“In The Care of a Tender God”

Hosea 11:1-9

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Our story for today jumps ahead 100 years from where we were last week.

Last week we heard about Elijah and that duel between God and Baal.

We saw God reign victorious, reminding the people that Yahweh is faithful.

But that moment was brief when the people realize the Lord is indeed God

It was a short lived moment in history.

It didn’t take them long to return to their unfaithful ways.

They soon returned to worshipping Baal and being unfaithful.

So now our narrative skips ahead about 100 years.

We are still hearing about the people in the northern tribe.

At this point in history it is called Ephraim.

God has called up a new prophet, Hosea, to deliver messages and warnings to the people.

Most of the book of Hosea is filled with oracles from the prophet.

He is telling the people of Ephraim that they better change their ways.

If they don’t, they will deserve nothing short of destruction.

Hosea is particularly harsh toward the leaders of Ephraim.

The priests and prophets, the king and his officials.

These leaders are leading the people astray, just as their predecessors had.

The portion of Hosea that we read this morning marks a dramatic shift in the text.

It reveals quite a bit about the nature of God.

Let us continue to listen for the Word of God…

1 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.

This is the Word of the Lord…Thanks be to God.

Think of the most terrible thing a rebellious child might do.

Runaway from home, cutting himself off from the family?

Dabble with drugs before she submits to inescapable addiction?

Commit heinous crimes, placing him in the national spotlight?

Most parents don’t want to believe that their children are capable of such behavior.

Of dismissing all of the good things taught to them and living a life of crime and pain.

Wanda Kaczynski didn’t think her son was guilty of such behavior.

Her other son David had been working with the FBI for months to secretly catch his brother.

David Kaczynski had suspected that his brother, Ted, might be the Unabomber.

That he was responsible for the murder of 3 people and injuring dozens more.

When David went to tell his mother the news, that his brother had been arrested, she reacted in a way that caught him off guard.

She put “her arms around his neck and lightly kissed him on the cheek. Then, he says, she told him three things: That she knew this must be hard for him. That she knew he was a good man who loved his brother. That she knew David was wrong. She knew her oldest son, Ted, knew how fragile he was, and she knew Ted wasn't capable of murder.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

For Ms. Kaczynski, the notion that her son could do such a terrible thing was unthinkable.

As the investigation continued, she hoped it would all go away like a bad dream.

But when the news broke, it became clear that her son was indeed capable of committing such a crime.

And that he was guilty of that crime.

Most parents are shocked when they see their children rebel.

Acting out and misbehaving.

I experienced this on a microscopic level earlier this week when my 7 month old daughter bit me.

Square on the forearm.

I yelped with pain and examined the red marks left by her two tiny razor like teeth.

Amazing how such a tiny creature can create so much pain!

Of course it was easy to forgive her quickly, especially since she is not old enough to know she’s causing harm.

She’s simply getting used to her growing body and new teeth that have emerged from her tender gums.

But it certainly struck me as a new parent.

Here was this little child, unknowingly doing something bad and causing pain.

I began to wonder how much more painful it will be when she is old enough to know what she is doing.

Old enough to know right from wrong, yet chooses to do wrong.

This is one of the great laments of parenting.

Knowing that we can’t keep them safe forever.

Knowing we can’t prevent them from making poor choices and causing harm to self and others.

God certainly understands this lament, as we see throughout the Old Testament.

It doesn’t take much for the children of God to rebel.

To get distracted and diverted from God’s ways.

Even though life is much better for them when they are faithful to God,

They choose to stray.

God sends them prophet after prophet, to try and draw them back.

Elijah is unsuccessful, Hosea doesn’t fare much better.

The appeal of other gods is just too enticing.

The people of Ephraim are seduced by Baal and are unwilling to stop worshiping him.

Now it would be one thing for them to just divert their attention toward Baal.

To worship him and ignore Yahweh, their creator.

But the devotion to Baal goes beyond prayer or praise.

Baal is not satisfied by fleeting devotion.

Baal is much more demanding than that.

There are times when worshipers of Baal are told to hurt themselves, slicing their flesh with swords.

We saw this last week in our story on Mount Carmel when the people were trying to get Baal’s attention.

Worse still, there are times when human sacrifices are required to appease Baal.

So the people of Ephraim would offer up one of their own to satisfy this god’s wicked need.

Sadly, we still see behavior like this in our world today.

This week the world was rocked by several terrorist attacks.

