

**Sinners In The Hands Of A Loving God**  
**Hosea 11:1-11**  
**Preached by Rev. Dr. Harry Cahill**  
**Babcock Presbyterian Church**

Before we delve into today's message, let's first meet the Messenger, Hosea, a prophet who left his home in Judah and ministered in the northern Kingdom of Israel about 700 years before Christ.

Like the Maytag repairman on TV, a Hebrew prophet was "the loneliest man in town," not because no one needed him, but because no one wanted him. You see, prophets were Truth Tellers, saying things no one wanted to hear. They held up the proverbial mirror forcing corrupt Kings, merchants and priests to face their unjust practices. Above all prophets condemned and antagonized just about everybody for being apostate, falling away from the true faith and chasing after false gods. Since no good deed goes unpunished these prophets were usually under attack for their unrelenting calls for repentance and justice.

Not surprisingly many of the prophets begged God to be released from their vows, but all of them eventually towed the line, usually at great cost to themselves, as they shared in the overwhelming burden of God's wrath and sorrow over his children's disobedience, knowing the dire consequences of their actions would bring about untold pain and misery.

So prophets weren't just God's spokesmen, they also experienced God's sorrow and anger while helplessly watching their neighbors self-destruct.

Hosea himself has been nicknamed "the prophet of doom" but paradoxically, emerging from his prophesies of divine judgment was the gospel of unconditional love. The Lord's patience may wear thin, but it never wears out because through it all God remains faithful even when we're not.

Certainly being preachers was what the prophets were primarily known for, but they were also known for making their most salient points by taking dramatic, symbolic actions. For Hosea, it meant taking a prostitute for his wife. Mind you, his bride was a cultic prostitute who participated in the fertility rites of the pagan religion. So this marriage, coupling a faithful groom with an unfaithful wife, was actually an intentional metaphor for God's relationship with Israel. Despite God's deep love for his people, they chose to worship pagan gods and take up their pagan ways, the unintended consequences being a slow downward slide into immorality and injustice that finally led to Israel being consumed by her enemies,. And that's exactly what happened when the Assyrians conquered and destroyed Israel in 722 B.C. with both the ruling classes and ordinary citizens carried off into slavery never to be heard from again. That's why they were called the Lost Tribe of Israel.

Now, it's understandable why we might draw the conclusion since these Jews turned away from God, God turned around and kicked them to the curb. And an argument could be made God sent the Assyrians to punish Israel and Hosea's writings are in essence a warning of the wrath to come for anybody who double-crosses God.

But why do we think that? Probably because that's usually how we feel when ever anyone betrays us. We get angry, even enraged and demand instant justice, "Let the chips fall where they may...you'll get exactly what you deserve, and I'll have the satisfaction of seeing you suffer!"

But, as the prophet Isaiah revealed, our ways are not God's ways. We do God a great disservice whenever we project our feelings of hurt over betrayals, both real and imagined, on to him. Unlike God, we demand our pound of flesh, we want justice, and not necessarily with mercy because justice without mercy is a horrible fate.

If anyone ever had a right to demand justice without mercy it was Jesus when he suffered on the cross. Jesus had every right to glare at his tormentors and damn them all to hell. But he didn't. Instead he prayed, "Father, forgive them..." Jesus expressed love and forgiveness for his enemies and that should tell us something about the wrath of God. It's tempered with mercy even though we don't deserve it.

We get a real sense of God's compassion overcoming his anger in today's scripture. After multiple chapters documenting Israel's idolatry and disobedience, suddenly, God, speaking through Hosea, revealed his unconditional love despite Israel's ingratitude.

*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 Bā'als  
and offering incense to idols.  
Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk.  
I took them up in my arms  
but they do not know that I  
healed them...  
I was to them like those who lift infants  
to their cheeks.  
I bent down to them and fed them.*

*(Hosea 11:1-4)*

Once in a while you hear someone make the erroneous claim, "the Old Testament is all about law and says nothing about grace." This passage from Hosea proves this allegation totally false. Here God reveals himself to be the

wronged parent whose love for his children causes more pain than anger. This is an image of God we need to take seriously, for our own good.

Let's face it, we're prone to remake God in our own image, especially when we presume to know God's deepest feelings and make confident predictions of his actions against evil doers. That's why fire and brimstone preachers have scared their flocks into worshipping this so called Old Testament God who cuts down those who betray him with his terrible swift sword.

Probably the most influential of these sermons, delivered by Jonathan Edwards in 18th century New England, was entitled "Sinners In the Hands of An Angry God." His congregation was warned sinners were like spiders hanging by a thread over an open flame. Sermons like that leave us believing God wants us to fear his wrath and inclination to punish sinners.

But today's passage, and scores of others like it, reverses this simplistic image of a great and angry God into the God whose anger is tempered with disappointment and grief whenever his children go wrong. Make no mistake, God gets angry when he sees us participate in injustice, immorality and corruption, but his is the anger of the long suffering parent who can only stand by and helplessly watch his children destroy themselves, because we have a will of our own and we don't know how to use it. And yet, despite all his pain and suffering, God still wants us back.

Remember Hosea's dramatic, symbolic act, marrying a pagan prostitute and loving her despite her unfaithful ways? When his wife, her name was Gomer, finally abandoned Hosea and returned to her cultic prostitution, God sent Hosea out looking for her and to buy her back from the temple for 15 pieces of silver, another powerful metaphor of God's willingness to buy us back from our foolish ways, even when we don't deserve it.

Once again, let me make this clear, God's wrath is real, because when we reject his Lordship, we end up hurting ourselves and each other. That's what makes God angry.

Think of it this way, on anyone's birthday, as the mother and father marvel at their new born child, there's a bond mysteriously formed between parent and child that cannot be severed. On that first day of new life, the mother and father realize their child will always be their child. They will pour themselves into nurturing their son, their daughter into becoming a physically, emotionally and spiritually healthy human being. Fears about the dangers of childhood and the perils of youth are present but unspoken. Instead they face the future with hope.

While no earthly parents are perfect their love for their children is a reflection of God's love for us. And all loving earthly parents would do anything within their power to intervene in their children's lives in order to save them from

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needless pain and disappointment. But like God, there's only so much a parent can do because in the end children are free agents, free to make their own choices, even the wrong ones.

But unlike earthly parents, there's something God can do that no one else can do and he did it: God sent his only begotten son who of his own free will remained obedient to his Father in Heaven, and willingly died for the sins of the world, those same sins we've been talking about this morning, that break God's heart because we end up hurting ourselves and each other when we could have been loving and caring for each other.

As we gather around our Lord's Table this morning to remember Christ's obedience and also our disobedience, also remember how God so loved the world he gave us his only son who like Hosea who bought back his wife from the pagan temple, buys us back from the power of sin and death through his death on the cross.

Does God get angry with us? Yes he does. Does God demand justice? Yes he does. And for both Jesus alone paid the terrible price, because God is love

May the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ broken and spilled out for our sakes and our salvation not only remind us of God's love for sinners but also empower us to destroy our love for sinning so we can heal God's broken heart by becoming obedient and grateful children whose only desire is to please God and bring him great joy.