

## July 26 2020 – “Family Album”

### Hosea 11:1-11

The Lord says,

“When Israel was a child, I loved him  
and called him out of Egypt as my son.

But the more I called to him,  
the more he turned away from me.

My people sacrificed to Baal;  
they burned incense to idols.

Yet I was the one who taught Israel to walk.

I took my people up in my arms,  
but they did not acknowledge that I took care of them.

I drew them to me with affection and love.

I picked them up and held them to my cheek;

I bent down to them and fed them.

“They refuse to return to me, and so they must return to Egypt, and Assyria will rule them. War will sweep through their cities and break down the city gates. It will destroy my people because they do what they themselves think best. They insist on turning away from me. They will cry out because of the yoke that is on them, but no one will lift it from them.

“How can I give you up, Israel?

How can I abandon you?

Could I ever destroy you as I did Admah,  
or treat you as I did Zeboiim?

My heart will not let me do it!

My love for you is too strong.

I will not punish you in my anger;

I will not destroy Israel again.

For I am God and not a mere human being.

I, the Holy One, am with you.

I will not come to you in anger.

“My people will follow me when I roar like a lion at their enemies. They will hurry to me from the west. They will come from Egypt, as swiftly as birds, and from Assyria, like doves. I will bring them to their homes again. I, the Lord, have spoken.”

### Message: “Family Album”

How do you remember your family and your past?

Do you have a hallway or a staircase lined with family photos?

A mantelpiece or shelf, perhaps?

In our house, we have a stack of photo albums  
tucked away downstairs.

The oldest photos were inherited from my grandparents:  
black and white, and mostly unfamiliar faces.  
Over time, as you flip through, familiar faces begin to appear  
– my aunts and uncles, my parents as children –  
and eventually my cousins and me as babies on laps.  
It's fun to see noses and ears and chins  
reappear across the generations,  
and to see familiar places  
as they once were.  
But faces start to age and disappear too,  
which is a little bittersweet.  
Looking back from the present means  
we know how the stories of those babies,  
whether in black-and-white or eighties neon pink,  
unfold.

Our text this morning starts out with God  
flipping through his family photo album,  
describing a series of images...  
portraits of love between a parent and child.  
We see young Israel, God's child,  
well-loved and rescued from Egypt, a foreign country.  
We see a parent teaching their child to walk,  
crouched down, calling encouragement,  
hands outstretched.  
We see a parent bending down and scooping up their toddler,  
holding them cheek-to-cheek, loving and affectionate.  
We see meals together, a child being fed and cared for.

Children as they grow up don't remember this kind of thing.  
We have stories, but very few real memories of our early years;  
of first steps or who stood in front of us,  
encouraging us to try and come to them,  
of baby food and diaper changes,  
and being carried when our legs got tired.  
But those who parented us  
– mothers, fathers, grandparents and other loving adults –  
they remember who we were when we were little  
and how we set out on the journey  
of becoming who we are today.

God's parenting memories are bittersweet.  
And that's because young Israel  
is a runaway,

a child who is running back  
 into the bad situation that God rescued him from.  
 Like a teenager getting in with a bad crowd:  
 bad choices, bad politics, bad values, and bad religion.  
 You don't need to have a child to know what that looks like,  
 and how it feels to watch someone  
 – a sibling, a friend, even a parent or other family member –  
 How it feels to watch someone you love  
 make bad choices.  
 God the parent is understandably frustrated,  
 worried sick and angry;  
 he knows their situation will only get worse;  
 that there are consequences;  
 that God himself is in the consequences.

It's interesting that God does not focus on the child Israel as he remembers...  
 God focuses on himself as the parent.  
 Now that might seem selfish,  
 but there's no sense that God is blaming Israel  
 for not living up to his parenting;  
 God simply states the facts  
 about what his child has done.  
 God is instead returning to those moments,  
 to those memories rich with love, care and hope.  
 Because God has a decision to make,  
 and it's breaking his heart to make it.  
 God says, "How can I give you up? How can I abandon you?"  
 When we see terrible things happen in the world around us  
 – conflict, refugees, natural disasters –  
 it's not unusual for Christians and non-Christians alike  
 to ask how God can allow it.  
 Small, personal tragedies,  
 things that don't have a dramatic effect on humanity,  
 are even harder to take, sometimes;  
 what's the point of not intervening in a life or in a situation  
 that is insignificant, really, on a global scale.  
 How can God allow it?