The suicide bombers at a funeral in Baghdad, killing 18 people and injuring 40.

The suicide bombers in Beirut, killing 40 and injuring 200.

Suicide bombers and armed terrorists in Paris, killing 129 and injuring 300.

Each of these incidents have been linked to ISIS, a group of people who inaccurately represent the religion of Islam.

They are akin to the Nazi party in Germany, who skewed the Christian message to decimate 6 million Jews.

These ISIS terrorists are a small group of people who are not genuine representatives of the Islamic faith.

They are extremists who act out of hatred, because they have lost sight of what is good.

They have terrorized the world.

Causing tragedy after tragedy.

As we watch these stories unfold, the question of “where is God?” might cross our minds.

How is God responding to these acts of terrorism? We might wonder.

If we look to Hosea, we might just find our answer.

Throughout the book of Hosea, we see God trying to win the people back.

Trying to lure them away from their wicked lifestyles.

But God’s message falls on deaf ears.

They have knowingly done wrong, diminishing the image of God within them.

And they have no desire to return to God.

No doubt God can relate to the mothers and fathers of the people responsible for mass killings.

Those whose children send bombs through the mail, or offer themselves as a human sacrifice through suicide bombing.

God appears flabbergasted by Eprhaim’s behavior.

We hear anguish when God says “I loved my children.

I taught my children to walk,

I took them into my arms and held them close.

I healed them from their sickness.

I nurtured them and loved them.

And what do they do in response?

They rebel.

They shatter all goodness inside of them and commit these terrible acts!

They give their lives over to Baal and obey his every command.

They have forgotten all that I taught them,” God says.

God appears distressed and confused.

Wishing this was all just a bad dream.

But century after century, God’s children continue to rebel and stray,

Wandering further from God’s law and love.

The scary part is, according to the law, Ephraim’s punishment could have been severe.

The law in Deuteronomy states that rebellious children should be brought to the city gate to be stoned to death. [[2]](#footnote-2)

If God wanted to be true to that law, Ephraim would have been wiped away.

But God’s mercy was greater than the law.

Greater than any wrong the people of Ephraim could commit.

The response we see in Hosea chapter 11 is proof that God is sovereign.

That God is not trapped or limited by any law.

That God’s mercy and love enfolds even the worst behavior.

This is good news for the people of Ephraim.

Though they didn’t deserve grace and mercy, that’s what they receive.

God’s heart recoils.

God’s compassion grows warm and tender.

Debunking the claim that the God of the Old Testament is an angry and avenging God.

Instead, showing that God is a forgiving God.

A God who will not give up on anyone.

The text ends with God’s anger dissolving, promising not to destroy the people.

When we try to discern who God is.

What God’s character is like.

We can’t make assumptions based on those more commonly heard stories.

Like the great flood, or Sodom and Gomorrah.

Those stories where God’s anger seems out of control.

Because there are more telling passages which reveal the core of who God is.

Like this passage in Hosea.

Where we see the tenderness of God, lamenting over the rebelliousness of the children.

And yet no matter what they do, they are still enveloped by God’s love.

God will always welcome them back.

Here we see God as a parent.

A mother or father whose love for their children is strong.

A parent who can handle the roller coaster of childhood development.

As their children swing between love and hate, cooperation and aggression, security and anxiety.

These normal polarities that all children go through.

God is able see past them and maintain steadfast love for the rebellious children.

Unfortunately for the people of Ephraim, this message fell on deaf ears.

Hosea was unable to convince them that God is good and always willing to take them back.

So the people would stray even further from the fold.

Continuing to worship false gods, offering themselves as victimized sacrifices.

But hopefully this message is not lost on us.

Hopefully we can hear these words spoken through Hosea and catch a glimpse of who God really is.

That God is like a loving parent who will never give up on us.

This loving parent is one who comes to be with us and among us.

Taking on all of our hurts and pains.

That God is right there with us in the bloody aftermath of an attack on the City of Love.

God is there weeping and wondering how someone could commit such an act of terror.

Lamenting over how we the children of God continue to fight and respond to one another with violence.

Even though we perpetuate this wickedness and vile behavior, God doesn’t give up.

God stays faithful to us.

God chooses to love us.

Chooses to remain in the center of our lives.

We stand on the promise that this broken world is in the care of a tender God. Amen.

1. http://www.npr.org/2012/08/01/157737038/when-your-family-member-does-the-unthinkable [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Deuteronomy 21:18-21 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)