grabbed my elbow
as soon as we made eye contact with our father,
and launched us from the curb into the surging traffic.

I remember the honking horns of passing cars,
the gasoline fumes rising from the hot asphalt,
the heat of bus exhaust brushing my bare legs,
the look of helpless horror on my father's face,
and the one word that my mother roared before the impact:
"Stop!"

The impact to which I am referring is not what you might think.

Fortunately, we were not hit by a car, although that is probably
what we rightly deserved.

But rather the impact was that our mother spanking both of us,
my brother and me, right there at the airport,
in front of all of those people.

And I was 12 years old:

old enough to know better than to dash into the path of on-coming traffic;
but too old, I thought, to be spanked.

But she did. She roared her alarm and she spanked us in public,
totally humiliating both of us.
And I thought to myself, "What kind of mother would do such a thing?"

It's a similar question that Israel is asking of God in today's reading from Hosea.
Israel, the Northern Kingdom, is about to be sacked by Assyria,
as punishment for his misbehavior;
as punishment for stepping off the curb
into the traffic of foreign cults and belief systems.
Israel has ventured so close to their temple doors and altars,
that he can smell the fumes of their incense.
Surely, he knows better than to chase after idols and false gods.
Yahweh God, who called Israel out of slavery in Egypt, didn't raise no fool.
Israel is defying years of Torah instruction,
years of memory work significantly more serious than
Jimminy Cricket jingles, which have steeled him against just such
syncretism.

"You shall have NO other Gods before me.

You shall NOT make for yourself an idol in the form of anything
in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.

You shall NOT bow down to them or worship them;

for I, the Lord your god, am a jealous God." (Exodus 20: 3-4a)

It's my way, or the highway, God has commanded.

And now when Israel strays from God's instruction,

the highway opens straight away to the invading Assyrians.

Their horns can be heard. Their fumes can be smelled.

The life of Israel is now in jeopardy.

What kind of God would allow this to happen, Israel asks?

What kind of God would discipline her child so publicly,

and cause her child to suffer so greatly?

It's the old theodicy question of love and suffering. Why must the beloved suffer?

It's a struggle, too, within the very essence of God, Hosea suggests. His poem looks deep within the heart of God, to reveal God's inner wrestling with how far to go with this issue of just deserves.

Looking back, God depicts the covenant love that has bound God to Israel, as that of a mother to her beloved son.

God called Israel into being, by delivering him out of Egypt.

God loved him, taught him to walk in her ways, took him by the arm,
lifted him to her cheek, bent down to manna feed him, healed him,
led him with cords of kindness and kept him close with
ropes of love.

But Israel did not know it was God who loved him so.

Israel turned his head the other way, hell-bent on stepping off the curb:
stepping off to follow the Baals;
stepping off to abandon Torah instruction;
stepping off without looking back to the one who had called,
lifted, fed, healed, taught, bent and held.

Israel stepped off the curb, because that is our human inclination.

In spite of our best upbringing and best instruction,
and perhaps because of original sin, who knows;
left to our own devices and inclinations, we all are prone
to step off the curb of good judgment
into the traffic of our own demise at some point.

Theologian Karl Barth once commented that we can no more extricate ourselves from our sinfulness than a drowning man can pull himself out by his own hair.

Martin Luther's great hymn likewise declares, "Did we in our own strength

confide,

our striving would be losing.”

Out of defiance, out of curiosity, out of ignorance, out of sheer will,

we will carelessly step away,

and God has to watch in pained horror, as God once watched Israel turn and step away.

And so God struggles within Godself as Israel steps out of Egypt and toward Assyria,

as if one experience of bondage were not enough to teach him wisdom.

It's rare in scripture to see the inner-logic of God at work,

but here we see God's turmoil in Hosea.

With a series of four questions, like a grieved parent,

God ponders her stance towards Israel.

Should she throw up her hands and give up?

Should she hand him over to his own doings?

