

***“IN-Vesting with God:
High Risk, Even Higher Return (100% Guaranteed)”***

Fourth Sermon in the Stewardship Series “I’m IN!” - “I’m IN-vested”

Hosea 11:1-9

New Revised Standard Version

**This manuscript is an interpretation of the sermonic moment. Use it as a guide for the sermon direction; because of time, not everything you read printed here is actually included in the spoken sermon.*

*“For I AM God and no mortal,
the Holy One in your midst...”
(v9).*

The good news of God for the people of God is that God is “not mortal,” not like us, even as God is “holy,” that is, “set apart.” And yet God chooses to be with us, to be, as Hosea writes, “*in our midst*,” which means, of course, in our messiness as well.

“For I AM God...”

Those words, I AM, should sound familiar to you. They remind us of Exodus 3, when Moses turns to see the burning bush that is full of flames and yet not consumed by them and, in fact, hears the voice of God calling him to be the one to lead the people out of Egypt, out of bondage and slavery, away from Pharaoh and into Freedom. Moses, in this moment of call and

commissioning responds to God by saying, “*But if I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say?’*” God said to Moses, “*I AM who I AM...you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’*”... “*This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations,*” (Exodus 3:13-15).

I AM who I AM. God’s name for generations.

And here we are in the time of the prophet Hosea, generations after Moses, and true to God’s word, God’s name has not changed, God’s nature has not changed, God continues to be faithful, God continues to show up, God continues to be “holy” and to be “in the midst” of this people, *even though* the people choose not to see God, hear

God, or know God - and in fact, to ignore God and dismiss God.

The prophet Hosea brings a word to the northern kingdom of Israel (this is our second week looking at the conditions in the northern kingdom...last week folks were deceived by King Ahab and distracted by Baals and others gods and Elijah brought their attention back to God. Now, we are in a new generation with a new king, and a new prophet and people have, yet again, turned away from and forgotten God.

The story is like a broken record. And if you are getting tired of this same song, second verse, imagine how God feels?

Hosea is a prophet in his hometown, as he is from the northern kingdom himself. And so he understands the suffering of his people who are languishing from a devastating war with Assyria; they are living in devastation and chaos. Four Israelite kings have been assassinated within 14 years and their key cities have been

sacked by Assyria. Israel, though, was not just a long-suffering victim, the people of God were themselves perpetuating the war and violence.

It is a fraught political context. Israel's bid to secure its place among the nations had led to fatal political alliances. These alliances were sealed by "treaty oaths" in which vassals (aka: the people of Israel) swore to "love" their new overlords (aka: the Assyria) in exchange for promises of military protection.¹ In these treaties, love was synonymous with loyalty, the proof of which was - you guessed it - money...a steep annual payments of tribute to Assyria. When Israel rebelled against these arrangements and withdrew this "love," its overlords brutally retaliated, and by 722 BCE, Israel (the northern kingdom) was completely destroyed.²

And in these nine verses, Hosea offers us a lens to look through so that we get a glimpse into God's heart during this time.

¹ William L. Moran, "The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 25 (1963), 77-87.

² Margaret Odell, "Commentary on Hosea 11:1-9," *Working Preacher* (10 Nov. 2019), accessed on 10

Nov. 2019 at https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4216.

God is devastated by the choices the people have made, by their violence against their neighbors, by their lack of faith and trust, by their rebellion against the Lord God in order to serve other gods. All for what? To say they have more power, more weapons, more land, more control? What do those things have to do with loving God and loving neighbor?

Most of Hosea's writing is bad news.³ He lists all the ways that the people have strayed from God. And what is touching about chapter 11 is that he describes God with this parental imagery - which is either paternal or maternal - in such a way that we can relate to what he is saying.

³ Interestingly, before we dive into this passage itself, it's important to note why Hosea might have chosen the parental imagery for God that he chooses here. In Hosea 1-3 we learn of the names of Hosea's three children:

- 1) A son named Jezreel. He names his son after a place where the kings of the northern kingdom committed a massive sin...where massive blood is shed. One scholar said it would be the equivalent of perhaps naming a child Wounded Knee.
- 2) Then Hosea has a daughter, and her name is Lo-Ruhamah, which means "not shown pity/not beloved." Why? Because God no longer loves the people.
- 3) Then finally a third child, another son, whom Hosea names Lo-ammi, which means, "not my people." Because it feels like God is saying to them, "you are not my people and I am not your God."

It's like God is flipping through a photo album,⁴ reminiscing: smiling with joy at some photos and wincing with grief at others:

Snapshot One: *Birth - the day of delivery, or deliverance*

"When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son..." (v1).

It may not be literal birth or delivery, but it's deliverance nonetheless. And after remembering that joyous birthday or re-birthday, God has a moment of grief in verse 2:

"The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols."

