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(Transcription—sermon delivered without text)
Hosea 11:1-11; Luke 12:13-21

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.

Someone in the crowd said to him,
“Teacher, tell my brother to divide the
family inheritance with me.” But he said to
him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or
arbitrator over you?” And he said to them,
“Take care! Be on your guard against all
kinds of greed; for one’s life does not
consist in the abundance of possessions.”
Then he told them a parable: “The land of a
rich man produced abundantly. And he
thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I
have no place to store my crops?’ Then he
said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my
barns and build larger ones, and there I will
store all my grain and my goods. And I will
say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods
laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be
merry.’ But God said to him, ‘You fool!
This very night your life is being demanded
of you. And the things you have prepared,
whose will they be?’ So it is with those who
store up treasures for themselves but are not
rich toward God.”

Finding the Happy Ending

What we have in the scripture lessons for today is a lesson in the importance of stories. Before I get into the scripture let me tell you what I mean by that, because I am a firm believer that stories have power. The stories we tell about our lives are the meanings that we create out of the facts before us and we think about it in the starkest terms of: there is an eight-ounce glass with four ounces of water in it. Some people call it half full and some people call it half empty. We call one a group optimists and one group pessimists. But that is only the beginning of the story because the story could be: "the glass was full and I was thirsty and now half of it is gone and I am not." And suddenly you are not a pessimist anymore, or it may be: "the glass is half full but I ordered a full pint and where is the rest of my drink" and you are no longer an optimist.

And these are the ways we put meaning into the facts before our lives, because as we live our lives things happen to us and so we could be unhappy with our jobs and it could be because we say "I have failed in everything I have tried to accomplish, I will never again succeed and it is a fine thing for me to be consigned to this, I deserve no better." Or we could be ecstatic in our jobs and tell the story, "I have done great things, I am a wonderful person, nothing I touch can go wrong and therefore there is no chance that this job too will go wrong or that I will do ill in it." And these are the meanings we put on to our lives. And I think that as we turn to the scriptures we see ways that these can trip us up and also bring us hope. Our lives are not theater, I hope and we can have happy endings there.

I will briefly treat the Gospel of Luke, my main text will be in Hosea but I think it is important to reframe Luke in terms of stories. Because the story that Jesus tells is about a man who has done well, who has done a good job of farming, who has had good land that has produced abundantly. His story is that I have done so well in my life, I deserve to sit and eat and be merry for the rest of my days and so rather than spreading out the love that has been bestowed on me, rather than giving the gifts to the world I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones to store my booty, and I will love the rest of my days, and God says "I hope you did, because your story, my friend, right now is at an end." Had his story been different who knows what would have happened to him--if the story had been, "God has blessed me with this land and God has blessed me with this ability to farm well, maybe I should give some back to God." God may have then said "Good on you". But Jesus uses that story to warn us at the end of our lives we will be gone. If we have goods maybe then our descendants will just be fighting over them like this man that asked Jesus for help has done.

When I started that story of the glass that is half full or half empty, there are a lot of different ways to tell a story. You can tell a story about your own life, by saying well I was in a career and then my job was ended when the company was sold off and shut down and I had to do something new and that is a story told in frames of external actors. I think we can do the same with the story in Hosea, because what we can say about Israel in the time of Hosea is that, especially in this northern kingdom, the traditional powers of the ancient near east, Assyria and Egypt were focused on inward things of tending their empires of not exerting their influence and throwing their elbows around as they were used to doing. And with those two traditional powers, the USSR and USA of their time, from our cold war, little tiny states had a chance to stand up and be

glorious and prosper and not pay tribute. And this is what happened to Israel in the story of First and Second Kings you can see the story of little states who were free from the shackles of the big, bad nation states around them, able to be prosperous. And that is a way of looking at the situation geo-politically and another one is: "well those states wake up sometimes."

That is what's happening here in the book of Hosea, it is Assyria on the march, and Israel is, unfortunately for them, between Assyria and Egypt and the Assyrians want to conquer all of the Ancient Near East and are doing a good job of it. They are coming; doom is on the horizon for Hosea. It does not take a prophet to see what is coming next for Israel, for this northern kingdom of Israel, they do not even have the population of Judah or the great cities of Judah that might let them buy off the Assyrians. Israel is in the way of the Assyrians. It is ongoing and Hosea could tell the story in the way that Amos does and in the way that Hosea sometimes does elsewhere of "we have sinned against God and now we are going to get what we deserve," or Hosea could tell the story "we have sinned God but if only we repent we will be saved." But Hosea is a bit more of a realistic prophet, he does not, in this chapter at least, go in for saving and rescuing angels, he does not predict any miracle, in the face of the Assyrian onslaught. No, Hosea takes a different tack, and this is where I think we can learn a lot about the stories we tell, because Hosea's story does not start in the sins of Israel against God, Hosea's story does not start in the warmth and protection Israel might enjoy as the blessed of God. No, Hosea's story begins in Israel's childhood as a state.

