

SERMON TITLE: "God Is Calling"  
SERMON TEXT: Hosea 11:1-11  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: August 4, 2019, at First UMC

### **INTRODUCTION**

A number of years ago, the United Methodist denomination did a big television advertising campaign. Because the ads were so well done, I kept copies of the narrations. If I remember correctly, the first ad had scenes of a large tree with a swing hanging from a branch. The tree and the swing were gently swaying in the wind. The narration went like this:

I miss you. I miss the sound of your voice. Your laughter. Our late-night conversations. The way your eyes lit up at Christmas, or a sunset. Please remember, no one knows you like I know you. Time is no obstacle. No distance is too great. I've tried to call, but there's no answer. But I'm ready to try again. If you are. Love always, God.

The second ad showed pictures of someone getting their mail and opening a card. The narration said,

I hope this finds you. I think of you every day. I miss hearing from you. I miss being asked for my advice, and loving you enough to always tell you the truth. Now that you're grown, I miss the feeling of your hand in my hand. Sitting on the side of your bed, watching you sleep . . . I'm still here, you know. When you need me. When you're ready. Love always, God.

Obviously, those ads were an attempt to reach the hearts of those who had known God's loving care in the past, but had let other things get in the way of their prayer and worship. Those messages were an invitation to return to a relationship with God that could again be tender, nurturing, and sacred. Then and now, those words are a way of communicating that God is calling.

### **1—GOD IS CALLING THROUGH HOSEA**

Today's scripture from Hosea 11 is trying to convey that same message. The prophet Hosea was a member of the Jewish tribe of Ephraim in the northern kingdom of Israel during the years just before the Assyrians conquered them. More than 700 years before Jesus, Hosea warned his people that they

were in trouble. They hadn't been faithful to the one true God, who had rescued the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. Instead, they had turned away like a rebellious child. Now, through warnings of doom and reminders of love, God was calling them to return home before it was too late.

In this chapter, Hosea describes God like a parent. The imagery of verses three and four are so beautiful: God is the one who taught the people of Ephraim to walk. God is the parent whose arms held and healed them. God is the parent who led them with cords of kindness and bands of love. God is the parent who lifted them up and bent down to feed them.

Such parental commitment, such parental affection, should have been enough to inspire faithfulness among the people. The loyalty of Ephraim should have come easily. The obedience of Ephraim should have come gladly. Unfortunately, like many a child, Ephraim turned away to do its own thing. When the Israelites migrated from Egypt into the land of Canaan, they found there a different culture and different religious practices. These new ways of the Canaanites were attractive to the younger generations of Hebrew children. They saw nothing wrong with Canaanite beliefs and behaviors. The old ways of the Israelites seemed inadequate, and the new ways of this new land engaged their imaginations. As the saying goes, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do."

Yes, there can be many advantages to adapting in a new environment. That's what made Baal worship so attractive to Hosea's people. The Canaanites believed that Baal was the storm god responsible for the seasonal life-giving rains. In Egypt, the Hebrews had lived in the fertile Nile Valley. But, after migrating to Canaan, even the most traditional Hebrew immigrants could quickly see that rain was essential for growing food. So, before long, the Hebrew people were worshiping and making sacrifices to the rain-god Baal, just like their Canaanite neighbors.

To no small degree, the Hebrew peasant farmers behaved this way in their attempt to survive. And it didn't help that their ruling class made life more difficult for them. Chapters six and seven of Hosea describe the rulers and priests as corrupt and wicked, dealing falsely with their people, and

banded together in murder and monstrous crime. The ruling-class Hebrews had no reason to correct the spiritual misdirection of their citizens. As long as the common folks and peasants were focused on Baal, maybe they wouldn't notice that their leaders were constantly breaking God's commandments and enriching themselves at the expense of everyone else. As long as the working class was busy worshipping Baal, maybe they wouldn't realize that their leaders were selling them out to foreign powers.

Did all the Israelite people switch over to Baal worship? No. Of those who did make sacrifices to Baal, did they do it all the time? Probably not. That's what's so deceptive and tempting about assimilation. They probably thought that, if they conformed just a little bit, some of the time, it couldn't be so bad. But, by doing so, they missed the important guiding and corrective voice of God in their personal lives and allowed for the downfall of their society. Because they were distracted by Baal, they missed hearing the calling of God.

## **2—APPLICATION**

How often we go through a similar experience. Our religious tradition tells us one thing, and our cultural situation tempts us to do something else. We compromise by believing that we can do it all and have it all. A little of this, a little of that. Go to church this Sunday. Do chores next Sunday. Spend time in recreation the Sunday after that. It's not like we don't believe in God. It's not like we don't appreciate what God has done for us. But we think there might be more to life than God. We think there may be more opportunities out there. We think—if we devote ourselves to our work or our play or our relationships or our addictions—that somehow we're going to survive better, that our lives will be more satisfying. We don't want to put all our eggs in the God basket; we want to hedge our bets.

We all do it to some degree. We conform to our culture, often without even realizing it. When we do recognize that we're straying from God, we make excuses for our behaviors. "Surely God understands why I need to use my time this way. Surely God understands that I need to spend my money on that." And I'm sure God does understand that we're mere mortals, constantly tempted to

stray away. But that doesn't mean that God's going to reward us for going off in other directions or that God will let us go without a fuss.

No, God is always calling us back home. God is warning us that trouble is out there. The grass may look greener on the other side of the fence; but, in reality, a lot of that green is noxious and invasive weeds. Those thoughts and behaviors which seem so innocent now may control us later. Ask anyone who's tried to quit smoking. Watch someone who's gotten addicted to gambling or alcohol or pornography. Notice someone who works so many hours that they destroy their health and their family. Look at someone who has gradually drifted into a hobby that has consumed their time, so that they have no hours left for Bible reading, prayer, and worship. It's hard to change bad habits once they get started. As Hosea warned, the enemies are real. If we aren't careful, before we know it, we'll be slaves again in Egypt or Assyria.

Fortunately, our God is merciful, and doesn't want us to suffer. So God uses carrots as well as sticks and honey as well as vinegar. As much as Hosea wanted to warn his people, he also wanted them to realize how gracious and compassionate God is. As we read in Hosea 11, verse 4, God uses cords of kindness and bands of love to try to rein us in. God reminds us of spiritual victories from the past. God entices us to come back to the goodness that has been ours. Through the words of the prophet, God reminds us of the love that helped us learn and grow and develop. God is more than willing to offer forgiveness and guide us back where we belong. Like a parent, pleading with a wayward child, God is calling us to return home.

### **CONCLUSION**

For the front of the bulletin, I chose a picture of a smart phone. At the top of the phone screen, the caller ID indicates that it is "God calling." Beneath the screensaver picture of a cross, you see the options to "decline" the call or "answer" it. These days there are plenty of robo calls and scam calls that

we shouldn't answer. But I certainly hope that each and every one of us will choose to answer this call from our loving, forgiving, and tender God. We've dabbled in other things, turned away from God, and procrastinated long enough. Whether your ringtone is set on country western, classical music, hip hop, or vibrate--what the ancient prophet Hosea told his people nearly 3000 years ago still rings true today. God *is* calling.