



## *Texts in Context*

# Preaching God: Hosea 11:1–11

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**T**he divine soliloquy in Hos 11 occurs but once in the Revised Common Lectionary, as the lesson for Proper 13 (18) in Year C, which won't come again until August 1, 2010 (and then only as one of two alternatives). Still, this text, with its remarkable insight into the very mind of God, remains a rewarding text for preaching on many occasions—certainly during Lent or on any other occasion when the mind and heart of God are up for consideration. It could also work well as a lesson during the Easter season when the lectionary provides no Old Testament readings at all.<sup>1</sup> The text gives us the opportunity to preach God, to proclaim who God is for our sake.

### THE TEXT

The argument of the text itself is straightforward, if surprising. Faced with Israel's recalcitrance in the preceding chapters of Hosea, God, as a loving parent, now reflects on having raised Ephraim (Israel) from childhood, teaching him to walk, holding him in the divine arms, healing and feeding him, only to receive in response the child's rejection (vv. 1–4). God's story is the story of the parent in every age who experiences the rebellion of the wayward adolescent. Indeed, the

<sup>1</sup>Indeed, during Eastertide, one could pair this passage with the prelude to the other divine soliloquy in Hosea (Hos 6:1–3, leading up to 6:4–6), especially given the images of new life and rebirth in 6:1–3. One might then use Paul Gerhardt's hymn paraphrases of the two texts as part of those services. See Frederick J. Gaiser, "Come, You Lost in Strife and Sorrow": Paul Gerhardt's Hymn Paraphrase of Hosea 6:1–3," elsewhere in this issue: *Word & World* 28/2 (2008) 177–181; see the reference to the hymn paraphrase of Hos 11 below in footnote 9.

*Hosea 11:1–11 allows the preacher not to preach about God or describe God or even to proclaim the works of God, but to preach God's own self, to proclaim who God is. The prophet takes us into the very heart of God.*

more the parent reaches out, the further the child runs away (v. 2). And like human parents, God wonders what to do.

The language of the text and the image of God is as tender as any in the Bible. The Jewish Publication Society translation gets the tone right, noting that God “*fell* in love with Israel / When he was still a child,” that God “*pampered* Ephraim, / Taking them in My arms” (Hos 11:2–3, emphasis added). In fact, because of this intimacy, some interpreters count this picture among the maternal images of God in the Old Testament. There is, however, nothing in the text itself to compel that reading. Indeed, understanding God here as gentle father (with the text, I believe) may be an even stronger way to break gender stereotypes than seeing God here as mother. In the Old Testament, fathers, too (including God!), can exercise loving care.

Matthew 2:15 finds the words “out of Egypt I called my son” fulfilled in the return from Egypt of the holy family after the death of Herod. This is, of course, not the historical sense of the clause for Hosea, who here portrays God reminiscing about the tight parent-child relationship in the exodus, but Matthew seems properly to understand the mood and the protective care of the parent God who will allow no harm to come to Jesus—just as God had allowed no harm to Israel.

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Alas, however, Israel “did not know that I [Yahweh] healed them” (v. 3). This may be another reference to the exodus/wilderness tradition where God, in one of the Bible’s early “I am” statements, offers this self-predication: “I am the Lord who heals you” (Exod 15:26). In Hosea’s parallel language, Israel “did not know” God as healer just as they “did not know” that it was God who gave “the grain, the wine, and the oil” (Hos 2:8). Not Baal, insists Hosea, is lord of healing and harvest, but Yahweh. The God of the exodus can also be trusted to care for Israel now in its settled agricultural existence. Israel, however, does not yet “know” this, and so flees to worship Baal.

Ephraim has already felt the consequences of its rebellion. Caught up in the international conflicts of the eighth century and refusing to rely on God as their help, “the sword rages in their cities” (v. 6). And again, what will God do? Or, perhaps better, what *can* God do, in the face of a child who refuses God’s help? Israel turns instead to the Baals or the idols (v. 2), who are not able to help (v. 7).<sup>2</sup> Should not God then simply give them up, leaving them to the destruction that met Admah and Zeboiim in an earlier day (Deut 29:23)? Indeed, Deuteronomy itself seems to require it, exacting the death penalty for the rebellious son who refuses to obey his parents (Deut 21:18–21). But God cannot go there—not because of who

<sup>2</sup>The Hebrew of v. 7 is uncertain, but commentators rightly read it negatively, sometimes emending the “Most High” (NRSV) to read instead “Baal.”

