

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 13, Year C

First Reading

Hosea 11:1–11 (track one)

When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son.
The more they were called,
the more they went away;
they kept sacrificing to the Baals
and burning offerings to idols.

Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk;
I took them up by their arms,
but they did not know that I healed them.
I led them with cords of kindness,
with the bands of love,
and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws,
and I bent down to them and fed them.

They shall not return to the land of Egypt,
but Assyria shall be their king,
because they have refused to return to me.
The sword shall rage against their cities,
consume the bars of their gates,
and devour them because of their own counsels.
My people are bent on turning away from me,
and though they call out to the Most High,
he shall not raise them up at all.

How can I give you up, O Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, O Israel?
How can I make you like Admah?
How can I treat you like Zeboiim?
My heart recoils within me;
my compassion grows warm and tender.
I will not execute my burning anger;
I will not again destroy Ephraim;
for I am God and not a man,
the Holy One in your midst,

and I will not come in wrath.

They shall go after the LORD;
he will roar like a lion;
when he roars,
his children shall come trembling from the west;
they shall come trembling like birds from Egypt,
and like doves from the land of Assyria,
and I will return them to their homes, declares the LORD. (ESV)

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23 (track two)

Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.

I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me, and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun, because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity. (ESV)

Second Reading

Colossians 3:1–11

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Luke 12:13–21

Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” But he said to him, “Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you?” And he said to them, “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” And he told them a parable, saying, “The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ And he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.”’ But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.” (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

(Hosea, track one)

Again this week we see the torment of the prophet Hosea, caught between his vision of the hardships that are coming, the consequences of their faithlessness, and the relentless love of God that won’t let go. This week we see God speak as a loving parent, One who “taught them to walk.” Stop for a moment and just let yourself imagine that, see the Parent, bent over, grinning, with Ephaim holding on to one or two fingers, stumbling and giggling as they take their first steps. The Parent, laughing with joy when

Their son lets go and totters across the room to someone. Really, stop. Just ponder a God who sees Himself that way, and would love to be seen that way by you and me.

But the child has gone their own way, as we so often do. Determined to make our own way in the world, we rush out of the door of the house that held and protected us and we forget where our home is, where our safety is, and we make a goodly mess of things. And the Parent watches, knowing the pain that we're about to bring on ourselves.

They shall not return to the land of Egypt,
but Assyria shall be their king,
because they have refused to return to me.
The sword shall rage against their cities,
consume the bars of their gates,
and devour them because of their own counsels.
My people are bent on turning away from me,
and though they call out to the Most High,
he shall not raise them up at all.

And as disaster closes in on us, the Parent's heart melts. I remember when my daughter was young, she and my wife had this thing they did. They'd each hold up a little finger and smile at each other, a sign that I was wrapped right around that little finger.

Yes, Israel is going to suffer, but God will not stand by and let them be destroyed.

How can I give you up, O Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, O Israel?
How can I make you like Admah?
How can I treat you like Zeboiim?
My heart recoils within me;
my compassion grows warm and tender.
I will not execute my burning anger;
I will not again destroy Ephraim;
for I am God and not a man,
the Holy One in your midst,
and I will not come in wrath.

God shall not come in wrath. Funny how many preachers there are out there who seem to have forgotten this passage, who talk about God coming in wrath. They talk about "standing on the promises" of God and forget this promise. And not only will God not come in wrath, but They will come with a roar to our rescue.

Hosea is to me one of those clear-eyed prophets who can look unflinchingly at the mudslide rushing at us because of our foolishness, our hard-headedness, and still find the love and mercy of God inescapable.

The world needs more prophets like Hosea. People who can stand and look at the wreck we've made of things without flinching, and stand declaring that God's heart melts for us, aches for us, that God is coming with an earth shaking roar for us.

(Ecclesiastes, track two)

It is unfortunate that our reading from Ecclesiastes this week is the *only* time in the whole three year cycle that we hear from the Preacher. This book does not occur at any other time. Ever.

