

“God’s Choice for Us”
August 3, 2025
Scripture: Hosea 11:1-11; Colossians 3:1-11

It’s not often that we get a glimpse into God’s interior life in the Bible. Usually we hear pronouncements or descriptions of actions God takes on behalf of the supplicant or the people. But we almost never hear God’s inner dialogue. That’s what is so unique about this passage from Hosea. Here God is portrayed not as a sort of knee-jerk reactor to whatever Israel has done wrong, but as a careful deliberator, weighing the options and considering the costs.

In his famous book *The Prophetic Imagination*, Walter Brueggemann wants to provide insight into the nature of God. As he puts it: “We are indeed made in the image of some God. And perhaps we have no more important theological investigation than to discern in whose image we have been made.” What do we really know about God’s nature? And how are we shaped by it?

In this reading from Hosea we find God debating what to do about Israel’s disobedience. That disobedience has come in two forms. First, they have been worshiping other gods: “they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols.” Earlier in the book we’re told, “They utter mere words; with empty oaths they make covenants; so litigation springs up like poisonous weeds in the furrows of the field.” In other words, Israel has been violating the commandments as they apply to their relationship with God, by making idols and worshiping other gods, and with each other, by bearing false witness and taking each other to court. So, God has reason to be angry and to want to punish them.

Yet here we find God agonizing over it. God remembers who they are and why God holds so much affection for them. The relationship between God and Israel is more than just between a ruler and a subject. We’re often told that the God we find in the “Old” Testament is a God of law and order, always meting out punishment to those who violate the rules. We have this image of God that is harsh and distant. But that sort of God wouldn’t bother debating whether or not to punish Israel. Punishment would be a simple act of justice.

Yet here we find God tied up in knots over Israel: “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.” The God we find in Hosea is not motivated by a need for retribution and punishment. The God we meet here is filled with anguish over losing Israel, as a parent would be to see their child drifting away. There’s anger, sure; it’s maddening to see a child go down a harmful path when there’s nothing you can do about it. But there’s also a deep sadness and agony to see someone you love more than your own life pull away from you.

You know, when I see my children today, one 29 the other 23, both of them adults, I don’t see them the way anyone else does. I see the infant I held in my arms as she held her bottle looking up in my eyes, watching every expression on my face; or the little boy running across the yard to jump into my arms. I see the child lying still after fighting sleep until I’d lie down next to them, my hand on their back to soothe them. You see, that’s how God sees Israel. No matter

what they've done, they're still God's own child, struggling always to make their way in a world that bewilders and frustrates them, yet fills them with wonder.

So, if we want to know who this God is in whose image we're made, we need to listen to words like these from Hosea and recognize qualities in God we can see in ourselves. When we do that we can begin to understand God's choice for us. I think part of the reason God is portrayed as being so frustrated with Israel is this relationship is meant to be the beginning. Israel isn't intended to be an exclusive oasis of God's concern. Israel is meant to be a beacon, a microcosm, for that concern. God's relationship with Israel is meant to draw the whole world to God. God doesn't want just Israel; God wants us all. But losing Israel means losing all of us.

That's what's at stake in this passage in Hosea. It's not limited to the historical moment, because there are always enemies on the horizon looking to conquer weaker nations. And if Israel can't stand up to that pressure and hold on to its principles, then maybe it really doesn't matter what happens to them. If Israel in Hosea's day can't even see its own failure to honor its principles, then maybe the whole experiment of Israel is a bust. That's the possibility God is wrestling with in this book. So, God is fighting like crazy to bring them back, to convince them they are more than their fears are telling them.

Fear is the real culprit, I think, not disobedience or arrogance. I think what really drives Israel away from their values is fear that they'll somehow lose standing in the world if they don't comply and adjust their behavior to mimic their neighbors. In some ways it's as if they don't appreciate how unique they really are and how valuable their contribution to the world really is. They've become so intimidated by the power of other nations, so infatuated by how efficient tyrannies can be that they've begun to think maybe that's a better path for them and they should put their faith in leaders who will give in to dictators rather than resist them.

In his book *The Prophets*, the great Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel, in discussing Hosea, points out the difficulty of monotheism. He writes, "The conception of one God Who created heaven and earth is hard on the imagination. There is such multiplicity and variety of beings, there are thousands of communities, millions of human beings, countless numbers of days and nights—and only one God? Pagan gods, moreover, are more easily approached and appeased." The pagan gods offered efficiency and instant gratification because the systems that served them had no use for weaknesses like justice and compassion; under their rule you did what you were told and if you disobeyed you were crushed.

Israel was meant to be an alternative. While their neighbors offered only oppression and fear, rooted in the worship of static gods who were one-dimensional, Israel offered the alternative of a free and active God who extends compassion and seeks justice for the oppressed. All the prophets understand the importance of that alternative. They understand just how fleeting oppressive regimes really are, how unsustainable policies that favor the wealthy at the expense of the poor really are. As Brueggemann puts it, prophets like Hosea and Moses and all the rest offer "a religion of God's freedom as alternative to the static imperial religion of order and triumph and a politics of justice and compassion as alternative to the imperial politics of oppression."

So, we can see how important God's choice for us, as Hosea depicts it, really is. It's the difference between a world where the strong dominate the weak with impunity, controlling all the resources and one where the weak have access to all that's needed for well-being, where no one is ground under another's boot or told their lives don't matter.

God's choice for us is what lies behind the words from Colossians. There we hear the writer encouraging us to embrace the alternative life we're given in Christ. "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God." When the writer talks about "things on earth," they're not saying we shouldn't pay attention to what's happening around us, but that we're called to apply an alternative set of values to how we respond to what's happening around us. Because we have died, our old self, our ego has died, we are free to put on Christ and reveal Christ in the world. All the other categories we use to separate ourselves from one another, ethnic, religious or social, skin color or gender, they all dissolve in Christ. We're no longer bound by them. We're dead to them. God's choice for us means we are free to choose compassion, empathy and love for one another.

By insisting on that choice, by insisting that God will not give up on God's people no matter how far they might stray, Hosea offers an image of God his people can cling to in spite of the hardships about to befall them. When forces around us want us to give up our principles, our values, for the sake of convenience or efficiency or order, we are called to cling to the image of God Hosea describes, who says, "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?...My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender...for I am God and no mortal, the holy one in your midst." We're called to immerse our life in Christ who embodies compassion and generosity, who is all and in all.

God's choice for us means we can offer the world an alternative to fear, hatred and division. We can offer hope. We can offer the possibility of a new day with an end to oppression and coercion. We can offer the embrace of God's love and justice to set us all free.

Amen