



Sermon of January 31, 1999



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"YOU HAVE OUTWITTED ME"

Hosea 11:1-9

Galatians 1:11-24

The title of this sermon, "You Have Outwitted Me," comes from the writings of Brother Lawrence. I am indebted to John Imel, who discovered the quote, shared it at a staff devotion some years ago.

Brother Lawrence entered a monastic order thinking that he was giving up the happiness of this world to become a monk. He discovered instead a deeper happiness in a monastic life than he had ever imagined. He said, "God, you have outwitted me."

That's a wonderful phrase, and a testimony to what we call the providence of God. It comes from the same word as our word "provide." As in, "God our Maker doth provide all our wants to be supplied," which we sing at Thanksgiving. That is what providence means. We believe that

there is a power greater than our own powers, and who is in control of things even though we are not. Thus God will provide and care for us, often in ways that are surprising to us.

That is why the theologians talk about the irony of history. The irony of history means that there will be surprises. Things are not always the way they seem. We thought we messed things up, but they came out better than we planned. We thought that we lost everything, but we discovered that we have found something that we never imagined. This popular epigram illustrates it.

I asked for riches that I might be happy.
I was given poverty that I might be wise.

I asked for power that I might have the praise of men.
I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God.

I asked for all things that I might enjoy life.
I was given life that I might enjoy all things.

Almost despite myself my unspoken prayers were answered.
You have outwitted me.

The providence of God. The irony of history. All of this is based on the biblical understanding of the covenant. The Old Testament lesson for this morning from Hosea is a wonderful illustration of the covenant. This is one of the incomparable passages in scripture. Not only because of its literary beauty, which is breathtaking, but also because of its revelation of God, which is mind boggling. It is from the prophet Hosea.

The job of the prophet is to interpret history through the covenant that God made with Israel, to see all things through the eyes of the covenant. And the way that that covenant was interpreted by most people before Hosea, was that it was like a contract. God is one party to the contract. We are the other party. The party of the first part, that is God, is to provide certain services to us; namely, life, abundance, and protection. And the second party, you and I, is to respond with righteousness, obedience to the Law, and goodness. If we don't, then the contract is off. All the pain and evil and suffering from which the covenant is protecting us, will be taken away and will come upon us.

That's the way the covenant was interpreted by so many people before Hosea, and I imagine even a whole lot of people today. It is a covenant of law. It is like a contract. So if you break it, you will pay the consequences.

But Hosea said that the covenant is not so much a covenant of law, as it is a covenant of love. Before Hosea, the words that were associated with the covenant were law, righteousness, judgment, and punishment. After Hosea, the words that are associated with covenant are faithfulness, patience, love, trustworthiness, and forgiveness. Once the analogy of our relationship to God was the covenant between a king and his subjects. After Hosea, the analogy is the covenant between a husband and wife.

Hosea was the first prophet to have the courage to say that. The covenant, he said, is as if God is married to Israel. He talks about that in the first and second chapters, before our text for this morning. Israel is like a wife that runs away from a marriage. Under the law her husband has a right to get rid of her. Most husbands would do that, and you wouldn't blame them. That is the image that Hosea used in those first two chapters, a faithless wife.

Evidently he is reflecting on his own marriage to Gomer, who ran off, and ended up in a life of prostitution. Eventually Hosea bought her back in a slave market, she had sunk so low. He said, God is like that. Israel is like Gomer, who has run away, worships other gods. But God has bought her back. You would expect that God would give her up because of her sins. But here is the revelation: God will not abandon Israel. Because of the covenant, God will always be faithful. God has given a promise, and God will be faithful.

That is in the first two chapters of Hosea. He says God is like a spouse who is faithful even though the partner in the marriage is unfaithful. In our text for this morning, in the eleventh chapter, Hosea changes the metaphor from husband and wife, to parent and child, a deeper, more profound covenant. He imagines God as the parent. This could be either a father or a mother. Either parent could be used in this kind of analogy, because these feelings are parental feelings.

In the eleventh chapter God carries on a soliloquy, weighing what he should do with his child, torn between the behavior of the child and the feelings that only a parent can have.

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the more they went from me....Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them.

That is a parent talking. How many parents can remember what joy it was to watch your child, with your gentle encouragement, take his or her first steps. The joy of that moment. You remember that. Your child doesn't remember it, but you will never forget it. "I taught Ephraim to walk." That is a bond that is never broken.

Or, the night when the child is so sick, perhaps a frantic ride through the city streets to the emergency room of the hospital. Then holding the child close to you, trying to ease the child's suffering or fright. The child doesn't remember that now, but you will never forget it. "I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them....How can I give you up, O Ephraim!"

The name Ephraim is used in Hosea interchangeably with Israel, probably because for a period of time, Ephraim, the tribe, was the most prominent of the confederation of tribes, and therefore is the representative tribe.

How can I give you up, O Ephraim! How can I hand you over, O Israel!....My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger, I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come to destroy.

You read Hosea and you see that God is determined to keep His promise, because of the covenant. That's what it means. That's all a covenant is, it's a promise. It is as fragile as a promise. And God always keeps the promise.

That is the center of biblical faith. If you were to boil the message of the Bible down to one phrase, that would be it. God keeps the promise. If you wanted to define the essence of faith according to the Bible, it is this: Trusting that God will keep the promise. And if you want to know what makes life difficult as a person of faith, it is that it doesn't always look like God keeps the promise.

