

July 25, 2010 – Rev. Anne E. Hodges-Copple [PDF] (Hosea 1:2-10; Colossians 2:6-19; Luke 11:1-13)

Well, I almost feel like I needed to have given you all fair warning, a rating system, a M for mature audiences on the first lesson. Could not the prophet have at least not used some more Elizabethan word like harlotry or something like this. But my goodness, such vivid language. But indeed the prophet Hosea at the bidding of the Lord God reveals to the covenant people, the people of God, the deep wrath and anger and sense of betrayal that the Lord is feeling from his betrothed, from his people. So much so that God tells Hosea that he needs to go out, find and marry a woman who is known for her unfaithfulness, who is known for her immorality so that the people will see in the very life of Hosea being lived out the kind of sense of betrayal and anger and indignation and vengefulness that the Lord God is feeling toward the Lord's beloved. That's what's going on in that first reading. You know, that angry, judgmental and punishing God is not the God we nice, polite, very good Episcopalians want to hear about too much. We want to hear about that loving, forgiving, kind and gentle Jesus. But let us not hurry past the prophet Hosea.

For the last couple of weeks we've heard from Amos, the prophet who had preached in the southern kingdom, the kingdom called Judah. The kingdom that was enjoying great prosperity and yet still oppressed and abused its weakest, poorest, most fragile members. Cheated them at the markets. But Hosea, working in the northern kingdom, faces a far worse situation. For here political intrigue has caused the assassination of king after king. The people have gone off worshipping false gods. They have squandered every blessing from the Lord God and the Lord God has had it. The Lord God proclaims that the relationship is broken. He is giving up on this people. He will destroy them. He will no longer be their God. And yet, even so, the Lord God there at the very end holds out in this reading just this bit of hope, "And yet they will be the children of the living God."

The Old Testament and the New Testament uses a lot of metaphors for our relationship with God. There's the relationship of God the vineyard keeper with his blessed vineyard bringing forth great abundance. There's the metaphor of God the good shepherd caring for the flock. And here we have the metaphor of the very, very angry spouse ready, really, to humiliate the one who has caused this betrayal. Whenever we read the prophets addressing Israel, we should also hear the questions addressing the church because it is our story that is grafted into – that we are grafted into by baptism. Our story is the story of Israel. Our question is the same. Have we been faithful? Are we faithful or do we also risk the wrath, the rejection, the repudiation of our Lord God?

Due to the incredible generosity of my mother-in-law, John and Sally and I were invited to go with her on a wonderful pilgrimage, a pilgrimage that started in Munich and ended in Venice. A pilgrimage that had its peak, in terms of planning, to attend the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ as it's performed in a little village in Bavaria, the southern part of Germany, a little village called Oberammergau. It only took me a year to try to learn to pronounce that – Oberammergau. Very proud of myself. Every ten years for 376 years this little village, and only residents, native-born with a few little footnotes, performs this elaborate six-hours long – and you thought a two-hour

vigil was something? Six-hours long Passion Play. I have to tell you, I was a little nervous about this. In German, right? I'm like, "Oh, okay. Yeah, okay. Let's do this."

We arrive in Munich and it's beautiful. And one of the interesting things about Munich is that no buildings can be above the beautiful spires of the cathedrals and churches. One of the things that we first noticed about Munich are the churches. And if you don't see it, you hear it because the church bells chime not just every hour, every 15 minutes. Beautiful. And we went to this plaza in Munich. And there was the gorgeous, historic palace of the kings on one side, and a beautiful cathedral of St. Mary on our right and the palace on the left. And in front of us was this great kind of court, this great kind of public address place. And it was quite, quite impressive architecturally. And yet there was something about it familiar. It had some lions, it had some warriors in their statuesque pose. And then it dawned on us where we stood. And we could see in our minds' eyes the swastikas hanging down from the sides and we could see in our minds' eyes those old black and white videos of Adolf Hitler addressing the Nazis. The church to the right, the palace to the left, we remembered a time that the church was unable to speak. And we remembered a time that Christians were often not just silent, but complicit. The betrayal of our Lord Jesus Christ and the hunting down and imprisonment and extermination of the Jews. And we found a little path behind this courtyard through an alley where Germans who refused to pass by and salute the swastikas would go – because it was required to go by this every day – would go in an attempt to thwart the effort of the Nazis. And eventually it was figured out and even those who would dare to go through the back alleys and avoid this courtyard were arrested, beneath the spires of the church, amidst the tolls of the bells.

