

“How do we respond?”

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### Hosea 11:1-9

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.

One of the strange things about being a pastor is that this is not only my job, it is a calling. I am not just an employee here at the church, I am also part of the community.

Being a pastor to you, there is a deeper sense of relationship than with employees or even coworkers. The work of the church is not just a job that I do, or a job that you do, it is part of who we are. It is what we believe in. And so we don't just see each other, we know each other. It's not instant, because building meaningful relationships takes a while. When I first came to Grace, over 6 years ago, part of what I was looking forward to about it was that I didn't know how long I would be here. Every other position I had previously, I knew exactly how long it would last before I moved on. When I worked for churches for 9 months, or a year, it always felt like I was just finally getting to know people better before it was time to move on. But coming here, not knowing how long we would stay, opened up that possibility for deeper relationship.

And so many of you not only know me, but also know my family - my husband Tobin, and our son, Lincoln. And if you know anything about Tobin, you probably know that he is a great dad. He got his first experience caring for a young child when he was a teenager — he was 13 years old when his younger sister was born, and in many ways he was her main caretaker when she was young. For a few years, Tobin worked in childcare at the Y here, but over the summer he left that job so he could be with Lincoln. When Tobin is with Lincoln, he is kind, patient, imaginative, and playful.

So, with all that in mind, it might surprise you to hear about Tobin's philosophy about teenagers — that they should be sent to boarding school in Europe. He has told me this since before we had kids, that he is going to love having them as a baby and as a child, but when it gets to be a teenager, Tobin just can't deal with that — off to boarding school in Europe. Tobin brings this up still from time to time, and I know it is mostly a joke ... (but maybe not entirely....)

Our scripture today is a beautiful poem where God is compared to a loving and doting parent. God is a father who tended to his daughter, feeding her and kissing her boo-boos; God is a mother who held her toddlers hand as he waddled through his first steps and scooped him into a tight hug. But now, God's beloved, sweet, adorable baby has grown into a rebellious teenager, full of eye-rolling attitude and defiance. This teenager is not one harmlessly pushing

the boundaries, but instead engaging in behavior that is reckless and dangerous, not only to themselves, but to one another. God is identified as the one who saved Israel from slavery, delivering them from Egypt. Historically during the time of the prophet Hosea, the country of Assyria is putting political and military pressure on Israel, forcing them to pay tribute to the Assyrian King. In response, the king of Israel attempts to make an alliance with Egypt — the country that once enslaved them — to ask Egypt to pressure Assyria to get them off Israel's back. The plan backfires: The Egyptians don't go for it, the Assyrians find out and rather than releasing pressure on Israel, they increase it. Hosea sees this as not only a political failure, but also a failure of faith, looking to foreign kings and foreign gods to protect them instead of trusting in the Lord their God.

God's response burns hot with anger - after all this time, after all that I have sacrificed for you, all that I have taught you, all the love we have shared together, this is how you respond?!? Fine, God says, go back to Egypt, go back to bondage and slavery. Go back to war and to violence and to suffering — that's what you're asking for, that's what you'll get! But like a mother whose anger is hot but immediately melts into love, God catches herself and remembers who she is, first a foremost - a mother. One who loves her child more than anything in the whole world. "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." God is like a father who takes a step back to catch his breath and count to ten before reacting, and in doing so, remembers who he is — a father — and that he can't help but love and embrace his child.

How often do we lose ourselves in angry rants? Not just as parents, but as people in the world... someone does something that upsets us, that seems stupid or gets in our way, and we snap to the angry in response, or at least annoyed and frustrated.

But is this who we want to be in the world, who we want to be toward one another? Angry? Ranting? Suspicious?

Too often this has become the primary way of being in our world... (perhaps because we are..... are too busy, or too tired, or too self-focused, or too driven toward one particular outcome, or too short sighted.....) Those reactions are normal, but too often we're missing that moment that God demonstrates here, of taking a step back, catching our breath, and counting to ten before responding. We're missing that moment of looking in ourselves and asking, who are we? How do we want to live our lives?

Because even in a world like the one we live in — a world where the default is fear, suspicion, caring only about me and mine the rest of the world be darned — even in a world like that, we still choose who we want to be. We choose how we want to live in the world. We choose what kind of life we want to have.

Unlike God, we are not perfect. But as people of faith, we do see ourselves as made in God's image. The good news of this beautiful poetry from Hosea is not only that God loves us in the way that a mother loves her child, even when we turn away from God - but also that we can learn to love one another in the same way. Not just here at church, and not just with our families, but with everyone we meet. Everyday, we are called to remember who we are, as people of God, and to act on that to treat the world around us with grace, with patience, with forgiveness, with empathy, with compassion, with love.