

Hosea 11:1-11

Aren't kids wonderful? For those of you who might not have known, I spent the past week with a whole bunch of kids during our High Seas Expedition Vacation Bible School. And I can still say sincerely that kids are wonderful. For the most part, I think, or at least I hope, we can all agree on that. Especially when they're very young, though, people we don't even know will fawn over anybody's newborn, that's how wonderful we think kids are. And we wonder, with anticipation and expectation what they will make of their lives as they grow in our shadow, under our guidance. If you're not a parent, you're at least a child of parents, or grandparents or step-parents, or even someone significant in your life who was like a parent to you. We work so hard to document our kids' lives. When I was a kid, my parents kept baby books for my siblings and me. You know the kind of thing, right? A place to record our firsts: first haircut, first tooth, first word, first step, and so on, all so they could look back someday and see how we've developed. Some people create "Brag Books" so they can regale others with pictures and stories of how wonderful our kids are. In this era of YouTube and instant uploading of videos, pictures and information via Facebook or any other means, I'm not sure baby books are really in use, although, we haven't had to worry about our son's for a good 15 years. We've celebrated school awards, sports awards, learning to ride a bike, learning to drive, graduations, etc. When they're doing great, we're right behind them, winking, saying, "Yeah, I taught him or her that."

But, then what happens? Somewhere along the way we stop recording those things. Our kids may become not so endearing or precious. They become less and less dependent on us and our wise counsel and good advice. We teach them to walk, and eventually they walk away from us. We teach them to talk, and eventually they talk back to us, sometimes in very impolite or inappropriate ways, or worse, they don't talk to us at all. They become fiercely independent, making choices that we're absolutely SURE we did or would advise against, things that make us cringe, cry or just downright ANGRY. We want to scream, "What on earth have you done?!" and sometimes we do. Sometimes we pass the buck to the other parental influence, "Do you know what YOUR daughter did?" Suddenly, we disavow ANY personal involvement or influence in the child's life. As our children become self-reliant and self-determining, our ability to discipline is lost.

We can maybe draw some comparisons with what God knows will happen as his rebellious child stays away. v.5 "They shall return to Egypt..." keep going back to the old habits, ways of doing things, "Assyria will be their king..." indicating that the child will be under someone's or something else's power and influence, counter to our parental influence, and there isn't a thing we can do about it. "Swords will flash..." Okay so maybe not swords, but what about needles, pills, bottles, guns or knives? I don't know how many of us have experienced such things, as parents or as children, but I want you to consider, the day to day tragedies we hear or read in the news. When a young life is taken, by any means, there is a parent somewhere

in the background who fought to raise that child. When a person commits a crime, is found out and imprisoned, there is a parent, somewhere in the background, certainly not celebrating this latest accomplishment of their child, not looking to add another page to the Brag Book, but grieving, in pain, wondering where they went wrong, wondering, "I thought I raised you better," wondering maybe how their love could have been so ineffective.

What Hosea has presented us here in this text is an intimate, internal divine dialogue, a glimpse into a lonely, sad, painful moment of reflection and deliberation. God, the single parent of a rebellious child, here using the role of a single child to represent the nation and religious community of Israel, struggles with whether or not to punish a disobedient child. The pain, sadness, hurt and resentment are evident in the words, the reminiscences, God looking back at the baby book, if you will, of His adopted people, Israel. "Look at all these things I've done for you. Is THIS the thanks I get?" This internal, private dialogue is not meant to be a guilt-trip to sway Israel to return. We parents are good at that, though. Just look again at what's being said, "My son" – God is staking a claim already, or in this instance re-claiming a relationship that began with the Exodus. The cover of this evening's bulletin is an attempt to portray the intimacy of the relationship that God speaks of in these verses, a relationship that is ours, too. God continues, "I loved you, I fed you, I taught you to walk, I picked you up when you fell, I kissed away the pain of the scrapes, bumps and cuts, I LOVE you, STILL." No, this painful reflection is for God's contemplation only.

Japanese-Lutheran theologian Kazoh Kitamori claims, "The real meaning of the cross of the Lord is the pain of God"¹ and this pain is the heart of the gospel.² But, what IS the "pain of God?" This pain is more a textbook definition that encompasses physical, mental or emotional suffering, distress or torment. God's pain reflects God's will to love the object of wrath, namely, sinners. God's pain is the result of loving the unlovable.

Rather than endure this pain, should not God then simply give them up, leaving them to the destruction that met Admah and Zeboiim in an earlier day (Deut 29:23)? Now, just for the sake of information, Admah and Zeboiim were cities that were destroyed in the downfall of Sodom and Gomorroah. Indeed, Deuteronomy itself seems to require it, exacting the death penalty for the rebellious son who refuses to obey his parents (Deut 21:18-21). But God cannot go there—not because of who Israel is, but because of who God is.³ We even hear God justify the choice to withhold wrath, because, "I am GOD, and not man."

This intimate, loving although lopsided relationship that the people of Israel had with God, that sits on the brink of complete destruction, is too meaningful for God to bring to an end. We, too enjoy that relationship with God, not because we did anything better or less worse than the people of Israel in Hosea's time, but because God acted. God's adoption of us, obtained by Christ and sealed in our Baptism is

¹ Kitamori, Kazoh. *Theology of the Pain of God*. (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1958), 50.

² *Ibid*, 19.

³ Gaiser, Frederick J., "Preaching God: Hosea 11:1-11," *Word & World*, Vol. 28, No. 2, (2008): 204.

the beginning of the same relationship. This pain of God's is the final word of the gospel, i.e. the forgiveness of sins. This is why the Incarnation and the Cross matter! God's pain isn't possible without the flesh, blood and death of His only Son, Jesus.

We have in this reading a beautiful image of a loving parent, a loving God, a God willing to withhold wrath for the sake of love. Often, we might hear that God of the Old Testament was the God of Wrath, while the God of the New Testament is the God of Love, represented in and through Jesus. But this isn't the only example of God's love and compassion in the Old Testament; there are many others. How wonderful if it would end here, and this was the sum total of what we needed to hear from and about God. Unfortunately, for the people of Israel, the story isn't that nice and tidy. God doesn't withhold wrath all the time, and the people of Israel will continue to find that out, as will we. But, behind that wrath is the love of a parent, a parent who has undergone an intense internal struggle over whether to punish or love. One author made this observation, "*No, God has been gracious before, and God will execute anger again, even in the coming chapters of Hosea—though Hosea, along with the other prophets, understands that God's anger is never merely capricious but always in the service of grace.*"⁴

Like God, we continually call after our children, and most children, like Israel in the second verse, will run further and further, maybe feeling nagged or smothered. God didn't wait until the situation got bad to start calling. Nor did God stop calling when it looked like there was no hope of the wayward child heeding and returning. God doesn't stop loving, calling after the rebellious one. God persists, and God says, "Eventually, I will see you return to me, and I will settle you back in your home." God doesn't wait for us to make the first move. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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⁴ Gaiser, *Word & World*, 208.