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 The more they were called, the more they went away;
 they kept sacrificing to the Baals and burning offerings to idols.
 Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk;
 I took them up by their arms, but they did not know that I healed them.
 I led them with cords of kindness, with the bands of love,
 and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws,
 and I bent down to them and fed them. Hosea 11:1-4*

Today is the official beginning of Advent, which the season traditionally observed in many Christian churches as a time of expectant waiting and preparation for the celebration of the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, on Christmas Day. The word “advent” is a version of the Latin word which mean "the coming." Now this fits perfectly into the context of our ongoing sermon series through the gospel of Matthew which we began the first Sunday in May – as a common theme of Matthew’s gospel is Jesus entered the world to establish the New Covenant Kingdom of God/Kingdom of Heaven in the hearts of those who surrender their lives to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The Christmas Advent season is a time of expectant waiting and preparation for the coming of the Kingdom of God, that would occur as a result of the miraculous incarnational birth of God who entered the world in the physical human form of Jesus. This would be the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies that foretold of coming King who would also come as the long-promised Messiah. This is also a common them in the gospel of Matthew.

The books of the Old Testament contain many passages and prophecies about the coming of Jesus as Messiah and King. For instance, the crucifixion of Jesus was foretold in Psalm 22:16-18 approximately 1,000 years before Christ was born, long before this method of crucifixion was even practiced. After the resurrection, the apostles and leaders of the New Testament church began to declare officially that Jesus was the Messiah and King by divine appointment. The apostle Paul opened his letter to the Romans by writing: “*Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord*” (Romans 1:1-4).

Some Bible scholars believe more than 350 prophetic Scriptures were fulfilled when Jesus came to earth. A number of those Scriptures are reflections rather than revelations of Jesus, but there are 44 prophecies that clearly reveal Jesus to be the promised Messiah and many of those were spoken forth by God’s prophets. Over the next four Sundays we will be hearing from four of the minor prophets in the Old Testament regarding Jesus as the promised Messiah in the coming of his Kingdom.

This morning we will begin with the prophet Hosea, whose name means “salvation.” Hosea has been called “the deathbed prophet of Israel” because he was the last prophet of God to speak for God during a period of national decline before the northern kingdom of Israel (also called “*Ephraim*”) fell to the Assyrian army in about 722 BC. Hosea’s ministry followed a golden age of Israel, which was a time of peace, comfort and prosperity not seen since the great days of king Solomon. But, as what commonly happens, this prosperity lead God’s people into moral decay and spiritual adultery, as Israel/Ephraim abandoned God and gave themselves over to pagan idols. And so in order to clearly make His point, God instructed the prophet/preacher Hosea to marry a prostitute, whose unfaithfulness to her husband would serve as an example of the spiritual adultery of Israel’s unfaithfulness to God. Hosea proclaimed God’s complaint against Israel and warned them of the punishment that would come unless they turned back to God and were faithful to Him. Hosea reveals the depth of God’s love for His people, a love that tolerates no rivals, but also a love that causes God to relentlessly pursue His people.

The word of the Lord that came to Hosea, the son of Beeri, in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, king of Israel. When the Lord first spoke through Hosea, the Lord said to Hosea, "Go, take to yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord." So he went and took Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son. Hosea 1:1-3

In these words we read that Hosea prophetically spoke for God about thirty years before Assyria invaded and destroyed Israel/Ephraim in 722 BC. In his book Hosea addresses the northern kingdom of Israel, rather than the southern kingdom of Judah. What this means is that Hosea was a contemporary of the prophet Amos, as the both addressed the same corrupt and idolatrous northern kingdom of Israel/Ephraim during the last decades of its existence. But God called Hosea to do so in a personally unique and tragic way by calling Hosea to personify Israel's unfaithfulness by marrying a prostitute. What happened after Hosea did so was shocking, which reflected the reality that Israel's spiritual adultery was shocking. The problem was, God's people of that time did not see it as shocking.

