

Hosea 5:15-6:3 *Then I will return to my lair until they have borne their guilt and seek my face—in their misery they will earnestly seek me.” 6 “Come, let us return to the Lord. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds. 2 After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence. 3 Let us acknowledge the Lord; let us press on to acknowledge him. As surely as the sun rises, he will appear; he will come to us like the winter rains, like the spring rains that water the earth.”*

Return to the Lord

1. The Lord tears to pieces
2. The Lord heals
3. Let us earnestly know the Lord

When I was growing up in the mountains of Colorado, I had a dog. He was a little dachshund, a wiener dog. His name was Herman, but my dad called him a stupid mutt. In fact, my dad called him stupid so much he would come running when someone yelled, “stupid.” To show how well that fit, one spring, probably around late April, we went for a drive to Twin Lakes at the foot of Mt. Elbert. The ice on the lake was just breaking up. Big chunks of ice were floating in the lake. My mom had Herman on a leash as we were walking around. We walked out to the end of the dock to look at the lake. We stopped when we got to the end; Herman didn’t. The stupid mutt walked right off the end of the dock and landed on a chunk of ice. The ice flipped over and Herman went straight down. It was a good thing my mom had a good hold of the leash. She yanked on the leash, choking Herman with his collar and pulled him back up on the dock.

I know that must have hurt him. He was choking and coughing for a while, but my mom had to choke him to save him. Sometimes, that is the way God must deal with us also. Hosea teaches us today that even though God hurts, he will also heal. So, Hosea calls on us today to return to the Lord.

How do you picture God? We have many symbols to picture God for us: The Good Shepherd, a lamb, a father, even a dove. All these symbols remind us of what a loving, caring God we have. Would you ever think of God as a lion? That is what he calls himself in the verse before our text. God said, “For I will be like a lion to Ephraim, like a great lion to Judah. I will tear them to pieces and go away; I will carry them off, with no one to rescue them.” (Hosea 5:14) How is God like a lion? He kills. He devours. He destroys. Not the picture of God that we like to have, is it?

He not only devours. He then withdraws his gracious presence. *Then I will return to my lair until they have borne their guilt and seek my face—in their misery they will earnestly seek me.* God has promised, “I will be with you always to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20) and “Wherever two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.” (Matthew 18:20) We take comfort in the promise of God’s presence. But what if we neglect him? What if we ignore God? What if we get so wrapped up in our lives that we never have time for his Word and seldom have time for worship? Would he have reason to say to us *Then I will return to my lair until they have borne their guilt?* That’s what we deserve for our sin. Isaiah said, “But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.” (Isaiah 59:2)

We call it adultery. When you give your love to someone who is not your spouse. When we give our love to anything other than God, it’s spiritual adultery. When anything becomes more important to us than God and his Word. When we trust in ourselves more than we trust in God, when we put our own wants and pleasures before what God says, we are committing spiritual adultery.

What happens when there is adultery in a relationship? Divorce. So, when we are guilty of spiritual adultery, God should divorce us. People ask, “Where did God go?” Instead, they should be asking, “What did we do to drive God away?” Instead of asking why God would allow the coronavirus to cause so much disruption to our lives, maybe we should be asking, “How have we treated God lately?” Maybe we should look at our lives and marvel that God doesn’t bring worse things on us.

It’s not just the coronavirus. We have family problems, job problems, friends that hurt us, health issues and financial setbacks. How do we react to troubles in life? Look at Judah and Israel. What did they do? When attacked by an enemy they looked either to Egypt or Assyria for rescue. What they failed to do is look to God for help.

What do we do first when we have health problems? The doctor. When we have family problems, where do we turn first? When you have homework problems, where do you look for help?

Now, don't misunderstand. There is nothing wrong with going to a doctor or a teacher for help. The point is, where are we going first for help when adversity strikes? Isn't it true that so often we turn to the world first for help and then, if that doesn't work, we wonder where did God go?

When it seems that God is tearing our world apart, we need to understand that God is like a surgeon. It is necessary for a surgeon to cut the flesh in order to remove a cancerous tumor. A person with cancer might not feel that bad before the surgery. Then the surgeon comes along, cuts him up and brings pain into his life. But that is necessary for the person to have healing. God allows us to suffer the consequences of our sins so that we can find healing in him.

Martin Luther encouraged Christians to distinguish between the punishment of love and the punishment of wrath. We can distinguish them only when we see them in the cross of Christ. The Apostle Paul announced, "Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. {34} Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died--more than that, who was raised to life--is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us." (Rom 8:33-34) God punishes sin. But he punished Jesus in our place. Through faith, we stand justified or not guilty before God. We do not suffer the punishment of wrath. Jesus suffered it that for us on the cross.

That does not mean that bad things won't happen to us. Paul goes on, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? {36} As it is written: 'For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.'" (Rom 8:35-36) He doesn't say that we won't have troubles anymore. He does say that the troubles we have, are part of God's love for us. This is the punishment of love. It is the discipline which a father will impose on his child when he runs into the street without looking. He makes his child suffer, but only because he loves him and does not want to see him hurt. So, God may bring suffering on us only so that we will cling to him more closely. We can see his love in these things only when we see the cross.

So, let us return to the Lord. *"Come, let us return to the Lord. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds. ²After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence.* Let us return to the Lord in true repentance. Let's not treat God's forgiveness like a PEZ dispenser: push button and out pops forgiveness. True repentance means owning up to what we have done. It means admitting our guilt. Let's be honest that we haven't loved God completely. We haven't always been easy to get along with. We haven't always made the lives of the people around us easier. Let's return to the Lord with true repentance.

Bringing only our sins and our hurts, let us look to him for healing. During the Sundays of Lent, we have been beginning with the gathering rite, "Remember Your Love." We sing, "Remember your love and your faithfulness, O Lord. Remember your people and have mercy on us, Lord." That is a wonderful prayer of repentance and trust. May that be our constant prayer.

May we return to the Lord but then, let's also strive to be closer to him. *Let us acknowledge the Lord; let us press on to acknowledge him. As surely as the sun rises, he will appear; he will come to us like the winter rains, like the spring rains that water the earth.* "Press on" has the picture of a hunter pursuing his prey. That is the way we were to return to the Lord: pressing the attack, not in half-hearted measures, but with all our energy.

Then believe his promise. He will come like the rain. Do you think it will rain in Appleton this spring? As certain as it will rain this spring, it's just as certain that God will bring us healing.

So, let us press on to acknowledge him. We are often too passive in our faith. We need to be more deliberate in learning and growing in our understanding of God's Word. We've talked about this in the past. Make a plan. Set goals of Bible reading and Bible learning. Attend Bible Study.

My dog Herman was a wonderful pet. But at times he could be a stupid mutt. When it comes to your faith, don't be Herman. Be smart. Return to the Lord.