

Today we will wind up the minor part of our series on the minor and major prophets. We will spend one more week with Hosea. Last week, we looked at Hosea's dysfunctional family. We looked at his God ordained marriage to a prostitute named Gomer. We also met his three children with terrible names. Last week was all about the ways that Hosea's improbable marriage represented the ruined marriage relationship between God and Israel.

Hosea continues with the mixed message of punishment and hope. But in chapter 11, he totally changes gears. In chapter 11, the God we've known to this point is represented in a most illogical way. Hosea's description of God sounds quite a bit like...a description of a mother. A mother with a tender love for her child. The tender love that instantly inserts itself into a mother when they hear those first squalls of their newborn child.

The images of God that Hosea uses in this passage are not common ones. God is pictured as a loving parent—really a loving, almost doting mother.

In verse three God reminds Ephraim (Israel) that God taught him to walk. Do you remember teaching your children how to walk? Each of my kids learned very differently, but there were some common trends. First, they start pulling themselves up to a chair or table. Then they walk around the table and chairs, learning to put one foot in front of the other. Finally they turn away from the table and take their first steps. Don't you remember the applause and encouragement of those moments? When they fell down, we picked them up and encouraged them to try again. We repeated this countless times until our beloved child finally succeeds in taking his or her first steps. Then, oh the celebrating.

Now picture God with us in our walk with Him. There God is, with us, watching as we take our first steps of faith. Watching when we step outside of our comfort zones. Watching when we step onto a path not knowing where it will lead.

Hosea continues by sharing God's story. How God took Israel in God's arms and healed them. Can I get an amen for this next statement? Children do not realize all that their parents do for them. When my kids got sick, their dad and I would tag-team. One would stay home while the other went to work. The one who at home played "Nurse Nelly"—holding their child, caring for them (the best cuddles ever!), feeding them, cleaning up after them and entertaining them. If the sickness lasted more than one day we might have to switch roles. In our "not so good" days God cares for us. God nurses us through the tough days.

Next, through Hosea, God tells Israel that God is like a parent who lifts their infant to their cheek and "loves on" them. Smooch, smooch, smooch

Now what I'm about to say next is going to be a shocker. There comes a time when a child needs to assert their independence. To declare this to their parents. Yes, it is tough, but it is also a very important stage of human development. It is not an easy time for either the child or the

parents. One parenting guru said, “When they are young children step on your toes. When they are older, they step on your heart.” This is exactly what God, through Hosea was saying here about God’s relationship with Israel and with us.

Last week in Hosea we saw Israel portrayed as unfaithful; as a woman who did not keep her marriage covenant. Israel wandered after other gods and willfully rejected calls God to return. Aren’t we guilty of that too? Guilty of deciding that God is not going to be an important part of our lives. When God doesn’t do what we want God to do, we pout. We say we’re not going to follow God. We’ve decided. It’s more about what’s good for self, not about serving and sharing.

And yet, just as it was with Israel, so it is with us today. God still loves us. No matter how rebellious we are, not matter how much trouble we get into, God still love us and God will never stop loving us. I’m living proof of that. God grieves for us knowing that our lives could be so much better if we would just frickin’ begin to make some right decisions. But no matter the decisions, God never stops loving us.

God never stops believing that we, as human beings will at some point discover who we are. That we will realize how dependent we are on God. That we will find truly ourselves only when we are deeply and completely “in” God.

Parents out there, how many of you have heard those sweet words uttered from your child as an adult, “Hey mom, Hey, dad, now I understand what you were saying.” And isn’t true that no matter how old they get, you never stop loving them. Never stop worrying about them.

How long does God’s love last for us? Maybe something like this.

**I’ll love you forever video**

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Church family. God invites us to stop and reflect on the love that God has for us. It is a deep, steadfast, sacrificial love. It’s a forever kind of love. God’s love is a love that comforts us in difficult times and gives us the courage to face the challenges of life. God’s love is a love so great that we ourselves are inspired to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves. That is love. And that is a knowledge that would make any parent proud.

Amen