It's not likely that many of us who claim Christ would ever dream of falling in love and marrying a pimp or a prostitute. But God tells us this is what happens when we put anything before Him in our lives. In God's eyes, everyone who forsakes Him is a whore. There are no unmarried people in God's eyes. Everyone is either faithfully married to God or to a prostitute. God made us for himself; in Isaiah 43:7 God declares: *"Everyone who is called by my name, whom I formed and made, I created for my glory."*

If we get our greatest glory or joy or satisfaction or pleasure or fulfillment or love from anyone or anything else than God, we are committing spiritual adultery. That was the condition of the hearts of God people in northern kingdom of Israel in Hosea's day. And so, God told Hosea, "Before I give you a word of judgment and grace of My people, I am going to make you know what it's like to be married to an unfaithful wife." Hosea obeyed and his marriage became a parable of Israel's relationship with God.

So he went and took Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son. And the Lord said to him, "Call his name Jezreel, for in just a little while I will punish the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel. And on that day I will break the bow of Israel in the Valley of Jezreel." Hosea 1:3-5

The name "Jezreel" means "scattered" was the name of a city that had played a tragic part in Israel's history. It was in Jezreel that the spiritual adultery under Ahab and his queen Jezebel came to its frightening conclusion. For it was in Jezreel that Jezebel was hurled from the window of her palace and her body was eaten by dogs on the streets of Jezreel. So when Hosea named his son Jezreel, he was making the boy, his marriage, his family an object lesson of God's relationship to his people. Every time Hosea would call out the name "Jezreel" in the marketplace, the sounding in the ear of a pious Jew would be a reminder of the fact that in the past God had fatally dealt with the nation's sin. Because of their spiritual adultery God would "scatter" His people in Israel among the wayward and pagan nations.

She conceived again and bore a daughter. And the Lord said to him, "Call her name No Mercy, for I will no more have mercy on the house of Israel, to forgive them at all. But I will have mercy on the house of Judah, and I will save them by the Lord their God. I will not save them by bow or by sword or by war or by horses or by horsemen." When she had weaned No Mercy, she conceived and bore a son. And the Lord said, "Call his name Not My People, for you are not my people, and I am not your God." Hosea 1:6-9

Hosea doesn't tell us whether these last two were his children or not. When your wife is a prostitute, you never know. But, like Jezreel, their names show what harlotry, or forsaking the Lord, begets. "No Mercy" meant God would lift His mercy from the nation of Israel and permit her to suffer for her sins; and "Not My People" indicated God's people in Israel were out of fellowship with God and out of line with God's will, God's purpose, God's promises as once they were.

Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured or numbered. And in the place where it was said to them, "You are not my people," it shall be said to them, "Children of the living God." And the children of Judah and the children of Israel shall be gathered together, and they shall appoint for themselves one head. And they shall go up from the land, for great shall be the day of Jezreel. Hosea 1:10-11

Here we read that in the midst of Hosea's prophetic message to the nation of Israel, after first exposing their sins and warning them of coming judgment - we then read of the passion, the depth, the joy, the compassion and the greatness of God's love in His relentless pursuit of His people. In the face of our rebellion against God and our rejection of God and our running away from God, in giving our love and our ourselves to someone or something other than God - God still loves us and pursues us, so we might turn back to him, so we might live with Him and live for Him, in the relationship we were created for.

This all began in the Garden of Eden. After creating the universe, the world and everything in it, God created a man in His image, a human being God named Adam – and God breathed His life into Adam's body, heart and soul. And not long after God created a woman in His image out of one of Adam's ribs, a human being God named Eve, and Eve was joined together into a divine love relationship with God and with human relationship Adam. But not long after satan was able to convince Eve that there are things in life that are more joyful, more satisfying, more pleasurable, more fulfilling, more loving than God. And so Eve rebelled against God's authority and she rejected God's love, and Adam joined her in doing so, and they ran from God, giving their love and themselves to someone/something other than God.

But even then, at the very moment sin came into the world, we see God's relentless pursuit to love His people. After Adam and Eve rebelled against God, rejected God and ran from God, the Bible tells us that God pursued Adam and Eve in the Garden, and in Genesis 3:9 we read that God calls out: *"Where are you?"* And after listening to Adam and Eve blame, excuse and rationalize their rebellion, rejection and running – God pronounces His judgment and punishment for their sin. But even in this, we see God's relentless pursuit to love His people - *in that* while God did pronounce His judgment of hard work on Adam and painful child-birth on Eve and relational conflict for both of them – God did not pronounce a *"curse"* on them as He did to satan and the earth. We *also* see God's relentless pursuit to love His people – *in that* right after sin entered the world, God promised to send a Savior into the world who would sacrificially defeat the sin and evil in the hearts and lives of His people. In Genesis 3:15 God declares curses on satan and then tells him: *"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."* God's relentless pursuit of loving His people would result in the coming of the Kingdom of God through a Messiah. We see this again reflected in Hosea 2, where in the first 13 verses God describes the punishment that nation Israel will experience because of their spiritual adultery. But then in Hosea 2:14-23 God tells *Israel and us* what He does for us because He loves us, even though we are rebellious adulterous wives.

"Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her" (Hosea 2:14). Because God loves us, *He will gently persuade us to come back to him.* We're all guilty of spiritual adultery because we have all have loved other lovers, including ourselves, more than God. But God does not cast us off. He promises to take us into the *"wilderness"* to be with us, so He can tenderly speak to us. The original Hebrew of *"speak tenderly to her"* is literally *"to speak to her heart."* This is how God wants to talk to us, even in the midst of the rebellion, rejection and running of our spiritual adultery.

"And there I will give her her vineyards and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope" (Hosea 2:14). Because God loves us, *He will promise us His hope and His safety.* The valley of Achor is where Israel was first unfaithful to God in the promised land. Just after Israel entered the land, Achan kept the forbidden plunder, causing the defeat at Ai. But now God promises that if we will come home to Him, Achor will no longer be a valley of trouble but a door of hope. We will come home to God's rich vineyards.

Verse 18 spells out this hope in detail: "*And I will make for them a covenant on that day with the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the creeping things of the ground. And I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land, and I will make you lie down in safety.*" The promise of God is that because He loves us, He will give us His hope and His safety, when we come home to Him as our greatest love.

"And I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the Lord" (Hosea 2:19-20). Because God loves us, *He will renew His promise to us to enter into an intimate relationship with Him.* By repeating "*I will betroth you*" three times, God is telling us that when we come home to Him because He is our greatest love - we will go back to the early days of our relationship with Him and we will start all over. When we repent and come back to God, God will lay a fresh foundation of love, justice, grace, righteousness, joy, mercy, and faithfulness. And its then that we "*shall know the Lord.*" The word "*know*" here is the biblical word for the most intimate, pure relationship we can know in life. This is the gospel story in the Old Testament. This is the meaning of Advent interpreted seven centuries before Christ. God comes to gently persuade us to himself; he promises us His hope and His safety; He starts over with any who will come, and offers us the most intimate and pleasure-filled relationship possible.

We see this once again in Hosea 3, which opens by telling us that Hosea's wife Gomer has left him for another man, who uses her and then sells her into slavery. And so, God commands Hosea to go find his wayward prostitute of a wife. Hosea does so, and he finds her and he buy his own wife back, brings her home, and assures her of his forgiveness and love - again reflecting the gospel and the coming of Christ.

But one wonders what was going on in Hosea's mind throughout all of this. He marries Gomer and provides her with the love, safety, stability and blessing of a new life, out of the shadows of selling her body to survive - and she leaves him for another man and she ends up being a slave! But even then, Hosea goes and looks for her, buys her back, brings her home and assures her of his forgiveness and love. This is the relentless pursuit of God to love His people we see in coming of the kingdom of Jesus.

But does God really love us like that? Well, everything in the Word of God and everything in the world we live in gives witness that God does love you and I just like that. That is our testimony because we desperately want to live our lives our own way. We have pushed God away in fits of rebellion. We have all rejected God by ignoring, twisting or changing the truth of God's Word to fit our way of thinking. And we have all run from God, when we don't want to do what He wants us to do - and we run even faster and further when we know what we have done is wrong in the eyes of God. It's in all these things that we need to know that God is always near, ready and waiting to tap us on the shoulder, so we might turn around and go back home. In everything that happens to us in this world - whether it be good or bad, joy or sorrow, easy or hard, comfort or pain, gain or loss, laughter or mourning, healing or brokenness, strong or weak, sickness or health, life or death - God is always saying: "I love you."