Which is like saying, "the harder I hugged him, the more

Later in chapter 2, looking toward a future of hope, Hosea changes the names of the kids.

- 1) Jezreel becomes it's meaning - "God sows, God is planting seeds of hope."
- 2) "Not beloved" becomes "beloved."
- 3) And "Not my people" becomes "My People."³

These poor PK's (prophet's kids)! Like other PK's (pastor's kids) they are being used as sermon examples for their father...but the message is clear. Hosea believes in naming the sins of the people and in hoping toward a future of redemption and reconciliation with God, in naming God's faithfulness in return.

⁴ Photo album idea from Rolf Jacobson, Craig Koester, and Kathryn Schifferdecker. "#380 - Hosea," *I Love to Tell the Story Podcast* (2 Nov. 2019), accessed on 10 Nov. 2019 at

https://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative_podcast.aspx?podcast_id=1188.

he resisted...the more he wanted to be dropped off a block away from the school, not in front of the school, the more he didn't turn around when I called out goodbye...he just walked on, ignoring me like I didn't exist...too cool for dad, for mom...hanging out with his friends and never with me, choosing headphones and videogames over conversation and family dinners." (sigh)

Turn page in photo album.
Snapshot Two: *First steps*

"Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk," (v3)

Ephraim is the largest of the northern tribes - equivalent to the beloved first son, maybe. God is remembering those first few toddles and steps when independence and freedom was just within reach; it's a happy memory.

Turn page. **Snapshot Three: *First bike ride*** (aka: first bike crash and skinned knee)

"I took them up in my arms, but they did not know that I healed them," (v 3).

I bandaged his knee and kissed him and made it better but then as soon as his tears were dry, he zoomed off! Time and time he kept falling off his bike and scraping his knee and coming in for me to kiss it and make it better...then he was off again and my healing kiss was long forgotten.

Turn page. **Snapshot Four: *Disney World***

"I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love," (v4)

You know those backpacks that every preschooler at Disney World has that has a long cord tied to their parents hand or waist kind of like a human leash? This is how I envision these cords of love. God saying, "I took them with me to a place I knew they would love and I gave them freedom to walk around without letting them out of my sight. I thought they would love Disney World (aka: the Promised Land), and in turn love me. (sign)

Turn page in photo album.
Snapshot Five: (another baby photo) - the cheek to cheek cuddle

“I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks,”
(v4)

You all know the photos...that first picture of a baby on her mother’s breast or resting on her dad’s chest. It’s not the Anne Geddes poised baby photo, but that first raw shot of mom and dad and baby in the hospital bed, cheek to cheek, a picture of intimacy and attachment.

Turn page. **Snapshot Six:**
Soccer

“I bent down and fed them...”
(v4)

“I hauled the cooler of Gatorade and snacks to all their soccer games and as it thudded to the grass, the kids swarmed...my daughter and all her teammates...they drank and ate and talked with one another...never once looking up to see who put the cooler of Gatorade down or to say thank you. But - that’s okay. I don’t do this to be thanked. I just love watching her play with her friends. *Does she know that I’ll do anything for her?* Even haul a cooler of Gatorade in 105

degree heat across six soccer fields?”

“I provided for their needs,”
God said, *“I bent down and fed them...”*

And at this point, it’s as if God can’t take it anymore and closes the photo album. God moves from reminiscing about the past to thinking about the future.

God’s child, is no longer a cute infant, no longer a curious toddler, no longer an eager elementary schooler...God’s child is now rebellious. And the rebellion is harder than anything God as a parent could imagine. For years, they had created this bond and had this relationship, and now, “why won’t Israel even look at God? Why is he talking back? Why is he running away from home? Why is he spewing hate? Where did he learn this? Certainly not from me? Not at in my house?” God muses...

It’s as if God is watching God’s child take the car keys, slam the front door, get in the car, speed out of the driveway, and whiz out of sight while God is left watching out the window, tears welling in God’s eyes (and

heart). God wonders, *“How many times have we talked about this? How many times do we have to go through this? What am I doing wrong? Why can’t he see that I love him? Why can’t she understand that this is for her own good? Am I a complete failure as a parent? I don’t know what else to do. I don’t know what I did wrong...or what I did to deserve this...”*

And then in verses 5-7, Hosea writes in God’s voice, angry and hurt: *“They shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me,”* (v5)

“Fine - let them run away. Let them live on their own and fend for themselves.”

“The sword rages in their cities, it consumes their oracle-priests, and devours because of their schemes,” (v6)

“Let’s see how far they get. They’ll never make it. They’ll get eaten alive out there! That’ll show them.”

