

FROM RANT TO REFLECTION
Rev. Jason Santalucia

A sermon preached at Valley Presbyterian Church
in Brookfield, Connecticut
on August 3, 2025

Text: Hosea 11:1-11

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals and offering incense to idols. 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. 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. They shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me. The sword rages in their cities, it consumes their oracle-priests and devours because of their schemes. My people are bent on turning away from me. To the Most High they call, but he does not raise them up at all.

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. They shall go after the Lord, who roars like a lion; when he roars, his children shall come trembling from the west. They shall come trembling like birds from Egypt, and like doves from the land of Assyria; and I will return them to their homes, says the Lord.

The second reading today has a valuable lesson about the perils of greed. But I don't want to talk about the second reading today. I want to talk about the first reading—for two reasons. First, because I've never preached on it before. And second, because it pushes back against a common misconception people have about the Bible.

A lot of people think there's a split between the God we see in the Old Testament and the God we see in the New Testament—that the one is all wrath and vengeance, and the other is all love and mercy, almost as if they're not even the same God. And to be fair, I can see why someone might think that. God does do a lot of smiting in the Old Testament. But the fact is, God is also incredibly gracious in the Old

Testament, every bit as much as God is in the New Testament, and nowhere do we see that more clearly than in this reading from Hosea. What we get here is a rare, intimate look at God's inner life. And what we find is not a God with anger issues, but a God who feels anger—because, let's face it, human beings are a pain in the neck—but chooses love instead.

The passage starts off with a father talking about his troubled relationship with his son. The father is God, and the son is Israel. "When my son was a child, I loved him," the father says. "I taught him how to walk. I bent down to feed him. I held him in my arms and wiped his tears whenever he got hurt." It's like a series of scenes in a movie, one after another—all these images

of a parent doting on a little kid. But the little kid grows up, and that's when things change. He turns away from his father and starts chasing after other things, other priorities.

Still, the father shows him nothing but kindness. He keeps loving him no matter what. Not that it's easy. He knows the way the son is acting is self-destructive. He knows he's going end up hurting himself. But he's torn about what to do as a father. "Should I keep standing by him, or should I let him face the consequences of his actions?" He worries himself sick about it.

And then one day all that hurt and fear and frustration boils over. He starts ranting about how badly the son is treating him. He shakes his fist and yells, "If he doesn't want anything to do with me, fine! If he wants to throw his life away, let him! See if I care!" But no sooner has he said it than he regrets it. He's shocked and horrified that those words came out of his mouth, and he immediately starts reflecting. "What am I doing?" he thinks. "He's my son. How can I even consider giving him up or handing him over?" His heart recoils at the thought of it, his anger softens, and he feels compassion welling up inside him, warm and tender. "This is not who I am," he says. "I am God and no mortal... and I will not come in wrath."

So, God resolves to never again be anything less than God—to never again act in ways that go against God's nature. And immediately God starts making good on that resolution by calling Israel back from all the places the people have wandered off to. "I will roar like a lion," God says, "and when they hear me, my children will come back. They will come trembling like birds from Egypt, and like doves from the land of Assyria; and I will return them to their homes."

What a powerful passage. It invites us into God's inner struggle—something we rarely get to see. We meet a God who has a heart problem, so to speak—not in a medical sense, but in an emotional sense. God is torn between anger and love, frustration and faithfulness. And I think the first thing we should do is just sit with that for a moment. Let it sink in. The picture of God here doesn't fit neatly into the boxes we usually try to put God in. This isn't a harsh, demanding God, and this isn't a warm fuzzy God either.

No, this God is deep, raw, and real. This God wrestles with feelings. This God steps back, reflects, and decides not to let anger have the last word. And that kind of honesty? That kind of self-awareness? It's so personal, so vulnerable, that ordinary language can't quite capture it. That's why Hosea uses poetry instead of prose—because poetry can hold things like tension and transformation and truth all at once. It can move suddenly from shouting to whispering, from a fierce warning to a quiet moment of soul-searching.

So once we've sat with it for a while, this picture of God raises some really important questions for us: What does it mean to be made in the image of a God who's this complicated? And what would it look like to follow God's lead in our own lives?

Here's what I think: We live in a world full of noise that's always demanding our attention. We're constantly connected—texting, posting, replying, arguing—and that constant engagement gets exhausting. It makes us quick to snap, quick to lash out, and slow to stop and think. We just react instead of taking the time to check in with ourselves and ask: What am I doing? Who am I? Am I being my best self? Am I showing love? Compassion? Kindness?

It's like we've lost the ability to pause and take a breath—to step back and reflect

before we speak or act. And that's not just an individual problem; it's a problem for our communities, for our society, even for our democracy. Because without reflection, without self-awareness, we can't grow. We can't move forward. And we can't engage with one another in ways that are productive and beneficial to all. And sadly, sometimes religion adds to the problem. A lot of people grow up with a version of God who never reflects, never reconsiders, never changes course—maybe because these days that's often seen as a sign of weakness. "Flip-flopping," people call it.

But the God we meet in Hosea does all of those things. This is a God who steps back and says, "Wait... this isn't me," and then chooses a different way. Chooses mercy over punishment. Love over anger. Faithfulness over frustration. And that choice changes everything. Because the moment God chooses to reflect and act out of love, not wrath, a new future opens up—not just for God, but for all of God's people. If God had stayed stuck in anger, the story would've ended in destruction. But instead, God chooses relationship, healing, and hope.

And that's the call for us in this reading. To do the same. To stop, reflect, and choose a better way. When we do that—when we go from ranting to reflecting, from reacting to relating—we bring out the image of God inside us. The image of a God with the presence of mind to ask: What kind of person do I want to be in this situation? And what kind of future do I want to create? That's not weakness. That's wisdom. And it's how real change begins. Amen.