Israel is, but because of who God is. Humans might be bound to the deuteronomic law, but God is “no mortal” and therefore “will not come in wrath” (v. 9). Here is a new definition of God’s holiness: God is not “holy” in God’s fierce wrath, as in Amos 4:2; Isa 10:17; Mic 1:2–3 (other eighth-century prophets), but in God’s grace—nothing turns out to be so “other” as God’s refusal to condemn.

God’s roar remains fearsome (vv. 10–11), but now it is the roar of an avenging lion, bringing its children home from exile among the nations. God remains God in this passage, never one to take lightly, but God is holy and fearsome precisely in God’s turning toward Israel in grace. This parent will never cease to seek out the child, to turn him from the path of destruction, to “roar” him home at last.

The picture of God here is complex. God is described as a parent, but not as a mortal. God is a father, but not a “man.” God is personal, but not a human person: *שִׁי אֵל אֲנִי וְלֹא אִישׁ*—“for God am I, and no ‘ish” (v. 9), that is, no man, no mortal, no male human being, no human person, no human husband. In describing the relationship between God and Israel, only the image of the loving father will do—but it too will fail, for God cannot be captured in that image. As Deut 4:15–20 knows, finally no image of God is possible; but as Gen 1:26 knows, the human is the proper image of God. Throughout, the Bible wrestles with this paradox.

#### THE LIMITATION OF THE DIVINE WRATH

The Bible makes clear that God dare not be limited by an image, a likeness, an idol, even though everywhere in the Bible God’s people and God as well make use of verbal images to describe and proclaim God. But if not by an image, can God be limited by a promise? Precisely that seems to happen here. God limits the divine self by limiting the divine wrath, promising “not again” to destroy Ephraim. There are certain things that God simply will not do, places that God will not go, because God is God and not human—more, because God is a particular kind of God, a particular God, who cannot be otherwise and remain God.<sup>3</sup>

This is not the only place in the Bible where such a thing happens, of course. Best known, perhaps, is God’s self-limitation following the flood.<sup>4</sup> Despite the fact that human nature remains the same post-flood as it was at the outset (cf. Gen 6:5 and 8:21), God will “never again curse the ground because of humankind” (Gen 8:21): “As long as the earth remains,” God is now firmly committed to the normal cycles of creation (8:22). “Never again!”—God defines something that God will not do and thus forever limits God’s possibilities, not out of weakness, but out of a strength of character that defines the self of God (and thus the acts of God) in a particular way.

In Hos 11, as elsewhere, God specifically limits the divine wrath, “for I am

<sup>3</sup>For further development of this theme, see Terence E. Fretheim, “The Repentance of God: A Key to Evaluating Old Testament God-Talk,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 10/1 (1988) 47–70, and “Theological Reflections on the Wrath of God,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 24/2 (2002) 1–26.

<sup>4</sup>See Terence E. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005) 83–85.

God and no mortal” (v. 9). Later, Ezekiel makes a similar claim, defining God throughout history as one who, though moved by Israel’s rebellion to “pour out my wrath upon them,” nevertheless refrains “for the sake of my name, so that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations” (Ezek 20:8–9, 13–14, 21–22).<sup>5</sup> Same limitation, different motivation<sup>6</sup>—and there are others as well, as Israel understands in its own pleading to God to turn from wrath to grace.

In Ps 6, for example, the pray-er asks that God not “discipline me in your wrath” (v. 1) for at least three reasons: First, simply because “I am languishing” (v. 2). The appeal is to God’s compassion for the suffering, which, in fact, was the basis for the exodus long ago (Exod 2:23–25; 3:9–10). Apparently, human suffering invites, even compels, God’s gracious intervention. Second, Ps 6 appeals to God’s “steadfast love” (v. 4)—similar, no doubt, to the appeal for compassion, but more firmly based in God’s covenantal self-definition (Exod 34:6–7). Steadfast love defines who God is in God’s own self-understanding, which means that divine wrath can never be the final word. Third, the petitioner reminds God that there is “no remembrance of you” in death; “in Sheol who can give you praise?” (v. 5). This has sometimes been seen as a kind of crude “no atheists in foxholes” bargaining chip played by the pray-er, but more profoundly understood it is an appeal to God’s unflagging desire for relationship. In death, no praise; in other words, no interaction, no communication, no human lifting up of the name and person of God, no beneficent divine response, no relationship. All three of these rationales for God’s deliverance assume that God is fundamentally committed to humans and the world and that such commitment matters for how God acts, because it names who God is.

