

A PROBLEM ADOPTION

Scriptures: Ezekiel 16 (selected verses); Hosea 11:1-9

Before I read our second scripture lesson, let me tell you a story.

From the day they adopted him, Laney knew there would be problems. His mother was a crack addict; his father ... well, the mother wasn't sure who the father was. When firefighters responded to a chimney fire, he was found abandoned in a back room of the house. He was taken to pediatric intensive care where he was treated for smoke inhalation, rapid heart rate, and a defect they discovered in his urinary tract.

As his nurse, Laney noticed that he stiffened when anyone tried to pick him up and avoided eye contact with all the nurses on the floor, except Laney. He would stare at her with his large brown eyes framed by long dark lashes, and one day, when he smiled at her, Laney was hooked. It was a long, complicated process to adopt him, but Laney and her husband went through all the hoops, and the day they brought him home was one of the happiest of her life.

They named him Jeb. Things went surprising well for Jeb, given his start in life. He had trouble sleeping and seemed to be in perpetual motion all the time, but he was good natured, and Laney delighted in giving him a beautifully decorated room, nice clothes, toys and books appropriate for each age, and above all a safe stable family.

But in Junior High things began to unravel. Jeb became surly and uncommunicative. He waged fierce battles with his father over the clothes he wore, the chores he didn't do, and the friends he hung out with. His grades dropped, and one day he was picked up for being truant.

Then a couple weeks later he did not come home at all. Laney frantically called all of his friends. None knew where he was, or so they said. Laney went on line and looked at his bank statement. One hundred and seventy dollars, all the money he had, had been taken out. She finally remembered his I-Phone that they had given to him for his birthday just the week before. She called the number, but all she got was a pawn shop. The owner said Jeb used it to get a loan. Laney slumped in her chair, sick with worry, wondering what to do next.

Let me stop there. Now I am ready to read our second scripture lesson. Turn with me to the insert in the bulletin, and follow along as I read Ezekiel 16:1-5.

(Read Ezekiel 16:1-5)

Israel's story was a lot like Jeb's. When God called Abraham, he was a landless nomad wandering from place to place to avoid famine. When God called Moses, he was a powerless slave fleeing from the Egyptians. When God called David, he was a shepherd boy too small to lift a sword. When God came to the people of Israel they were helpless. They had no home, no land, and no security. They were like an abandoned child.

But God adopted them and took care of them. Follow along as I read starting at verse 6.

(Read Ezekiel 16:6, 9-14)

These verses could be a metaphor for Israel in the time of King Solomon. Israel was rich and prosperous. Solomon built a great temple for the Lord and an even greater palace for himself. His wealth and fame spread throughout near East and Africa, so that even the Queen of Sheba came to see it. But Israel forgot the God who gave it to them. They began to think it was all their own doing, the result of their own power and cunning. They thought they no longer needed God. Look at verses 15-19.

(Read Ezekiel 16:15-19)

Israel's was not only God's adopted child, it was God's bride. God made a covenant with Israel, like a wedding vow, promising to be faithful to Israel for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in health and in sickness. But Israel threw herself at every foreign god and idol that came along, like a prostitute throwing herself at lovers one after the other. In fact there is a double meaning to these verses. Worshiping other gods was itself a form of adultery against God, but sometimes when Israel worshiped other gods, like Baal and Asherah, they practiced a literal form of sacred prostitution. Temple priestesses were impregnated in a kind of fertility ritual designed to entice the gods to give them fertile crops.

Can you imagine how God's heart must have been broken? Just like Laney's. And here is the irony of it. Israel used the very gifts given to her by God in order to worship other gods. The gold and silver that God gave to Israel were made into idols. The beautiful cloth with which God clothed her was sown into shrines for their rituals of prostitution. The perfumes God gave them were offered as incense to Baal and Asherah. It was like Jeb pawning his I-Phone. The very gifts his parents gave him were used against them.

Of course you and I would never do such a thing. We wouldn't take the prosperity that God has given us and use it for our own self-centered glory instead of God's, would we? We would never take the bodies God has given us and use them for lust instead of love, would we? We would never take the tongues God has given us and use them to tear people down instead of building them up. We would never take the minds God has given us or the freedom God has given us and use them to take advantage of other people instead of making their lives better. We would not do such things, would we?

Well, let me go back to the story of Jeb. When Jeb ran away he headed for Portland. At first it was exciting to be on his own. He used his money to get a cheap room downtown. He was free to come and go as he pleased. There was no one to tell him what to do. Of course, his money lasted about a week. Then he had to earn some more. But he was too young for anyone to hire him, except this guy he met on the street. He had the most tricked out car Jeb had ever seen, and the coolest clothes. He was so easy going and confident. He showed Jeb how to smoke this stuff that gave him a rush like nothing else he had ever experienced. He immediately wanted more, but the man told him he would have to earn it. So Jeb went to work for him, first as a lookout and later as dealer hanging around schools and playgrounds where Jeb could fit in, because he was the right age.

But one day Jeb's supply of drugs was stolen, along with the money he had made that day, and at the end of the day when he could not pay, the man he worked for beat him up and left bleeding on the sidewalk. And Jeb had a flashback to a day he barely remembered when he was alone in the room of a burning house paralyzed with fear. And he sobbed uncontrollably until he fell asleep right where he was lying.

Now look at Ezekiel 16, beginning at verse 35.

(Read Ezekiel 16:35-42)

This part of the chapter is a metaphor and sometimes a literal description of what happened to Israel at the time of the Exile. Their homes were burned. Their gold and jewels were pillaged. The people were stripped and taken away as slaves into captivity. And this was done by the very nations whose gods Israel had worshiped. Israel prostituted itself to Babylonian gods, and it was the Babylonians who did this to them.

Friends, the sad thing about idolatry is that it works. When you treat something in your life like a god, it becomes a god and rules your life with the power of a demon. People turn to drugs and alcohol to feel better, but eventually the drugs and alcohol take over their lives. The same thing can happen with any idol to which you give your life. If you give your life—your heart and soul—to a boyfriend or girlfriend, I guarantee they will eventually disappoint you, because no boyfriend or girlfriend can fill the space in your heart that is meant for God. If you throw yourself totally into your career or your sports or your home or even into your family—if any of these things become your god, if any of these things become the most important thing in your life above all else, they will let you down. I guarantee it. They will take your soul and leave you empty, because they cannot bear the weight of being God. They cannot fill the God shaped hole in your heart left there by the One who created you life in the first place.

The next morning Jeb was found by a policeman. At first Jeb panicked, but then he remembered he had no drugs left on him, nor any money, so resignedly he rose to his feet and trudged along as the policeman took him to the squad car and back to the station. That night when his parents came to get him, he did not know what to expect. He was afraid to look them in the eye. Laney stopped short when she saw his tattered clothes and his blood crusted, emaciated face. She too had a flashback to the child brought into the hospital after the fire. Without saying a word she walked across the room, took him in her arms, and held him until his shaking stopped and he began to breathe again.

Now let's read the last paragraph: verses 59-63.

(Read Ezekiel 16:59-63)

Have you been ignoring God for too long? Have you been searching for some substitute in your life to fill the God shaped hole left in your heart by the One who created you? It is not too late to come back.

- Ken Onstot
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