Our misfortune is compounded by the choices of our lectionary choosers, who have cherry-picked verses that give us a very one-sided view of the identity and intentions of the Preacher (Qoheleth) and his point of view. Looking only a few verses beyond what was chosen today, we find:

There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. (vv 24-26a)

Of course that is followed again by 26b, “ This also is vanity and a striving after wind.”

Still, it isn't as though work (toil) and enjoyment have no value to the Preacher. Only that they are “vanity.” Perhaps we need a better understanding of that word. Literally translated, the word we read as “vanity” means “vapor,” or “mist.” That is, it is something onto which we just cannot hold.

And that, dear readers, is the point, I think. Qoheleth describes as “mist” or “vanity” all those things that we might hold on to in order to make ourselves secure. It isn't that there is no value in work, but the value is in the work itself, not what it brings, which can be swept away, and which we'll be forced to leave to another. Enjoyment has value, but not if we hope to seek some security in it, for it is like mist. Wisdom has value, but it cannot keep the same things from happening to the wise that happen to the fool.

Qoheleth is not the biblical Kafka that our reading seems to make him out to be, though such an interpretation might appeal to some post-modernists. He is a realist, who has a purpose beyond bemoaning the absurdity of life, which is to acknowledge that there are many things about life that do not make sense or seem fair, while also maintaining that there is value to be found in things for themselves, rather than in the security they cannot provide.

[Here is a link](#) to an article by Douglas Miller that helped me pull all that together. It's not a very difficult read, but it may test your patience in places.

Second Reading

Well, Paul seems determined in this week's reading to make a liar of me concerning what I wrote about the Hosea passage!

"Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming."

Ouch. Well, actually not, but it sure seems that way on the surface.

Just because God's wrath isn't coming against me doesn't mean there's no wrath. After all, God did say They were coming with a roar that would set us trembling, right?

That's the tragedy of a lot of well-meaning theology today. Because the wrath of God has been misused to manipulate Christians and to justify a lot of violence on the part of Christians for, well, centuries, a lot of us have decided that wrath just has to go. We're not going to talk about it, we're going to write that off as a misunderstanding by the authors of the Bible or something like that.

But that's a terrible mistake. God does get angry. What mother doesn't get angry when someone harms her children? What father? What we've never really succeeded in grasping is that God's wrath is real, and against all unrighteousness, against all that causes us to harm ourselves and each other, but never against us, God's children.

Now Paul here is saying "put to death" these things in us. Because of them wrath is coming. Why the warning? Quite simply because if we are found clinging to those things when God burns them away we're going to suffer unnecessarily. To the extent that our identities, our safeties are bound up with the false gods of "sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness" we will find great pain in having them taken from

us. And yes, they're false gods. Paul called those things "idolatry," that is, the worship of false gods.

Thank God that there is wrath. A love that didn't inspire wrath would be a pale and lifeless thing. And thank God that this wrath is never directed at me.

Gospel Text

It's astounding how much difference a preposition can make. Today's reading, translated the way it is, (in the ESV at least, and the NRSV we'll hear most congregations, I haven't checked lots of others) makes a good preamble to stewardship season. "Be rich toward God!" it seems to exhort. Well. Maybe not so much.

It's all in the prepositions, you see. Jesus concludes His short parable about the rich fool with these words, "So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God." But the thing is, that word translated "toward" can just as easily, perhaps more easily, be translated as "in," or "into." It makes far more sense to translate it "in God" than "toward God" when we consider that Jesus never carried a single coin. When they needed a coin for the temple tax, He had to send Peter to get one out of a fish's mouth. Jesus didn't put His riches "toward" God but found His riches "in" God. But the rich fool found his riches in the things he could put into his storehouse, "where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal." (Such an echo of the "mist" of Ecclesiastes above!)

Jesus has no real objection to property, but He surely does against placing our hope in them. And that's the thing about inordinate riches. They only accrue like that when we place our hope in them.

So, sorry folks who want to use this passage to get an early start on stewardship preaching. It doesn't say that people should be "rich toward God." Of course, if you really want to teach stewardship, and not do fundraising for the church, then this passage works very well!