Hosea 11

Last Sunday at 10 o’clock there was a couple with a baby in church, and after the service one of the experienced mothers of grown-up children in the congregation was jokingly offering this couple some advice on bringing up children, so I made some comment about her being an expert, and she said, “Oh no, the point is, I don’t want them to make the mistakes I made.” When you look back at decisions you made in your life, at the way you related to people, at friendships you made, at the way you brought up your children, or your husband—what do you see? Are there things you’re proud of? Things you regret?

In that chapter from Hosea that we read, God is looking back like that, in the way a father or a mother does. “When Israel was a child, I loved him,” God says, “and out of Egypt I called my son.” In Hosea God does a lot of looking back like that, actually, and the looking back is always a bit sad. There are about six of these unhappy recollections in Hosea.

So in this recollection God looks back to when Israel was like a child, like a son, and God called him from Egypt. There was Israel in Egypt, and it was having a hard time. It was doing forced labor for the Egyptians. It was crying out to God. And God heard its cry, and he thought about the special relationship between himself and Israel, and the way things had gone south in Israel’s life. So he called them out of there.

Now last week I talked about the Lord’s Prayer and about there being two sides to being a father and two sides to having a father. Being a father means being committed to your sons and daughters; it also means them being committed to you. Jesus is talking about grown-up children, of course, people who work with you in the family business.

It’s the same idea in Hosea. God is Israel’s father. He’s calling them out of Egypt so they won’t be doing forced labor there anymore. But he’s calling them out of Egypt because they’re going to work in the family business with their father.

Their father is **calling** them. As our Gospel reading today it would have been neat to have the story of Jesus calling the first disciples, because that’s the same kind of event. Peter and Andrew and James and John weren’t involved in forced labor—they had a nice fishing business. But Jesus says, “Follow me.” He calls them out of it. And he calls them to follow him.

In some sense maybe God did that to you. Maybe he called you out of a life that was at best aimless and at worst tough. Maybe you didn’t have a call like that—maybe you were born into a church family and you stayed in church all your life. Maybe that means the call came to you before you were born—that’s what Jeremiah says happened to him. When he was still in the womb God called him. Or maybe you did need to be called out later. Maybe Jesus did say to you, “Come and follow me.” That’s what God did to the Israelites. “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.”

Now last week I mentioned Jesus’s story about the father with two sons, and when the father called one of them to go and work in the vineyard, he said he’d go, but then he bunked off. In that story Jesus was actually talking about Israel He was talking about what Hosea is talking about. “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son,” God says. But then he says, the trouble is, “the more I called them, the more they went from me.” Instead of serving him, following him, they served other gods, they followed other gods.

God carries on with the unhappy recollection.

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.

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.

God’s not the absent father or the uninvolved father. God was the one who taught this baby to walk, and took him up in his arms, and dangled him with those straps you use when you want the baby to walk but you don’t want them to fall over or get away, and lifted him up to kiss him, and bent down to feed him. You couldn’t have a more involved father. But, he says, “the more I called them, the more they went from me.” Instead of serving him, following him, they served other gods, they followed other gods.

So God called you, before you were born or after you were born. God taught you to walk. God took you up in his arms, and dangled you with those straps. God lifted you up to kiss you. God bent down to feed you. You couldn’t have a more involved father.

The question is, how did you respond? How are you responding now? What kind of a son or daughter are you?

If you’re a father or a mother, you don’t let you son or daughter get away with everything. You probably let them get away with some things, but not with everything, for all sorts of reasons. And sometimes you’re not sure what to do this time. And God’s the same. Hosea imagines God wrestling with the question of what to do about his disobedient son. “He can blooming well go back to Egypt is he doesn’t want to behave like my son,” God says.

But then he says, “But how can I make that happen? How could I do that? “How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.” A friend of mine who is the mother of two boys commented to me on how this passage made sense to her. She said she thought her bond with her boys was deeper than her bond with her husband. She loved her husband, but he was still a physically different person from her. She had a different kind of bond with her sons. They had come into existence inside her own body. They had come out from her. She could quite see how God said he couldn’t give up his son. The usual Hebrew word for compassion is actually its word for a woman’s womb. Compassion is the feeling you have for the children who came out from your womb. That’s how God feels in relation to us. It’s as if he gave birth to us. My friend said that no matter what wrong things her sons did, she could never throw them out or disown them or refuse to have anything to do with them. They’ll always be the sons who came out of her womb.

So that’s how God feels about Israel, and how God feels about the church, and how God feels about you. He knew you before you were born, and he called to you then, he called you out of the womb. He called you to follow him. He can’t stop seeing you as his child.

So. When God sees his church failing him, when he sees you or me letting him down, he does get fed up and he half-wishes he could just be rid of us, but he can’t.

My heart recoils within me (he says);  
 my compassion grows warm and tender.

I will not execute my fierce anger;  
 I will not again destroy Ephraim.

And then he adds something else about himself. Why can’t he be rid of us? Why can’t he just get really angry with us? Well, he says, it’s

because I am God and no mortal,  
 the Holy One in your midst,  
 and I will not come in wrath.

There’s something here that would be funny if it wasn’t so sad. Lots of people think that God is someone who is by nature wrathful. They think that he’s very different from us human beings. We don’t get full of anger, we don’t act out our anger. God does. Now when people say that about themselves, they’re probably kidding themselves, right? From time to time, at least, we do act out our anger. And sometimes we’re right. Sometimes parents do terrible things to children, and sometimes they’re wrong, but sometimes you sympathize with them and we don’t blame them.

I’m not like that, says God.

because I am God and no mortal,  
 the Holy One in your midst,  
 and I will not come in wrath.

You’d have thought that being holy meant that God was tough and acted in judgment, but he says it’s the opposite. God being the holy one means God really being God, and being supernatural, and being different, and not being like a human being. And the essence of God in his holiness is that he doesn’t act in wrath. Well no, that’s putting it too strongly. He knows that sometimes he must give expression to his anger, he mustn’t let us get away with it this time. But anger never has the last word.

because I am God and no mortal,  
 the Holy One in your midst,  
 and I will not come in wrath.

My heart recoils within me (he says);  
 my compassion grows warm and tender.

The last thing Hosea said in giving us that kind-of testimony from God was this. Given that he’s that kind of God, Hosea says,

They shall go after the Lord,  
 who roars like a lion;

when he roars,  
 his children shall come trembling from the west.

They shall come trembling like birds from Egypt,  
 and like doves from the land of Assyria;   
 and I will return them to their homes, says the Lord.

What you know about God means you know you can’t mess with him, but you also know that his compassion always grows warm and tender. You know you can always come back. You’ll come back trembling, but you can always come back. So if this morning you know you need to come back, come back.

*First Reading*  Hosea 11:1-11

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;

they kept sacrificing to the Baals,  
 and offering incense to idols.

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.

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.

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

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

my people are bent on turning away from me.  
To the Most High they call,   
 but he does not raise them up at all. **4**

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.

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.

They shall go after the Lord,  
 who roars like a lion;

when he roars,  
 his children shall come trembling from the west.

They shall come trembling like birds from Egypt,  
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