

## Hosea 11: 1-11

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.

10 They shall go after the Lord,  
who roars like a lion;  
when he roars,  
his children shall come trembling from the west.

11 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.

## Luke 12:13-21

13 Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.”

14 But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” 15 And he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

16 *Then he told them a parable:* “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. 17 And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’

18 Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 19 And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’

20 But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ 21 So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

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What do you think about when you think about God? I wish someone had given me a nickel for every time I heard God referred to as, “the big Man upstairs.” I’d be a wealthy man, at least I’d have a few thousand bucks. Thing is, every time I heard some one say that about God, I would automatically make some excuse up about the speaker. I would say things like, “He really doesn’t mean to describe God that way.” Or surely she doesn’t envision God as a man!”

If that’s how you think about God, or if that is how you express your understanding about God, don’t worry. I’m not here this morning to put you down or offer a negative critique of your belief, your understanding of God. There was a time when I would have let you have it; but the years bring humility, don’t they? And the fact is that I don’t know any more about God than you do. Sure I’ve probably read more books by people who like to write about God, and goodness knows that as an every Sunday preacher, I may think about God more than you (hold it! How could I know that?)-- it’s just an assumption, anyway.

We learn about God from many sources. We learn from the names we give God, “Big Man Upstairs,” I knew a woman who suffered from alcoholism who, as part of her step work, simply called God, “Donkey” because it was to “Donkey” that she loaded the burden of her past and her present.

We can also learn about God apart from what others tell us simply by paying attention; by observing and listening and feeling. We learn about God by watching or listening to the experiences of others, we learn about God through our reading, and through the reading of what others tell us about God especially from the writings we find in the scriptures we call holy.

Hosea’s understanding of God was beautifully composed in what was to be the eleventh chapter of the prophecies bearing his name., where he rehearsed the salvation history beginning with the Exodus. I read it to you a moment ago, let me bring it a little up to

date for you now.

## God Debates God's Self

I loved them so much that I brought them back to life.  
They answered quickly enough the first time I called;  
    less quickly --then not at all-- after that.  
Then, they chose lesser gods.  
(What was wrong with me?)  
I was Mama and I was Daddy to them-- from  
    the beginning.  
While they were still defenseless they did  
    not know that it was I who made everything  
    all right.

(The case has been made. There is no defense.)  
    Time for the judgment...

And just then, God screamed...  
(Here is a confused whirlwind of rage, and of consequences.  
It is as if God has gone insane.  
As if God is striking out to hurt Israel wherever and however possible.

"...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."

And why is that?  
Why did it have to happen?  
Is it because God is damaged.

Q: How can that be? Who could hurt God?

A: Israel, by breaking the covenant.

    And this lesser god (ironically called the "most high") can't do anything for them.  
I can do it all, the "most high" can do nothing, and to which  
Does Israel turn? The (so-called) "most high"!  
Are you kidding me?

Then God says,  
It's not going to happen. I can't do it.  
It is a physical revulsion. I love them too much.  
Besides, I am God and I do not do business like mortals.

So I'm going to bring them home, (even though they do not deserve it).  
I'm just going to bring them home.

This is such a marvelous story, and to think that it was written maybe around 725BC.  
What's that 2,735 years ago?

Yes there are consequences for renegeing on the deal (or if you'd prefer the stained glass language-- breaking the covenant). Yes the response of God's Spirit is predictable. And yes, God will not be the only One who weeps. Israel's head is on the chopping block; the axe has been raised high above. It reminds us of one of those Hollywood medieval executions where everybody is cheering the executioner, "Go ahead! Strike hard! Strike cleanly! He deserves it!"

And then everything stops. Slowly the axe is lowered the victim is untied and allowed to return home free. It's as though we knew it all along. It's religion reduced to the final reel of the Saturday matinee thriller but it was so close even though we knew, still we weren't sure of the outcome. Then we admonish ourselves: we should have been sure; after all, we've heard this story before.

Everything in me wants to believe in that God. Especially when this story will be writ large again in the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth. But just like the grace we believe in is costly, so remains the quiet claim of God on us-- "No other Gods before me." Not even Hosea's "most highs".

Like the wealthy man in Jesus' parable. I'm not sure what his big sin was. After all I hope you didn't expect him to leave his excess harvest in the field to rot. Of course he needed more barns, bigger barns; perhaps it was because he wanted to be a good steward. But I think Jesus' point was that he had far more than he needed. Remember Jesus got along with-- not much. At one point in the gospels he reportedly said, "Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."

But also in the gospels we could get the impression that Jesus got along with what he needed. In fact, I wonder if-- as we acquire more and more stuff that we don't need, if we're not guilty of the same sort of thing that this barn builder, or even Israel was guilty of-- that is, seeking the comfort of the so-called "most high" god, while forgetting the real God, forgetting the One who brought us to this place Forgetting the One who taught us how to walk and led us through the tough times.

This morning we have the opportunity to remember that God in a very special way, by joining with him in a meal that comes from two of the staples of the land where Jesus lived: wheat and grapes. For the people of that day and this these represent subsistence, nutrition and the foundation of life.

It's important that we remember what we call God and that in every instance remember to think of God as being both very near and very far. I don't think we can go far wrong by giving God the love and respect due the One that the prophet told us about.

By sharing in this sacred meal we remember the God we disappoint, the God who is so frustrated with us that we find ourselves in danger-- only to be reminded again and revived again by God who will never deny us, never abandon us, never stop loving us-- simply and purely because it is not a human being, a lesser god, or even the "most high" we are concerned with this morning, but God alone.