"When God loved Israel, when Israel was a child I loved him and out of Egypt I called my son. " The first thing Hosea reminds us of in this chapter is God's love for Israel "but the more I called them the more they went from me they kept sacrificing to the Baals, offering incense to idols." You could look at the story of Israel before the Assyrians as having a beginning, a middle, and then an end. In the beginning God loved us, then we went against God and now the Assyrians are going to destroy us. The beginning, the middle and the end. And it is interesting the way Hosea interjects these symbols of love "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." As we in our lives do not always understand how God is working to heal us especially as children we do not always understand the love of our parents so too did Israel not quite understand what was happening, but God says "I led them with chords 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." And God is not saying here that all that Israel had was due to the direct action of God, there is human kindness as well. There is this covenant we have in our own lives of treating others with the love that we feel from God with human kindness and cords of love. We are bound together as much as we are bound to God, and so this story continues with the love of God for God's children. And here would be the end of the story in certain tellings: "they shall return to the land of Egypt and Assyria shall be their King because they have refused to return to me. The sword rage in their cities 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."

And so God reminds us in our own lives we feel love and we turn away from that love. We understand from God the things we can do for our neighbors but as Amos tells us instead what we do is to cheat our neighbors, to cheat the strangers among us, to leave the alien in our midst uncared for, we turn away from God, and are exiled by our own choices and this happens and sometimes we exiled by the choices of others. You can look at Assyria as a divine hand of God,

or we can look at it geo-politically Assyria decided they wanted some more power and some good people in Israel were going to be exiled too. Because it's a reminder here they shall return to the land of Egypt.

God took the people out of Egypt but it was not that Egyptians came up to Israel raiding, came up to other countries raiding to get slaves. The tribes of Israel went down into Egypt to escape a famine and there found food and water and eventually found oppression and so to in our lives do we go places where there is safety. Sometimes we go home and sometimes we go back to places we have lived before and sometimes we find refuge in a bottle and it brings us comfort, but there comes a time that that comfort ceases and this is the reminder that God tells us here and tells the people of Northern Israel and this could be the end, they could be in Egypt in exile forever they could be conquered by the Assyrians, with the Assyrians ruling forever, that could be the end of the story. We could go into refuge away from our homes, we could be displaced. At the end of our stories, we could tell our stories that we had a good thing going and made lots of bad choices and then our good thing was over forever. We could tell the story we had a good thing going, then someone came in and took it away from us and if only we could conquer them again, we could come back to goodness, but that is a small story.

And what Hosea is telling us here is that the story does not begin with us, and the story does not end with us. It does not begin with our choices, it does not end with our choices. It is a bigger story than that. And our choices are important parts of how we tell the story but we need to see the rest of the story and that story is this small bit of mercy. "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 Zebaiim? My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fears 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."

And it is again important to understand what is being predicted here. Hosea knows doom is coming on the horizon. Doom is certain, there is no escaping the doom that is before Israel. So this little sliver of forgiveness of love and hope is "Well I won't destroy you completely." And if ever there was a need for a happy ending it is on the end of that sentiment. "Yes, The good news is I will not destroy you completely", but in our lives how often have we felt that we are about to be completely destroyed? We see no path forward from where we are, we are trapped in the job, we are trapped in a relationship, we are trapped and see nothing good on the horizon. And if you felt that way and if you have felt that pull that says, "nothing will ever get better, then maybe you can feel how this can be a cathartic release." Things will get worse but all is not lost. Because God says "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, like doves from the land of Assyria, and I'll return them to their homes says the Lord." No, you cannot be saved sometimes from the doom that faces you in the choices you have made. No, sometimes you will suffer. But what God says here by the prophet Hosea is, "It will get better." The doom is not the end of the story, and we have the choice of how to tell our stories. Do they start in us and they end in us or they start in the love of God and end in the love of God, saying "it will get better. We will have to work hard, but it will get better." Sometimes we are suffering at our own hands, sometimes we are suffering at the hand of others, but my story is that I tried hard and I failed, but I learned something, I'm going to try again. My story is, "I guarded all my treasures, I kept them

to myself, but I know now I can give them away, I can help other people who feel trapped in their own stories and I can change the story because my story does not begin in me and my story does not end in me. My story begins in being a loved child of God and ends in being a love child of God. And so my life is not Greek theater. My life does not end in tragedy. My life can end with a happy ending if only I can find it and if only I can help other people to find it." These are the stories we can tell ourselves to make meaning of our lives. Begins and ends not in us, but in our love. Amen