Other psalms make these and other appeals, working from a similar understanding of God. Especially interesting in relation to our consideration of Hos 11 (“I am no mortal”) is the recognition in Ps 27:10 that even though “my father and mother” might forsake me, “the Lord will take me up.” Here, too, God—though regularly depicted anthropomorphically—transcends human limitations. Second Isaiah makes a similar case for God: even a human mother might forget her nursing child, “yet I will not forget you” (Isa 49:15).

## THE TEXT IN THE FLOW OF THE BOOK

We will not fully understand the significance of our text without seeing how it functions in the flow of the book. Hosea, as we know, portrays God’s wrath in ugly and terrifying images: God is a maggot and dry rot (5:12); God is a tearing lion or a lurking leopard or a mangling bear (5:14; 13:7–8); God hides from Israel and its concerns (5:15); and, hardest of all for many, God acts in ways that our world

<sup>5</sup>See Christina Lynn Wendland, “‘I will give you a heart of flesh’: The Heart, Relationship, and Faithfulness in the Book of Ezekiel” (PhD diss., Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN, 2007) 45: “[F]aithfulness on God’s part is exemplified throughout Israel’s history by a self-limitation of divine wrath.”

<sup>6</sup>Interestingly, both Hosea and Ezekiel tell of God’s parental care for Israel (Hos 11:1–4; Ezek 16:6–14), both use the shocking image of the faithless bride to speak of the rebellion that elicits God’s fierce wrath (Hos 1:2–3; etc.; Ezek 16:15–34), and then both speak of God’s limitation of that wrath for God’s own reasons.

would define as those of an abusive husband (2:2–3) and abusive parent (2:4). “Abusive” is a strong word, to be sure, but few today would use any other language to describe a father who punished and rejected his innocent children because of the sins of their mother (2:4). And exposing a wife to public nakedness and shame seems irredeemably appalling. Indeed, something similar has been practiced in recent years in Zimbabwe, for example, by government thugs who terrorize women on the streets of Harare for dressing too “Western,” surrounding them and literally stripping them naked to be mocked and ogled by the crowds. How does one defend a God who would do such things?

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*“God acts in ways that our world would define as those of an abusive husband and abusive parent. Is this who God is? Is this who God wants to be?”*

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The fact is, though, the book itself, and God in the book, ask the same question. Is this who God is? Is this who God wants to be? God’s self-examination in 6:4 and 11:8 raises precisely those questions. In response, God turns away from those images of terror (“My heart recoils within me”—11:8; “my anger has turned from them”—14:4). Why? This is key: not because Israel has finally gotten its act together so that God can love her again, but because of God’s recognition of who God is. With a false reading of this book, God remains forever the abusive husband: the wife strays, the husband batters, the wife pleads, the husband relents—a pattern which, of course, will simply recur forever. Neither God nor we could escape such a vicious cycle: we sin, God punishes, we repent, God forgives, and so on, and so on. Such an understanding of law and gospel is not nearly radical enough for the message of Hosea. To be sure, there are times in biblical history where that pattern does in fact repeat itself (for example, in the book of Judges)—but now even God is wondering if that can ever get anywhere. In Hosea, God finally breaks the cycle by choosing to “heal their disloyalty” and “love them freely” (14:4). To heal disloyalty is altogether different from demanding or enforcing a return to loyalty in order that others make themselves worthy. Now something new has been created; the old pattern of sin and retribution has been broken and new possibility emerges. To love freely is precisely not to love only once the other has come to his or her senses. This is God’s *steadfast* love, the creative and sustaining love that makes all things new. Hosea understands God to break the pattern of give and take not only for Israel but for God. God has come to a new place, and nothing will ever be the same.

#### WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

To understand the book, we must hear God’s resolution of the question of how to respond to a rebellious people as a theological move within God rather than a chronological move within history. It is obviously not the case that, at this point

in Israel's history or in the Bible, God chooses never again to exercise anger, to be from now on a "good guy." Demonstrably, of course, things do not happen that way—nor should they. This would simply be a form of Marcionism, in which God turns from being the "God of the Old Testament" (wrath) to becoming the "God of the New Testament" (grace)—here it just happens earlier in the canon.<sup>7</sup> No, God has been gracious before, and God will execute anger again, even in the coming chapters of Hosea—though Hosea, along with the other prophets, understands that God's anger is never merely capricious but always in the service of grace. God punishes only in order to save—knocking down the wayward child if that is the only way to keep it from stepping into traffic.

Hosea portrays the dialectic of law and grace within God's own self, rather than as it is experienced or preached by people. God is forever resolving within the Godhead the tension between wrath and love in favor of love—for "wrath" is what God *does* when warnings and punishments are necessary to preserve life and when protection is required for the oppressed; but "grace" is who God *is*, now and always. In Hosea, the reader is allowed to overhear as God discovers that anew—for Israel's sake and God's.