“My people are bent on turning away from me (aka: it’s a lost cause), to the Most High they call, but he does not raise them up at all..” (v7)

“Good luck when she does come crawling back for help! I’m not going to be here for her. I’m done.”

You see, in verses 5-7, Hosea (in the voice of God) seems to articulate a well-deserved punishment of the disobedient child, and actually, these verses may well reflect historical realities in the years following 733 BCE when Assyria invaded and conquered parts of the northern kingdom. The *“return to the land of Egypt”* (see also 7:16; 8:13; 9:6) suggests that some Israelites fled to Egypt as refugees in 733 in the face of Assyrian domination. It’s something like a reverse-exodus.⁵ They are turning away from God. Unlike Moses who turns to God, to the burning bush, to God’s presence...the Israelites here turn away from God. But. God. Doesn’t. Turn. Away. From. Them.

⁵ J. Clinton McCann, “Commentary on Hosea 11:1-11,” *Working Preacher* (1 Aug. 2010), accessed on 10 Nov. 2019 at

https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=643.

But before we get to this moment of good news, I just want us to sit a moment longer in the bad news of the devastation and darkness that God is feeling. It feels like all is lost. Whether you are a parent who has felt this very sense of helplessness with a child that you love with every ounce of your being as you watch them make decisions that are hurtful or harmful for their life or for others or simply, just to you.

Or whether you are a child who has felt completely misunderstood and abandoned from your own parent...who feels like the very people who were supposed to protect you and provide for you, didn't...

Or whether you are a spouse or a partner who has tried everything in your power to communicate with your significant other - to no avail...where the road ahead seems so divisive and so uncertain and so hopeless...because you just can't talk to one another (maybe you're talking past one another or maybe you can only yell or nitpick at each other or may you're just not talking at

all because it's just now worth it anymore)...

I have a feeling that in the depths of each of our own human experience, we can all relate to this feeling of deep anger and grief and hurt that is borne out of deep love. It is the anger of betrayal. The hurt of abandonment. The fear of the uncertain future. "Will they ever love me again? Can I still even love them? When will this end?"

It's like we're eavesdropping on this inner monologue of God's heart: "When my people, my children, hurt me so deeply – what is the right thing to do? How should I respond given the circumstances? Do I punish them? Or forgive? Is this the last straw? Do I choose anger or compassion? Is it the time for tough love or a second chance? Am I enabling by welcoming them back yet again? Or is the best love here just to cut off ties for my own self-protection and for their own realization of the gravity of the situation?"

Here we see God as the grief-stricken parents, sitting on the couch in the living room,

looking at the happy family photo on the mantle - where everyone is smiling - and as tears roll down their cheeks they wonder, “*why is this happening? And what did we do wrong?*”

It’s a very humanizing moment that Hosea gives God. And I think Hosea writes these verses like this so that we can truly feel the deep emotions and grief of God...the deep hurt. Because only then can we maybe even begin to understand the deep love that God has for us.

It is the *pathos* of God, as Jewish scholar, Abraham Joshua Heschel, would say. The *pathos* of God in the prophets goes like this: Yes, God gets angry and God punishes, but it comes out of God’s sorrow, out of God’s grief, out of God’s love for God’s people. It’s the opposite of the train of thought that says: God is the unmoved mover...in fact, God is the most moved mover - who loves the people and longs for them!⁶

God did not just create the world and set it in motion, sitting back detached...God

suffers with and for us - it’s a message we will see with Jesus on the Cross...but it is a message and theology that we first see here, in Hosea. In a beautiful loving and devoted passage about the depths of God’s love for us.

It’s as if God’s anger is boiling over and then all the sudden when the steam is let off, God snaps out of it and says, “But wait! This is my child, whom I love; I can’t destroy them. I can’t help but love him, but love her, but love them.”

The reason for God’s change of heart and mind has nothing to do with the people’s change of heart and mind -- that is, the “rebellious child” does not repent (indeed, Hosea 5:4 has suggested that the people are incapable of repentance at this point). Rather, the remarkably different direction of verses 8-9 has to do with the heart and mind of God:⁷

“How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?...” (v8)

⁶ Jacobson, Koester, and Schifferdecker, *ibid.*

⁷ McCann, *ibid.*

“My heart recoils within me (i.e. I take the anger into myself, into my own being instead of directing it to you), my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger, I will not destroy Ephraim, for...” (v9)

AND HERE IS THE GOOD NEWS:

“I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath,” (v9).

Wrath is not my name. I AM who I AM. God is love. God is faithful. No matter who we are or where we are on life’s journey. There is nothing you could have done that could ever make God say, “eh I’m done loving you,” and there’s nothing you can ever do you in the future that would make God say, “eh, I’m gonna stop loving you now.” God loves you. God loves me. God loves. Period. End of sentence.

This is the good news.