God relentlessly pursues loving His people through Jesus Christ in the midst of their rebelling, rejecting and running. Romans 5:8 says: "*But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*" Ephesians 2:3-5 tells us that: "*God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.*" The preacher pastor Haddon Robinson once wrote: "God gives to us metal in the mine. God gives to us trees in the forest. Then the miner with the skill God gave him goes into the earth and digs up the metal, and the woodman with his skill chops down the trees. And then when the metal is mined, the smithy takes that metal and forms it into a spike. When the tree is cut, the carpenter comes and forms it into a cross. And when the cross is ready, God comes, and in Jesus Christ he stretches his arms along the arms of that cross and allows soldiers to pound with cruel violence, nails into his hands and feet. And he dies there on that cross for you and for me, that we might have the forgiveness of our sins, that we might have eternal life, that we might have heaven forever more. This is our God, and there is none like him."

This is the relentless pursuit of God to love His people we see in coming of the kingdom of God that began with the birth of Jesus. Again, we see this clearly in the words of the prophet Hosea. After the reflection of the gospel that we see in Hosea 3, the following chapters return to God's accusations of the sins of Israel (chapter 4), the punishment that is coming to both Israel and Judah because of their lack of repentance (chapters 5-7); and the whirlwind of punishment Israel would receive from their blatant spiritual adultery (chapters 8-10). And then, in Hosea 11, once again, it's here in the midst of the weight and the pain and the darkness of sin and clouds of God's condemnation and God's punishment, that God speaks of His relentless pursuit to love His people in coming of the kingdom of Jesus Christ.

Hosea 11 is one of the most moving, tender chapters in the Bible - in allowing us to feel the heartbeat of God's relentless love for his people. God speaks of His relentless love here in the context of family life, as a rejected Father who is loving His rebellious son with a long-suffering, enduring, relentless love. God is the Father here, and the spiritually adulterous nation Israel is the son who won't respond to his Father's love and come back to home.

*When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.
The more they were called, the more they went away;
they kept sacrificing to the Baals and burning offerings to idols.
Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk;
I took them up by their arms, but they did not know that I healed them.
I led them with cords of kindness, with the bands of love,
and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws,
and I bent down to them and fed them. Hosea 11:1-4*

This passage recalls the innocence of the early days of Israel's deliverance from their bondage to slavery in Egypt. God the Father graciously loved his son Israel and helped him escape Egypt. Verse 2 tells us that Israel responded to that love with rebellion. They chose other gods, causing them to violate their marriage-like relationship with God with spiritual adultery. But verse 3 stresses how quickly Ephraim walked away from other gods and turned back to God as Israel was taught to walk with God by his loving Father. Verse 4 is a beautiful image of how God the Father lifted that yoke of bondage and led Israel the son with a compassionate, guiding hand and with a band of love, not the control of a harness with a bit. We also see the picture of their Father stooping down to their level to meet their needs, feeding them tenderly, remembering how God provided manna in the wilderness. But the memories of Ephraim's early years couldn't deny the reality of how spiritually adulterous the had become again.

*They shall not return to the land of Egypt, but Assyria shall be their king,
because they have refused to return to me.
The sword shall rage against their cities, consume the bars of their gates,
and devour them because of their own counsels.
My people are bent on turning away from me, and though they call out to the Most High,
he shall not raise them up at all. Hosea 11:5-7*

The mention of "Egypt" here in Hosea is a symbol of re-entering the bondage of slavery. Because of the nation's spiritual adultery, they would return to the kind of slavery to sin, from which they have already been delivered. The reason for judgment is not just the sin of spiritual adultery with the Baals, but also their commitment to turn away from God and their persistent refusal to return or repent from doing so.

There is a sense of sadness in the words God expresses here - not only that His people had once again rebelled and rejected His love, but also in knowing what would tragically happen to them because they had done so. But in next two verses that follow (8-9) we once again hear the depth of God's love for His people, as He expresses His response to their rebellion and rejection *with the love of His forgiving grace.*

*How can I give you up, O 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 burning anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim;
for I am God and not a man,
the Holy One in your midst,
and I will not come in wrath. Hosea 11:8-9*

The glory of God's grace is that in God's relentless pursuit to love His people, He doesn't give up on us! Our hope in Jesus Christ is based on the faithfulness of God regardless of our unfaithfulness to him. In 2 Timothy 2:11-13 the apostle Paul wrote: *"If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he also will deny us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself."* God's words in verses 8-9 here weave together the strands of God's unqualified grace into a band of love, a cord of compassion that slips around and holds tight to our wandering hearts. God is relentlessly loving, and His love won't let His people go. Although, because He is Holy, God does have to judge and punish us – He also, by the power of His Holy Spirit, lovingly works in our hearts and patiently waits for us to humbly turn back to him – as He speaks to us and gently persuades us to come back to Him, promising us His hope and His safety and renewing His promise to us to enter into a new intimate relationship with Him - by His relentless love, time and time again.