But here is God, asking the same question:  
 how can I allow it?  
 How can I abandon my child, my people?  
 How can I punish them for what they've done?  
 Even God struggles with the same tension  
 between doing what is good and what is easy;

between ignoring Israel and letting it go, and not giving up on Israel;  
 between going for an easy, indulgent handwave,  
 and choosing to do what is best for the child  
 and the parent-child relationship in the long run.  
 God struggles with the idea of destroying Israel  
 as he would a foreign city.  
 In the end, he sets aside his anger.  
 The love of a good parent  
 who still wants what is best for his runaway child,  
 love that is rooted in memory, hope and grace,  
 that love wins out.

You may, by now, be a little curious  
 about what Israel did that so deeply disappointed and frustrated God.

When reading a Bible passage like this one,  
 it's often easier to start with the verbs  
 – the actions and events –  
 and then turn to the nouns  
 – the people, places and things.  
 All of this happened so long ago and so far away  
 That the nouns are often unfamiliar to us.  
 We know what it looks like to scoop up a toddler;  
 but what Assyria and Baal might be is not as easy to grasp.  
 We've made some headway with the verbs and the action of this story...so let's check out some  
 nouns!

The prophet Hosea was writing around the time of the last king of Israel,  
 about 2700 years ago.  
 By then, the kingdom of Israel was small  
 and surrounded on all sides  
 by much larger and vastly more powerful nations,  
 like Egypt and Assyria.  
 The previous king of Israel had been paying off Assyria  
 so that the Assyrians would leave them be and not invade.  
 But this new king didn't want to do that anymore.  
 Rather than listening and trusting God,  
 who had already done extraordinary things for Israel,  
 this king led his people away from God,  
 choosing bad religion (Baal)  
 and bad politics.  
 This king's idea was to seek help from Egypt,  
 from Israel's old captors,  
 instead of the God who had nurtured and loved them

since the moment Israel began to exist.  
It didn't work;  
Egypt did not help Israel,  
and Assyria attacked and defeated the kingdom of Israel,  
claiming its land and destroying the capital city.  
Most of the people of Israel were taken away into exile,  
but they did survive the destruction  
and the loss of their kingdom.

Despite a present moment filled with betrayal and its consequences,  
what God has remembered most  
from his look back through the family album  
is that God is God, and not like a human being.  
God is the Holy One,  
who is always and forever with us,  
wherever we go,  
however far we run away from him.  
He is still God.  
Frustrated, heart-sick and angry, yes;  
but once more,  
God has chosen to act out of love  
and for the lasting freedom of Israel.  
Freed from his own heartbreak and anger,  
God roars like a lion  
at all the things ensnaring and pulling his children  
away from him.  
Generations earlier, God had called and led Israel out of Egypt,  
like children being taught and encouraged to walk.  
But now, the voice that spoke reality into existence  
roars with a fierce love  
to liberate his wandering runaway children  
from a captivity of their own choosing.

But Israel, from time to time, continued to wander...  
and so do we:  
as a society, as a Church,  
as a congregation and as individuals.  
We really never learn.  
And so, God brought another child, his Son,  
out of Egypt to show his unbounded love  
for wanderers, runaways  
and sinners of all sorts.

This morning, we have looked into the heart of God.

We have found the fierce love of a good parent.

No matter how far Israel ran,  
no matter how far we run,  
God's actions speak of God's heart,  
and that heart knows us and loves us.

This is what I mean.

Watch what happens when we read God's verbs,  
what God does, in this passage from Hosea:

I loved, called, taught to walk,  
took up in my arms, drew to me,  
picked them up, held them,  
bent down to them, fed them;

I will not punish,  
will not come in anger,

I am, I am;

I will roar like a lion  
and bring them home.

That is the story of God and his people,  
of God and us;

of the gospel,  
and the coming of Christ  
with grace and healing and new life  
instead of suffering and anger.

What God does, tells us who God is,  
and God is love:

real, parental love that is fierce and active,  
not passively indulgent or negligent.

It is love that  
is rooted in the memories of a shared family life together,  
nurtured by the hope God has for us,  
and made real by the grace Christ offers to us  
through his death on the Cross  
and the lion's roar of his resurrection.

And that lion's roar still sounds today,  
promising a homecoming  
for all God's wandering,  
runaway,  
beloved children.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