It is impossible not to see just how deeply IN-vested God is in our lives...back in Hosea’s time, and yes, in our time too.

God has IN-vested everything in us. God created us. And God entrusted us with the care of all of creation, including the care of one another. God trusts us enough to give us the freedom to make our own choices. God does not coerce us to love God back or to believe in God. God put all of God’s chips in one basket...in you...in me...and ultimately, in Christ...who lives on through you and me - giving us the love and grace and example we need to live as God’s love in the world today.

And so this week, as we contemplate our financial gifts to the work of God’s kin-dom through this place, Calvary, I invite you to think about how much God has IN-vested in you.

Flip through the photo album of your life. Think about the relationships that have nurtured you. The people who have provided for you. The people who loved you and cared for you and believed in you when no one else did. The people who have given you 2nd and 3rd and 4th chances. The people who have taught you (or your children) something about God. Can you see those people as

bearing the image of Christ - as literally being the presence of God in your life?

Do you ever think about what the return on their investment in you is?

I'm guessing that for most folks who IN-vested in us...the only "return" they'd want us is for us to do for someone else what they did for us.

Well, Calvary gives us all an opportunity to do that. Because there is more we can do together in this place to make an impact on the world than any one of us could do on our own.

When you IN-vest in Calvary, you are IN-vesting in a community that strives to be Open to All, Closed to None, that strives to both experience the love of Christ in tangible ways with one another and to share that love in transformational ways with the world.

Quite honestly, there is great return in IN-vesting in a place like Calvary...but I get it, there's some risk too. While you do get to vote on our

budget, there is still the unknown of how exactly your money will be spent. There is still the risk of wondering will you have enough to live on or if you'll have enough for that potential medical treatment or if you'll have enough for that roof that you might need this year?

So - I'm going to IN-vite you to think of this in a different way. What would it mean for you to not think about your investment in terms of what you give to Calvary...but rather to think about your life (which includes your giving) in terms of IN-vesting with God. Because God is 110% IN-vested with you.

It is risky to IN-vest with God...because when you start listening to God and learning about the depths of God's love for you - like we read in Hosea today - the risk is that we'll actually take this love to heart and want to give our all to God, to give our all to Jesus, to actually change the way we are living to be more compassionate, more selfless, more loving, more daring, more vulnerable, more courageous, more authentic.

The truth is, following Jesus is not easy. It's anything but easy. It's really hard. The risk is high. You never know what you'll be getting into, or what you'll be asked to do. And you will be asked - always - to think of your neighbor first - at least as much as (if not more than) you think of yourself. It may seem like a high risk situation. And you are right. It is.

And yet, the return is even higher. Because you cannot go wrong IN-vesting in God. God will never leave you. God will never let you go. God will be in your midst always. And in this is a 100% guarantee: not from me, but from God.

When you IN-vest with God, you are IN-vesting your life in someone who will never give up on you and will always see the potential in you. When you IN-vest with God, you say YES to the life that really is life, the abundant life, the life of living with courage, the life that steps out of fear and into faith. The life that allows you to be you and to know that you always have God's love.

This is the good news. Hosea 11:9: *"For I am God and no*

mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath...my compassion grows warm and tender..."

God is love and compassion - even when you are *everything but* loving and compassionate.

How will you respond to God's great love and faithfulness?

It's overwhelming really, to think about. How much God loves you. How much God loves me. Just reading all these stories in the Old Testament this fall and seeing how many times the people strayed from God and disobeyed God and ignored God and craved power and wealth and land...even though God delivered them from their enemies and saved them and gave them "enough" and reminded them not to get caught up in power and wealth and "what's mine" but rather to always think first of the neighbor...it is amazing. God's faithfulness is amazing, but even more, it's God's persistence that is even more astonishing.

And to think that when we read these stories we can read our present day circumstances into

them --- almost as if nothing as changed --- just switch out the name of the country and the names of the kings and the names of the prophets and the date and year --- pick any century, any country, any leader...and the themes are the same: violence, greed, power, wealth, self-over-neighbor. And yet - God is faithful. It is such an enduring and unbelievable message of love.

God could not be any more IN-vested in us. It's time-tested. In fact, God never stops looking lovingly at photos of our life delighting in us, wondering what the next chapter will hold.

So what is our response in return?

Honestly, when you look at the fact that the return is so high *and* that it's guaranteed - (there's nothing we can do that can ever separate us from God's love, as the Apostle Paul says in Romans) - then maybe it's not that risky after all. Maybe it's just right.

Maybe it's just the right risk to take - to give everything we have to God. Because God has

given everything to us. And has - for generations!

It's now our time to respond, to risk, to give - so that generations more may know the enduring power of God's love in this good news.

The risk will look different for each one of us, but the reward is the same.

Amen.