Or should she treat him like Admah, like Zebolim:

two cities that went the way of Sodom and Gomorrah?

It's almost as if Israel is addicted to that one thing

which has the potential of doing him the most harm.

Israel in this instance reminds me of a nephew of mine, a young adult,

well-loved by his parents and grandparents,

treated to all the special family vacations and summer camps,

popular with his friends,

brilliant as a child, afforded the very best education,

fluent in German from an early age,

gifted with an IQ that would qualify him for success

at any college or university.

But at some point, he stepped off the curb of higher education, into the traffic of drugs.

He dabbled in weed, he played poker with pain killers, he hit the jack-pot with heroine.

And he has broken his parents' hearts.

And they vacillate as to what kind of parents they should be:

the kind who kick him out and change all the locks on the house;
who yell and throw tantrums and talk in ultimatums;
who cut off his funding; who call the police; who refuse to bail him
out...again?

Or the kind who refuse to give up on him;

who welcome him home even after he steals from them;
who take him on vacation with them, even when he is stoned;
who pay for his rehab, again and again;
who cry themselves to sleep at night;
who are willing to step off the curb into the traffic of drugs themselves
to find him and bring him home.?

These are complex issues, that ultimately ask of us,

what kind of loves is God calling us to model,
because what kind of God is God?

This is the question which Hosea posits.

God's heart is changed in the course of this inner wrestling,

because God's compassion is aroused.

God's initial inclination towards fierce anger,

is overcome by God's compassion towards the child whom she has
nurtured

since delivery.

God's judgment is tempered by God's mercy,

because God's grace can never finally allow her to give up on her children.

Human beings may match rejection with rejection,

but the heart of God recoils within Godself from such pettiness,

and resorts to higher resolution.

Only mercy and grace offers her beloved children the promised freedom of the covenant.

And so God struggles on the inside,

and God roars on the outside, a roar heard 'round the world:

a roar of refusal to resort to finite wrath;

a roar of welcome home to her beloved children;

a roar of defiance to sin and death; a roar of liberation.

And God's children come running back,

trembling like birds from their near death experience in traffic;

trembling like doves from their close brush with God's tempered power.

They come running back home.

In C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*, Aslan, the Lion King of the land of Narnia, roars to express his greatest displeasures and to celebrate his chief exultations.

His roar is a sign of God's power in him, a power which defies captivity and death.

When his nemesis, the White Witch, suggests that Aslan might not keep his promise,

to stand in for the child Edward, whose treachery has cost him his life's blood,

Aslan roars his displeasure.

"Haa---aarh", roared Aslan half rising from his throne;

and his great mouth opened wider and wider

and the roar grew louder and louder, and the witch,

after staring for a moment with her lips wide apart,

picked up her skirts and fairly ran for her life." (Lewis. LWW, p. 141)

But then later, after Aslan is raised from death to new life,
we hear his roar of great celebration, his roar of death-defiance,
his roar of Easter emancipation.

Aslan says to the children,

"Though the Witch knew the Deep Magic, there is a magic deeper still
which she did not know.

Her knowledge goes back only to the dawn of time.

But if she could have looked a little further back,

into the stillness of darkness before Time dawned,
she would have read there a different incantation.

She would have known that when a willing victim who had committed
no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead, the Table would crack
and Death itself would start working backwards.' (Lewis, LWW, p.
159-160)

... 'and now,' said Aslan presently, 'to business. I feel I am going to roar.

You had better put your fingers in your ears.'

And they did. And Aslan stood up and when he opened his mouth to roar
his face became so terrible that they did not dare to look at it.

And they saw all the trees in front of him bend before the blast of his roaring
as grass bends in a meadow before the wind. Then he said,

'We have a journey to go. You must ride on me.'

And they crouched down and the children climbed onto his warm, golden
back...

and with a great heave he rose underneath them and then shot
off...

The ride was perhaps the most wonderful thing that had happened
to them in Narnia." (Lewis, LWW p. 161-162) Amen.