

CALL AND ANSWER

HOSEA 11:1-11

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

BY: RYAN DUECK

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I spent a good chunk of my twenties very enamoured with philosophy, whether in the informal reading that I did before entering university or in my more formal studies in university.

I was fascinated by the internal coherence of arguments, with logic, with how we could know what was real and how to prove it.

I spent a lot of time reading and writing about how we think about God. I used big words like “immanence” and “transcendence” and “omnipotence.”

I studied thinkers like Augustine and Aquinas and Anselm and Hume and Nietzsche and a whole bunch others who spilled rivers of ink in the attempt to prove or disprove the existence of a good and powerful God.

The problem of evil became something of a pet issue for me for a season—how can we reconcile the amount and variety of suffering that we see in the world with the existence of a God who is all good, all knowing, and all powerful?

I asked questions like, “How can a perfect and perfectly powerful being *not* get what they want in the world they have made?”

These questions were all animated by a strong desire to demonstrate to myself that my own beliefs were intellectually credible and that a thinking, rational person could be a Christian.

It felt good and important to be doing “real theology”—to leave behind simple bible stories and simplistic understandings of how God works in the world and do some theological heavy lifting.

But every once in a while when I was neck-deep in some dense argument about the nature and properties of God and whether these could be held together, I would stop and ponder the distance between the remote God of the cosmos that I was trying to rationalize and defend and the God made known in Jesus of Nazareth.

For the most part I could convince myself that there was a connection between the two.

But I remember one very specific class where I could no longer hold these together. We were talking about what philosophers and theologians called “the impassibility of God.”

What does “impassibility” mean, you might wonder? Well, it is a composite of two Latin concepts: *im-*, “not”, *passibilis*, “able to suffer, experience emotion.” It was a doctrine of impassibility was put forth in one form or another by many impressive theologians: Theodoret, an early church bishop and theologian, Augustine, and, to varying degrees, reformers like Luther and Calvin.

The basic idea is that God is thought not to experience pain or pleasure from the actions of another being. It was often seen as a necessary consequence of another fancy word, “divine aseity,” the idea that God is absolutely independent of any other being.

Changeability was thought to be a sign of weakness or limitation or dependence on something or someone else, and thus utterly unworthy of God. To *feel* anything at all is to acknowledge that the outside world impinges upon you, right?

I remember sitting in that classroom and considering the “impassibility of God” and almost laughing out loud (in a way that only someone with a very small amount of philosophy could do!).

Does God feel? Can God be changed? Can God be hurt? Does God’s creation influence him in positive and negative ways? Well, *of course!*

These thinkers talking about the impassibility of God were Christians, but I often wondered if they had ever even opened a bible!

Now, it must of course be said that Scripture is always an interplay between divine inspiration *and* human authorship, including the cultures and norms in which the biblical books were written.

All descriptions of God in the Bible are the result of this synergy between human and understanding and divine revelation. We read descriptions of God as having wings or as being a “shepherd” or “roaring like a lion” or countless others and we don’t imagine that these are *literal* descriptions of God. If we were to try to make a composite picture of God based on every metaphor used in Scripture to describe God we would end up with a very curious looking being indeed!

So, yes, we acknowledge that there are limitations built into all attempts to articulate the essence of God. But even as we do so, we must also say that if we are to take the biblical narrative seriously (as all Christians do), we can come to no other conclusion that the God its pages reveal is influenced by his creation at virtually every turn.

This is perhaps nowhere more obvious than in the prophets.

A brief word about prophets. Many people often think that a “prophet” is someone who predicts things to come in the future or who offers bold new visions from God or directions for the people of God to take. We think of John the Baptist announcing the coming of the Messiah or the reformers protesting against the corruption of the medieval church or people like William Wilberforce in the abolition of slavery movement or people like Martin Luther King, Jr. who spoke for racial justice.

We think of these people as, in some sense, prophets, because they are calling people to something *new* in response to the leading of the spirit of God.

Even in our own context, we use “prophetic” language to talk about whether or not God is calling us in a new direction. This language has been throughout the BFC documents that our national church has been processing for years—we talk about discerning and testing to see if there are “prophetic nudgings” in new directions.

In common discourse, prophetic = new. Prophets chart new courses. And this is true. Sometimes.

But in Scripture, it's striking how often the prophets were calling the people of God *back* to what they ought already to have known. So often, the call is to *return* to God and to God's commandments for right living.

The language of the prophets is very often a call to *return* to a path and to a God that is already known.

I'm not usually one for counting up how many times a word appears in the bible and making a great deal of theological hay about it (this is mostly because of a pathological aversion to math!), but I did a quick search of the prophets this week and "return" occurs nearly one hundred times. Thirteen of these appearances are in Hosea, which is a lot for a relatively small book!

And within this language of "return," we see a God who is *absolutely* moved by his creation and by those he has chosen to bear his image into the world.

From Isaiah to Jeremiah to Ezekiel to the Minor Prophets, each one is drenched in language of pathos and longing and anger and frustration and love and exasperation.

God is portrayed as a wounded lover or a heartbroken parent, constantly calling out to his people who have wandered from the path he has laid before them, constantly pleading with them to answer his call.

