

God Loves You, and There's Nothing You Can Do About It
A Sermon for Pilgrim Church
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November 12, 2023

Introduction to the Text -

Last time on the Bible.... Two weeks ago, we met kings Rehoboam and Jeroboam, and witnessed the division of Israel into Northern and Southern kingdoms. Today, our reading is from the early 8th century before the common era, about a hundred years later - and the northern kingdom has come under the influence of Assyria. Just a decade after today's reading, Israel - also called Ephraim - will fall to Assyria and the people will be displaced. Hosea is a prophet in the northern kingdom, and in terms of the way Christians have organized the Hebrew Bible, he is one of the minor or shorter prophets. In this text, Hosea is speaking with God's voice to the people of the northern kingdom. And - Hosea is a poet, so his language is careful and beautiful.

Hoseah 11:1-9

When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son.

² The more I called them,
the more they went from me;
they kept sacrificing to the Baals,
and offering incense to idols.

³ 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.

⁴ I led them with cords of human kindness,
with bands of love.

I was to them like those
who lift infants to their cheeks.
I bent down to them and fed them.

⁵ They shall return to the land of Egypt,
and Assyria shall be their king,
because they have refused to return to me.

⁶ The sword rages in their cities,
it consumes their oracle-priests,
and devours because of their schemes.

⁷ My people are bent on turning away from me.
To the Most High they call,
but he does not raise them up at all.

⁸ How can I give you up, 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.

⁹ I will not execute my fierce anger;
I will not again destroy Ephraim;
for I am God and no mortal,
the Holy One in your midst,
and I will not come in wrath.

I've been thinking about sermons. I'm actually thinking of a series this winter, on good news for right now, and - this is not a rhetorical question - I wonder what sermon subjects come to your mind when I say that. Send me a note. I've already gotten a couple suggestions.

Eugene Peterson was a pastor for 29 years and a renowned Bible scholar. Most famous for The Message Bible, he worked to bring the Bible to people

in contemporary and understandable language. At his funeral, Eugene's son Leif told those gathered a secret. The secret was this: Despite publishing dozens of books, developing The Message Bible, preaching at the same church for decades - Eugene Peterson only ever had one sermon, one point. Just one. Just one thing he tried to get across to congregants and audiences. Just one idea that he whispered into his children's ears when they went to bed at night.

*"Because for fifty years you've been telling me the secret.
For fifty years you steal into my room at night and whisper it softly to my sleeping head.*

It's the same message over and over, and you don't vary it one bit:

"God loves you.

He's on your side.

He's coming after you.

He's relentless."¹

God loves you. God loves us, God loves humanity, God loves each one of us individually, too. God's love is steadfast, unending, no matter what. His compassions, they fail not. If a pastor is going to have one point, that's a good one.

It comes right from Hosea but it also comes right from Genesis, right from Exodus, right from Matthew, right from Mark....you see what I'm trying to get across to you. A lot of folks have the impression that God as portrayed in the Old Testament is a God of judgment - that God's love is somehow new in the New Testament - but it's not true. From age to age, God's love is eternal and God's compassions fail not.

¹ <https://www.phoenixpreacher.com/eugene-peterson-memorial-service/>

God's love, God's *chesed*, is right there in Hosea. The love of a parent for a child, is God's love for us.

When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son...

it was I who taught Ephraim to walk,
I took them up in my arms...

⁴ I led them with cords of human kindness,
with bands of love.

I was to them like those
who lift infants to their cheeks.
I bent down to them and fed them.

You have been a child, lifted up in love. You know what it means.

And Hosea, the prophet, testifies that even when the people - the northern kingdom - has turned to other Gods and acted out and ignored those ten commandments, those ten guidelines of love and community and worship - God's heart still turns toward compassion. Hosea and all the prophets of the Hebrew Bible call people back to God's ways - but God's love for the people is not in question.

God loves you.

God loves us.

God is love.

God is there for us.

God comes after us, calling us home.

God is steadfast - even, as Peterson would say, relentless.