I was getting a little more nervous about Oberammergau because I had also read in the history of this Passion Play how some deeply rooted anti-semitism was within the play. In the history of 300-year old play, the Jews, not Jesus and his disciples mind you, but the Jews were given horns, they were given yellow stars during the play for decades if not centuries. It was known to have been the type of Passion Play that in fact the Roman Catholic Church had forbidden for a period of time because it incited such violence against the Jews. I was a little nervous going into this beautiful Bavarian village. I wanted Maria Von Trapp to come over the hills singing. It was gorgeous. Again, the spires, the cathedrals, the bells. What would we find in the heart of Christian Germany about our Lord?

The play opens, it's six hours, but yes, it's three hours in the afternoon, you get a big break for dinner and then it's three hours in the evening. And the Passion opens with Palm Sunday and this entire Bavarian village, the actual people who live in the village, are in the play, hundreds of them, perform Palm Sunday. It was wonderful. And we watched as Jesus and his disciples came alive on this stage. And you cheered and you wept. And even though you knew the story forwards and backwards, you gripped the edge of your chair with excitement and dread as the play unfolded. And what we witnessed and what hundreds of thousands had been witnessing over the last 30 years – so the last three, including this year, performance of the Passion Play – is that this village in itself is redeeming their own – our own – participation in the suffering of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus, his disciples, Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus, they were portrayed as fully Jewish and fully loved and beloved and serving and faithful to the covenant. And it became clear through that Passion that the evil of our times is when powers and rulers and principalities and those who would put themselves up as religious authorities will put their own power, their

own status, their own well being ahead of serving the Lord. They will put their own lives ahead of those other innocent lives. And we saw this entire village of Oberammergau tell the story of suffering, tell the story of faithfulness, tell the story that asks people of faith to stand up and repudiate those who would kill the innocent, repudiate those who would serve the gods of greed and racism and to worship a Lord of steadfast love and mercy.

Over and over we found Germans who seemed so tentative about their ability to celebrate their culture. But what I also saw was a little part of the church who says over 300 years the story plays on. They have not Disney-fied it. It's only done every 10 years. It's only people in the village that do this story. It's not commercialized. It is an act of faith. We think it's hard to do things for 10 years at St. Luke's. 376 years.

We are God's beloved. But rather than thinking of ourselves as God's spouse, let us change our metaphors and realize as Hosea's lesson ends and as the Gospel begins that we are the children of God. By the covenant of baptism, by the sacred vows of baptism, we are joined to our Lord. And our Lord joins with us knowing full well we will betray him, knowing full well that in and of ourselves we are incapable of living justly, of showing complete mercy. And yet, the Lord who lived and died and rose for us marks us. Paul writes about this in the second lesson. The circumcision of Christ is the mark of baptism. We are marked as Christ's own forever. We are the covenant people, redeemed and then told be persistent, people of God. Knock, seek, look, find, be persistent in our prayers. Be persistent in our pursuit of justice. Be persistent in seeking out the neighbor who is hurt or hungry, the neighbor who is feeling such a darkness of heart and mind and spirit that threatens to block out the light of Christ.

We are the children of a loving God who wants nothing more than to answer our true and genuine prayers if we will pray. It's been a week of prayer at St. Luke's. It's been a hard week of prayer. Prayer that Dick Riddle could die gracefully and surrounded by his loved ones was answered. Prayers that a member of our congregation who has been struggling with a terrible personal crisis will see the light of Christ, that prayer has been answered. Prayers that when I get short and ill-tempered and tired of helping somebody, that that persistent call for help will break through my hardness of heart and remind me that when I serve others, I serve Christ. Jesus teaches us in the Lord's prayer, children, pray to your heavenly parent. Be demanding. Ask for forgiveness. Ask for daily bread. Ask for the Lord's presence every moment, every day. Ask forgiveness and ask for the power to give forgiveness and show it to others.

We felt so bad because our tour guide seemed so apologetic. They were so happy when Germany beat Argentina, and we were there. We were all German that day. I would go back to Brigit, the German tour guide, and tell her what I saw in the little village of Oberammergau that on Palm Sunday on that stage one of the children that came up on the stage was clearly a child who probably has some kind of condition that makes it difficult for him to focus, stay on track. But this child would clearly seem to be about to fall off the stage or go astray. And the people of Oberammergau all in their costumes would gently keep this child safe as they followed the Lord.

They would keep their vow to follow the Lord. This village will raise children to love the Lord in the full face of experiences of evil and betrayal. They have felt the redemption, they struggle

to be faithful. Where can we lead our children? How can we serve the Lord? Have we been completely faithful? Maybe not. Does God invite us to try again? Always. Amen.