

6 February 2022

The Power of Nature

Hosea 2:8-13

Of all the prophets, Hosea was perhaps the one most concerned with idolatry. Throughout his book, he treats Israel's worship of other gods as a marriage betrayal, as breaking a covenant between those who had pledged to love each other. We read Hosea chapter 2, verses 8-13.

- ⁸ *She did not know that it was I who gave her
the grain, the wine, and the oil,
and who lavished upon her silver
and gold that they used for Baal.*
- ⁹ *Therefore I will take back my grain in its time,
and my wine in its season;
and I will take away my wool and my flax,
which were to cover her nakedness.*
- ¹⁰ *Now I will uncover her shame in the sight of her lovers,
and no one shall rescue her out of my hand.*
- ¹¹ *I will put an end to all her mirth,
her festivals, her new moons, her Sabbaths,
and all her appointed festivals.*
- ¹² *I will lay waste her vines and her fig trees,
of which she said, 'These are my pay,
which my lovers have given me.'*
*I will make them a forest,
and the wild animals shall devour them.*
- ¹³ *I will punish her for the festival days of the Baals,
when she offered incense to them
and decked herself with her ring and jewelry,
and went after her lovers,
and forgot me, says the Lord.*

The other gods that Hosea was concerned with – the ones that the people of Israel kept slipping off to worship instead of the Lord – were nearly all nature-based gods. There was Dagon, the god of grain, Baal the god of the storm and rain, Asherah the goddess of fertility and crops, and so on. This isn't surprising. In nearly every culture and mythology we find that the earliest form of religion begins with nature. Some cultures personify the forces of nature into actual gods and goddesses, while others speak more of the "spirits" of the earth, but one way or the other, the default religion of humanity seems to be to worship nature.

Let's not be too scornful here and look down our noses at "primitive" religion. Let's face it: nature's pretty amazing. The idea of plants producing little hard bits that, if placed in soil and given water will turn into a whole plant of exactly the same kind as the original plant is pretty gobsmacking incredible. Or that birds and reptiles lay eggs that, depending on when you look inside, will either have liquid or baby animals. What is this magic? Creatures do things that we

could never do – fly, live underwater, weave webs – these are amazing. The very fact that new life appears to generate out of earth or our own bodies seems to proclaim the fact that there are powers contained in nature beyond our senses, and religious awe does not seem inappropriate before such miracles. Last week we talked about people who make money their god. *That's* primitive. Worshiping nature makes more sense than that, at least.

Hosea's problem with the Canaanite nature religion of his time was not that it made no sense, but rather that it didn't go far enough. As we've seen throughout this sermon series, one of the distinguishing features of idolatry is that idols are inadequate. Idolatry is settling for too little: worshiping appearances instead of reality, bowing down to means as if they were ends. Hosea's frustration is that the people are worshiping the gifts instead of the Giver. God says, in our reading, "Don't you realize that I was the one who gave you the grain, the wine, the new oil, the wool, and the flax that you're worshiping as gods? I even gave you the gold and silver that you're shaping into your idols! These things that you are worshiping as if they were gods are all just stuff I gave you! Hey! I'm over here!" In nature worship, again, people worship what is less than God, and thus are unworthy of worship.

But there's second problem with nature worship. This sort of religious practice is more than just respecting the everyday miracles of nature and honoring its power. It also invariably involves trying to control that power. Maybe it started when people noticed that they could prompt or manipulate some of nature's miracles. If you put manure on a field with seeds in it, you can make those seeds grow better. That's cool. If you chew on the soft inner bark of a birch tree, you can make a headache feel better. If you squash grapes, then leave the juice alone a while before you drink it, you can make everything feel better, at least briefly. Thus people began trying to influence nature. Then they started trying to control it entirely, forcing it to do their will, using their own "magic." So, for instance, some people painted their bodies with raindrop shapes and danced to thunderous drumbeats trying to cause rain: the rain dance. Others, would steal a hair from their enemy to put on a voodoo doll to exact magical revenge. There are a million variations, but in every society that has practiced a nature religion, there have been those who tried to force nature to do their bidding, selling love potions and curses, making protective charms, trying to call up spirits from the dead or even to summon powers from other worlds. The prophets have a lot to say about that side of nature religion, too: stay away from it. That has nothing to do with God. Anyone who tries to harness divine power is not talking about God, because God doesn't wear a harness. God doesn't play that.

So I've spent a fair bit of time today talking about the old nature religions that the prophets of the Hebrew Bible warned the people against, and you might wonder why. After all, isn't this sermon series supposed to be about the forms of idolatry that are becoming popular today, in our post-Christian world? Yeah, about that. Guess who's back?

In the 1950s, an English anthropologist founded a new religion that he called Wicca – a revival of witchcraft that tapped into ancient Celtic nature-based religious practices. Wicca has grown astronomically in numbers since then, in both the UK and the US, and mutated into dozens, even hundreds of different forms, so that "Wicca" now refers to a movement rather than a group. As with earlier incarnations of nature religions, Wicca involves both the positive side – respecting the mysterious power of nature – and the other side, trying to harness that power in the forms of potions and hexes and spells. You can buy supplies for your curses and ceremonies

at a magical supply store near you or from any of a number of online outlets. Witchcraft, in its various modern forms, has become almost mainstream today.

At this point, I could make fun of this movement, for a lot of reasons. Nature religion and magic have always attracted charlatans and hucksters promising power to the gullible, and there are certainly plenty of those today. In addition, as this style of faith grows more popular it is increasingly difficult to distinguish those for whom it is an actual religion from those who are playing at a new fad that feels *edgy*. But I won't throw stones: we don't have the moral high ground here. We Christians have our own share of hucksters and charlatans, and our own adherents who are just playing along until they get bored and decide to try something else. Mockery is easy, and useless, and I don't want to go there. Instead, I want to ask, "Why?" Why has this sort of nature-based faith resurfaced?

There are several answers to that question: let me suggest just one today. There is no religious book anywhere that is more clear than our Bible that humanity's task is to care for and respect God's creation. The first mention of the first human in the first story of Genesis describes him as the gardener, with the task of caring for God's world. Despite that witness in our own holy book, we Christians have done an abysmal job of it. In the industrial revolution, when technology in predominantly Christian nations set about the process of despoiling and destroying the earth for our progress and convenience, there were no Christian prophetic voices calling for people to care for creation. We were totally on board with "progress." Even now, as science has reversed course and is seeking to stop our self-destruction and to restore the earth, Christianity is lagging far behind. There are even voices within Christianity who oppose action against Global Warming for supposedly *biblical* reasons! Christ is coming soon anyway, so who cares? We have ignored our own God-given task, so we should not be surprised that people who care about God's creation are seeking faith anywhere but with us. Nor should we be surprised that at least some of those seekers are settling on a faith that *does* honor nature.

A couple of things in wrapping up. First, today we have identified another important indicator of idolatry. A religion that is focused on giving us power to achieve our own ends is not a true faith. As we find so often in idolatry, that god at the center of that faith is Me. Any God that is worth worshiping is a God that cannot be bridled and directed. Nevertheless, as I suggested earlier, I have some sympathy with nature-based religion. The mysteries and beauties of creation are indeed a holy book in which we can discover God. But let us make sure that we take that second step, that we don't stop with reverence for nature but go on to find the God who imagined it. Let us rediscover the mystery and power of God's good creation, then continue on to the Creator.