It's a good sermon.

But I find that it can't be the only sermon.

Because, if, then....

If God is love, then what?

If God is love, then what are God's people to do?

Hosea has a then what sermon, too. If God is love, if God loves the people relentlessly, then people who belong to God must be people who love.

Hosea gives God's call in chapter 6,
"6 For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,
the knowledge of God rather than burnt-offerings."

God desires chesed, steadfast love.

So there are two good sermons,

God loves us.

God is love.

God is there for us.

God comes after us, calling us home.

God is steadfast.

Which means....

We, beloved by God, are called to love.

Called to love God - called to love God's people, called to love God's world.

So, two sermons, then. Two sermons that Hosea might have been trying to preach, two sermons that I try to preach over and over again in different ways.

But perhaps I don't have very much focus, because I think there's another step here, another message.

Prophets, from the Hebrew Bible through the Christian Testament - Hosea and Micah, Elijah and Jonah, John the Baptist - prophets hold both God's love and compassion, and God's expectations. Prophets get fiery,

channeling God in asking: what is wrong with this picture? Let a prophet get in the pulpit and they're going to ask you to do better. They're going to tell you what the consequences of injustice and faith-less-ness are. This sermon comes from Hosea, too:

² The more I called them,
the more they went from me;
they kept sacrificing to the Baals,
and offering incense to idols.

⁵ They shall return to the land of Egypt,
and Assyria shall be their king,
because they have refused to return to me.

⁶ The sword rages in their cities,

If God is love, and those who belong to God belong to love,
When the people turn from love,
The prophet preaching God's message calls them back.
The prophet calls them home.
The prophet calls them back to love.
The prophet reminds the people that without God's love and guidance, they
cannot do God's will.

So this is a third sermon that I think has to be preached on regular rotation,
the prophetic call to change.

God loves us.
God is steadfast.

Which means....

We, beloved by God, are called to love God's people, and love God's world.

When we turn away from love, God notices, and calls us out.

But the prophetic word is not offered for the purpose of chiding or condemning. It's *always* offered with hope for the future. We can always return to love. We can always return to compassion. We can always return to God. God is love and God will not stop. And in God's love we *can* build up God's reign of love, of compassion, of justice, of peace. And in God's love we *can* look forward with hope.

That sermon (that fourth sermon, yes you can go home and say, the pastor preached four sermons today, she was making up for something), that fourth sermon is also in Hosea, just a few verses further in the text.

I will return them to their homes, says the LORD.

Which is to say,
There is always hope for the future.

God loves us.

We are called to love God's people, and love God's world.

When we turn away from love, God notices, and calls us out.

But turning toward God, turning toward love, by God's grace, there is always a hopeful future in front of us.

Hosea 6, The Message (Eugene Peterson)

I'm after love that lasts, not more religion.

I want you to know GOD, not go to more prayer meetings.

Hosea 11:1-9, The Message (Eugene Peterson)

1-9 "When Israel was only a child, I loved him.

I called out, 'My son!'—called him out of Egypt.

But when others called him,

he ran off and left me.

He worshiped the popular sex gods,

he played at religion with toy gods.

Still, I stuck with him. I led Ephraim.

I rescued him from human bondage,

But he never acknowledged my help,

never admitted that I was the one pulling his wagon,

That I lifted him, like a baby, to my cheek,

that I bent down to feed him.

Now he wants to go *back* to Egypt or go over to Assyria—

anything but return to me!

That's why his cities are unsafe—the murder rate skyrockets

and every plan to improve things falls to pieces.

My people are hell-bent on leaving me.

They pray to god Baal for help.

He doesn't lift a finger to help them.

But how can I give up on you, Ephraim?

How can I turn you loose, Israel?

How can I leave you to be ruined like Admah,

devastated like luckless Zeboim?

I can't bear to even think such thoughts.

My insides churn in protest.

And so I'm not going to act on my anger.

I'm not going to destroy Ephraim.

And why? Because I am God and not a human.
I'm The Holy One and I'm here—in your very midst.