God declared He would not do to God's people what he did to the cities Admah and Zeboiim, which were cities that were totally destroyed on the plain of Sodom and Gomorrah. God's people are not going to receive the absolute obliteration they deserve. God is telling Israel/Ephraim here that after His judgment on them for their spiritual adultery, which would be the destruction of their land by the Assyrians, He will begin the process of restoring His people. What we are reading here is that God's holiness is foundational to His love. God isn't vindictive, but He is righteous in his judgment. His punishment is remedial and His correction is an overwhelmingly work of His forgiving grace. What this means is that God's purpose in each and every circumstance is reconciliation. That's that gospel! And that means as followers of Jesus Christ, God's purpose of reconciliation should be our purpose also. But reconciliation, more often than not, is too hard for us to do. But God tell us that it's not hard for Him at all because he is not like man; he is not controlled by a fallen human nature. The holiness and grace of God's forgiving love on the cross of Christ will ultimately bring the people of God back home to God.

*They shall go after the Lord;
he will roar 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, declares the Lord. Hosea 11:10-11*

Here we see the relentless loving heart of God reaching into the future Kingdom of God, when all of God's people will live in an intimate, obedient, joyful, trusting, faithful relationship with Him and for Him. It will be a Kingdom of Heaven where all who are there will express a wonder and reverence before the glorious and powerful loving roar of His return, and they will gratefully accept His sovereign authority and His providential care. While some would describe Hosea's prophetic words here as a forth-telling of the final millennial kingdom to come – Hosea's prophetic words are also a picture of the coming of the Kingdom of God - where Jesus as Messiah would sacrifice his life on a cross in our place to pay the penalty for our sins, for the forgiveness of our sins - and where Jesus will also come as King, by the power of his resurrection, to reigns and to rules in the hearts, lives and souls of all those who surrender their hearts and lives to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

“When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son” (Hosea 11:1). Here we see a picture of the relentless pursuit of God to love His people in coming of the kingdom of Jesus Christ. The context of this verse speaks of the relationship that God had with Israel, and specifically when God relentlessly loved Israel and rescued the people from slavery under Pharaoh, bringing them into the Promised Land. The picture of the coming of Jesus becomes clear when we look at Matthew 2:13-15.

Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, “Out of Egypt I called my son.” Matthew 2:13-15.

Matthew uses Hosea’s statement to show that the coming of the Messiah is an extension of the relentless of love of God that He has for His people. Matthew does not say that Hosea had Jesus in mind when Hosea 11:1 was originally written, but rather that the experience of Jesus reflected what Hosea had written about Israel. Jesus was God’s Son, and God sent him to Egypt and called him back to Israel. Matthew was showing that Jesus completed what Moses began with the Exodus. The Messiah’s return from Egypt reflects our freedom of the bondage of sin. The “calling” of God’s “son” (Israel) began at the exodus and found its completion in the coming Christ who fulfilled the Law and the Prophets. We see these things referenced in 1 Peter 1. In verse 10-11 the apostle writes: *“Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven.”* And in verses 17-21 he writes: *And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one’s deeds, conduct yourselves with fear . . . knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.”*

The relentless pursuit of God to love His people never changes. What that means is that God does not love us because of what we are or what we do, but rather God always loves us in spite of what we are and in spite of what we do. This is what God is telling us through Hosea. This is hard for us because we tend to live out our faith in Christ believing there is always a connection between what we do for God and what God does for us. That’s heresy. That is not the gospel. That’s not the truth of God. God doesn’t bless us or reward us because of what we do; it’s in spite of what we do. Psalm 115:3 says: *“Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases.”* In Exodus 11:19 God Himself declares: *“I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.”* God’s love for us is not dependent upon us. The truth is everything – everything that God does for us is simply because He relentlessly loves us. Praise God we don’t have to do anything and we cannot do anything to earn God’s grace, mercy and love. When we finally do truly come to understand how much God really loves us, we will humbly respond to Him with love, praise, obedience, sacrifice and service. Amen!

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8:35-39

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