Others, too, have understood the significance of this move. Hans Walter Wolff, for example, sees in this text that God's love "is not some inconstant characteristic but proves itself to be the incomparable, holy essence of God himself. Yahweh cannot set aside his love just as he cannot set aside his divinity."<sup>8</sup>

Paul Gerhardt, too, in his hymn paraphrase of this text, recognizes that God cannot be God by following the human pattern of responding in kind to wrongs committed by another: "For I am God, your faithful Lord, / Not one of that ungrateful horde / Of Adam's wicked offspring, / Who, faithless, can no love bestow, / Returning blows for every blow, / More sinful daily growing."<sup>9</sup>

What will it mean to proclaim this God to Christian congregations? First, as we have seen, the Christian preacher or teacher will want to lead people, with the text, into the very heart of God, overhearing God's own sense of who God is for the sake of the world.

Second, the preacher will help people understand that this is who God is as the God of the whole Bible—not an Old Testament God of wrath who needs to be "fixed" by the love of Jesus. There is certainly a chronological move in the New Testament, the dawning of a particular time (a *kairos*) in which God and we experience the full reality of incarnation, but the turn to grace theologically is made by God in every moment, as God makes known the radical significance

<sup>7</sup>Though humorous (and perhaps widely held), Mark Twain's satirical observation is theologically indefensible: "The two Testaments are interesting, each in its own way. The Old one gives us a picture of these people's Deity as he was before he got religion." In Mark Twain, *What is Man? And Other Philosophical Writings*, vol. 19 of *The Works of Mark Twain*, ed. Paul Baender (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973) 442.

<sup>8</sup>Hans Walter Wolff, *Hosea*, trans. Gary Stansell, ed. Paul D. Hanson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974) 203–204.

<sup>9</sup>Paul Gerhardt, "How Can I Give You Up, My Child?" stanza 4, trans. Frederick J. Gaiser, *Word & World* 27/1 (2007) 78.

that “God is love” (in 1 John 4:8 and 16, of course, but by no means invented there).

Third, the preacher will proclaim the wonder of grace that breaks all the dead-end cycles of “I will if you will” to which humans are forever prone—in politics, in personal relationships, even in our own resolutions to do better. Precisely this is what it means that God is not a mortal: God alone will finally love freely, but that love will create new possibilities for the humans who receive it.

Finally, the Christian preacher will take this message to the New Testament and remind hearers of Jesus’ own call to turn the other cheek (Matt 5:39), now not as an unreasonable demand but as an exciting promise of the only way to end human violence, made possible by the “free” love we first receive from God. All things are new now, as God makes clear in the dialectic of Hosea and again in the person of Jesus. As Paul notes, “God has done what the law...could not do” (Rom 8:3)—that is (to say it yet again), breaking the eternal cycle of sin and punishment and repentance and forgiveness—by loving us freely (Hos 14:4) and by sending “his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh” (Rom 8:3).<sup>10</sup> To be true to the message of Hosea and the character of God throughout the Bible, the preacher must avoid all notions that Jesus comes to appease an angry God. In Jesus we see who the God of the Bible is. Love is who the God of the Bible is. God’s work in Jesus is the same work that God does in the Old Testament to harness the divine wrath. As sinners, we (like Israel in Hosea) stand inevitably under the wrath of God (Rom 3:5). But now (like Israel in Hosea) we are justified by God’s grace “as a gift” (Rom 3:24). Jesus comes not to appease God but is the one “whom God put forward” because of the “divine forbearance” (Rom 3:25) to which Hosea already bore witness. To be sure, Jesus “rescues us from the wrath that is coming” (1 Thess 1:10)—not, however, by “rescuing us” from a God of wrath but by embodying the God of grace who is always committed to turning away from wrath for the sake of love. One might say that in Jesus we see most clearly God’s own “turning self,” the full and final vision of God’s internal resolution to love humankind freely and to heal human disloyalty (Hos 14:4).

This is why Hos 11 could function well as either a Lenten or Easter text—announcing in Lent what God is up to in Christ and in Easter the new life made possible through God’s self-giving love. In either case, what we proclaim is nothing other than God—the God to whom Hosea bears such eloquent and surprising witness and the God we come to know most fully in Jesus Christ. ⊕

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<sup>10</sup>Wolff, *Hosea*, 203, also makes the connection between Hos 11:9 and Rom 8:3.