The book of Hosea is perhaps one of the most dramatic examples of this. The book begins with the rather jarring call of God to the Hosea to marry a prostitute in order to become a living embodiment of the unfaithfulness that God has experienced from his people!

The rest of the book takes us on wild ride that vacillates between soaring heights of divine compassion and mercy to the depths of angry judgment at Israel's unfaithfulness. I read the book in its entirety this week and at times it was almost whiplash inducing.

I will have mercy... No, wait, I will judge you harshly... But I love you so much... You have disgraced my name with your violence and injustice and idolatry and I cannot bear it... But you are my treasured possession... I can't stand what you have become... But I can't give up on you... Oh, Israel, oh Judah... What am I supposed to do with you???

Our passage this morning shows us both poles of God's pathos.

I loved you like a child... I taught you to walk... I brought you out of Egypt...

Hosea 11:4 expresses this most tenderly:

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.

It's a beautiful expression of parental love.

But...

They longed to return to their chains... They ran after other gods... And now, they will pay... They will again be enslaved by Egypt, Assyria... Swords will flash in their cities...

And then back again,

But how can I leave you to the fate your sins deserve? How can I give you up? My heart is changed within me and my compassion is aroused (v. 8) ...

I will not carry out my fierce anger. I will have compassion and I will welcome my people back home.

Why?

Because I am God and not a human being.

The Bible does not reveal to us an "impassible" God who cannot be moved or changed by his creation. Far from it!

God is not some remote deity who sits unaffected on the clouds by human sin and suffering. God is like a lover scorned, like a parent rejected. God hurts for his people and weeps over the paths that they continue to stumble blindly down.

Hosea shows us a God who loves fiercely, who is angered over human faithlessness and sin, who is frustrated endlessly by our inability to be what we were created to be, **but who nonetheless chooses mercy.**

Of course, when we talk about a God who feels, who is influenced, who suffers, we must move past Hosea and talk about Jesus.

To do this, I want to make a detour from Hosea to the book of Hebrews in the NT. Hebrews 1:1-3:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.

This is a remarkable passage. What it is saying is that every description of God throughout history has been partial and incomplete. What the prophets saw of God's character in part, we now see most clearly in Jesus Christ.

It means that every description of God that we see throughout the Bible finds its fulfillment in Jesus. Jesus is the "exact imprint of God's very being."

In Hosea, God goes back and forth and back and forth and seems almost conflicted. Judgment or mercy? Punishment or embrace? Anger or compassion? Yes, this is a poetic way of expressing Israel's relationship with God, but I think we must also take it at face value as the way that God disclosed aspects of his character to a particular people at a particular time and place.

With Jesus, what was once seen in part is now seen in beautiful clarity.

Hosea expresses important truths about God in beautiful and profound ways. But the image of God we see in Hosea is fulfilled and perfected in Jesus Christ.

And in Jesus Christ, we see that mercy triumphs over judgment.

I spent this past week as chaplain at Camp Valaqua. Each day in chapel, we talked about how our faith is like a growing tree. It starts small, with a little seed, is nourished by the roots of community and the Bible and families and stories of Jesus.

On Wednesday morning we talked about the “trunk” of the tree. I told the kids that the core of their faith, the one thing that the whole tree depended upon was God and the character of God.

We acted out the story of the Lost Son from Luke 11. We know the story well, right? The younger son demands his inheritance, turns his back on his father, and wanders off to waste his money and his life in stupid and sinful ways. Eventually, when he’s slumming it with the pigs and he’s lost all of his friends and money, he decides to return to his father. *I’ll just ask to be like a servant, he thinks. I know he won’t want me back as a son...*

And the father goes back and forth. I love him. But he’s been so stupid. He needs to learn that sin has consequences! But how can I do that? He’s my son! But he’s made me angry! But I can’t let him go... But think about how much he’s cost me... But...

Back and forth the father goes... Right?

Of course, we know that’s not at all how the story goes. We know that there is no back and forth at all. We know that the Father is standing at the gate with arms wide open in embrace, ready to throw a party for his son who has returned.

In these last days, God has spoken to us by his Son.

I told the kids that there is nothing more important that they will ever know than that they can’t outrun God’s love for them. No matter what they do or where they go, no matter how many good or bad decisions they make, no matter how many right or wrong turns they make, they can never arrive at a point where the God will not still be pursuing them, calling out to them, loving them, forgiving them, welcoming them home.

And I’m telling you the same thing today. The truest picture of God comes not from the philosophers and their rational constructions, but from simple Bible stories.

At the very center of the entire Christian story is a suffering God, a God who weeps, a God who welcomes, and a God who rejoices when his love is returned.

The story of the Bible is of a God who would go to the ends of the earth for his people, a God whose love and mercy race way out ahead of his anger and judgment, a God who was willing to suffer the pain and rejection and humiliation of a Roman cross to demonstrate the extent of his love.

The philosopher's God is interesting, for a while, but pretty sterile and remote. The God of the Bible is wild and unpredictable and sick with love.

This is no impassible God. This is a God who is always calling to his people, always pleading with them to return home, always longing for us to answer this call of love.

This is a God who died that we might live.

Will we live in imitation of this God? In obedience *to* this God? Or will we stumble down the dead-end paths of our own choosing?

We answer this question with our lives.

May God help us to heed the call that he has made perfectly and finally in Jesus Christ.

Amen.