I was preaching somewhere else some time ago. I preached a sermon similar to this, about God's providence. After the service I was greeting people. A man went by. He said only one thing. "What about Auschwitz?" Then he walked on. Mercifully, he didn't hang around for an answer, because I didn't have one. I have thought about it a lot since, and I still don't have an answer. "What about Auschwitz?"

A woman made an appointment to come and see me. She said, "I have stopped believing. I am not coming to church anymore, because God did not answer my prayers." She prayed for things that are legitimate, things you and I pray for. It wasn't trivial or selfish at all. She said, "My prayers were not answered." I couldn't answer her either. Of course, she didn't ask a question, she wasn't waiting for a reply. She came to make a statement to me. She wanted to file this with the preacher, "God doesn't answer prayer."

I'm glad that it wasn't a question, because I couldn't have answered it, either. I don't have answers. All I know is that according to the Bible, faith is not about having answers. Faith is more about having courage to go on without answers, trusting the covenant, trusting that someday the absurd will make sense, someday the scales are going to be balanced, someday the innocent will be justified.

That's the way Paul saw it. In I Corinthians he says, "We see through a glass darkly." He means that. That is a statement about human knowledge. We just don't see very clearly. That is our condition as human beings. What we do see is distorted. "We see through a glass darkly." Or as another translation has it, "We see in a mirror dimly." You get out of the shower, look in the mirror. That's the way we see reality.

"We can see only in part," is another way he puts it. It's as if we dwell in a house with small windows. The only part of the world that we can see is what we can see through that opening. We see "in part," but one of these days, he writes, we will see "face to face." "Now I know in part; then I will understand fully." Now, here comes the covenant. "Even as I have been fully understood." Listen to that again. "Then I shall understand fully, even as now I am fully understood." What I trust now is not my knowledge. What I trust now is that I am known, that God knows me, loves me, speaks my name...as promised. Therefore I can be patient.

We mentioned Auschwitz. There have been lots of words written about Auschwitz, but none more moving than those written by Etty Hillesum in her book called, *An Interrupted Life*. She didn't have answers either. In fact, I don't recall that she raises any questions in the book. It is instead a testimony to the presence of God in her life. A near mystical presence. It was always

there, from the beginning. But as her life moved toward the end, and to Auschwitz, her description of her relationship with God became more intimate, the words she used more the words of a covenant. It was as if she didn't need to understand, because she knew God understood her. She didn't need to know why God let this happen, because she knew God did not want it to happen. It wasn't God's doing. God was on her side. Indeed she sensed God's presence with her, beside her.

Which is the way the Church talked about the cross. The cross didn't answer the question of human suffering. But, they said, the cross is a sign that God has suffered with us. Therefore the cross is a sign of a new covenant. God has suffered. Therefore they knew that they were known. They knew that God understood the kind of life they had to live.

That is why the cross is so important to Christian faith. It is a sign of a covenant. Jesus said, "When I am lifted up I will draw all people to myself." And it happened. Wherever the Church went it held up the cross, and the people came to hear about a God who doesn't give answers to us, but gives himself for us. The cross is a covenant.

The Christians called it the New Covenant. They could just as well of called it the renewed covenant, because it is just like the covenant that God made with the Jews and revealed to Hosea, "How can I give you up, O Ephraim! How can I hand you over, O Israel!." Even in the face of death they trusted, God keeps the promise. How can I give you up. How can I hand you over to death. What is more inevitable than death. We are all going to face it. But because of the covenant, because of the cross, we can expect a surprise.

When the philosopher A. J. Ayer died some years ago, there was a lengthy obituary in the paper about him. I read it with some interest, because I had studied philosophy in college and had read A. J. Ayer. I majored in philosophy in college to become wise. I ended up becoming mostly confused, and A. J. Ayer had a lot to do with that. He and his tribe were members of a school called Logical Positivism, which set out to dismantle most of traditional philosophy.

Ayer was an atheist who believed that there was nothing beyond the physical. If you can't see it, then it is not real. In fact he was so persuasive an atheist, so powerful in his argument, that it is said that when Somerset Maugham was dying, he called A. J. Ayer to his bedside, like a priest, to reassure him that there was no life after death.

This article said that a year before Ayer died, he suffered a heart attack and his heart stopped for four minutes. Then the doctors brought him back. Ayer wrote about that experience. He said he saw a red light and had become aware that the light was responsible for the governance of the universe.

We know that as a near-death experience, or an out-of-the body experience. It is quite common. It is when the spirit packs up, thinks it going now to another life. Then the doctors get the patient's heart going again, and the spirit comes back into the body. After such an experience, the testimony is universal: I could see things clearly. I could see what I can't see now. I could understand what I can't understand now. It is almost like having everything fall into place, at last make sense. "Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully."

A. J. Ayer, the world class atheist, had one of those experiences. Do you know what he said about it? He said the experience left his atheism intact, but slightly weakened. He said, "It weakened my conviction that my genuine death will not be the end of me, though I continue to hope that it will be."

Do you know what he should have said? I mean, if he had any sense of humor at all, if he had any sense of irony, the kind that accompanies faith. When he saw that red light, he should have said, "God, you have outwitted me."

*Help us to be masters of ourselves,
that we might be servants of others,
through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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