

Hosea 11:1-9
“By the Grace of God”
The Rev. Dr. Jean Halligan Vandergrift
Roslindale Congregational Church, UCC, Roslindale, MA
Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, July 31, 2022

The Reading: Hosea 11:1-9

*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 (*bay' uhls*),
and offering incense to idols.*

3

*Yet it was I who taught Ephraim (*ee' fray-im*) 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 (*ad' muh*)?
How can I treat you like Zeboiim (*zuh-boy' im*)?
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.*

It's not easy to describe God. Especially to children! Lawrence and Karen Kushner use poetry and metaphor to do so in their book, *Because Nothing Looks Like God*.¹ An excerpt: "Where is God? God is in the beginning. In the first red ripening tomato and in cookies fresh from the oven. In the first fun day of vacation and in the tiny hands of a baby." I will bring the book to our fellowship time, and you can look at it yourselves.

Hosea also uses poetry and metaphor to describe God. In chapter 11, the prophet compares the relationship that God has with God's people Israel to that between a parent and child. **This oracle is a portrait of grace. He tells us that God is gracious.**

Verse one begins wistfully, saying how much God loved Israel, also known as "Ephraim," how God helped him escape enslavement in Egypt, and later, to create a new, just society. Grace is God providing for Israel, being constant in support, giving watchful care, and helping them start over.

Hosea continues, pointing out that God is also a gracious teacher, patiently showing Israel, the toddler, how to walk: free and in *God's* ways. Grace is evident in the way God bent down to feed her in the wilderness and delighted in her growing up.

Even when, like a teenager, Israel strayed from the path of Yahweh – attracted to the Baals, that is, to the agricultural gods that his Canaanite neighbors followed – *in grace, God kept calling* to young Ephraim. Next, even when Israel came into his own young adult freedom and middle age power and made decisions that ignored God and set up unjust structures that perpetuated poverty for the majority and wealth for only a few, even then, God did not give him up!

When Israel succumbed to idols and lies, she still experienced the consequences of her choices, mind you. God's grace is *not* a magic "get out of jail free" card! In fact, in the 8th century, Northern Israel's corruption contributed to its fall to the Assyrians, and years later, the same sins tumbled the Southern Kingdom to the Babylonians.

God was not happy about this outcome! Raising Ephraim is a joy and a struggle for God. We hear the pathos in Hosea's poetry.

By the last verses, refusing to give into wrath, God remains true to *divine* identity, to God's Self, to love, to grace. Sometimes people oversimplify to say that the Old Testament God is one of wrath and judgment, while the New Testament God is one of compassion and forgiveness, but this is not accurate! We see here in Hosea, that the base of God's character is grace; *grace is who God is*. **It is by the grace of God that Israel survived all this and came through transformed for the better. Amazing!**

We sing about how amazing grace is. It is amazing, for one reason, because it is rare in our world!

¹Lawrence Kushner and Karen Kushner, *Because Nothing Looks Like God* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2000), 1.

Human beings are not often gracious to one another, are they? Grace doesn't always rule relationships! More often than not – and I can attest to it in my marriage, for example – we allow our fears and our grief to eclipse grace, and we become wretched – that's why the word in the hymn – in our sin and brokenness.

Grace is also frequently looked upon as weakness in our society; it is not held up as an ideal. Therefore, not too many crimes or infidelities are forgiven; few Truth and Reconciliation Committees get off the ground. Leaders choose revenue from guns over legislating guns, plus war over diplomacy. Grace is rare!

We also sing about how amazing grace is, because when it comes to the grace of God, we can *rely* upon it.

We ought not *presume* grace, mind you! Take it for granted or God for a fool! God's grace is not a permit to do evil. As Paul says we don't sin more so that there can be more grace!² But we can count on God's gracious care.

In the popular television series, *Outlander*, the Scottish hero, Jaime Fraser, has a godparent and friend who sticks to him like glue, watching over him through thick and thin. Murtagh Fitzgibbons is his name, and he made a vow to Jaime's mother to see to the well-being of her son. Murtagh is faithful in love and devotion. God's grace for you and me is solid like this.

Roslindale Congregational Church, it is by the grace of God that you and I found each other three years ago and developed a real ministry together. For my part, this is how I see it. God has seen us through thick and thin. We have *not* come out unscathed, and we have had to deal with the consequences of our choices. Nor have we come out unchanged. But by grace, we have grown and turned out better! By the grace of God, you *will* experience the same and more with Pastor Chip.

As one has put it, “when you run alone, it's called a race, and when God runs with you, it's called GRACE!”

²Romans 6:1