

✠ *In the Name of Jesus* ✠

One thing I really appreciate about St. John's is how many of you prefer tranquility over bickering or conflict or strife. Now sometimes it can be difficult to hear the quiet peace lovers over a few noisy, argumentative types, but there is a genuine longing among so many of you for goodwill. You want peace in school, peace at work, peace in your home, peace in our church.

But peace takes work. When believers long for a return to peace after hostilities, I recommend reading the Book of Hosea in the Bible. This prophet had a cheating wife. Yet the Lord told Hosea to take her back and love her completely. Difficult? Yeah! But God saw Hosea and his wife as a picture of how things were between God and his people. God loved his people dearly, and he wanted them to requite his love. Like a good wife, we believers promise to love God most. But still today God sometimes has a cheating wife. We cheat on God in a spiritual sense whenever we take the love we promised to God—our highest love, our first love, our best love—and give it to someone else or to something else. As husband God would have the right to divorce us, which we deserve. Yet like Hosea, God takes us back again and again. We're so glad to be reconciled to God that we try to do the same in our other relationships. To read Hosea again and again can help a believer appreciate the tender heart of our loving Father in heaven.

In today's text from Hosea 11 God stands before us like a loving father holding out

his arms to his little child. *1When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. 2But the more I called Israel, the further they went from me. They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images. 3It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realize it was I who healed them. 4I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love; I lifted the yoke from their neck and bent down to feed them.* Do you understand? The Lord is taking his people back to the time of Moses. "Moses, Moses, go back into Egypt and call my son, the young nation of Israel, to follow you out. I don't want my people in slavery any longer." See how the Lord puts himself out to reconcile with his people? He loved his child, even before Egypt, before Israel was a nation, back when Israel was just a person called Jacob. Remember your Bible history? Jacob was Abraham's grandson. Jacob was blessed with twelve sons. Ten of those sons hated the eleventh son Joseph. So the ten brothers sold Joseph into slavery in Egypt. But the Lord arranged for Joseph to become prime minister of Egypt and then to stockpile huge quantities of food just before a terrible famine struck the land. Jacob's family hundreds of miles away also ran out of food. But Joseph wanted to preserve the lives of his relatives. Through Joseph the Lord called Jacob and his family into Egypt. Israel was only 75 people, just a clan, not yet a nation. But the Lord called Israel into Egypt to save them from death by famine.

Later the Egyptians enslaved the Israelites. So the Lord called Israel out of Egypt through Moses (Exodus 12:40). He told

Pharaoh, “*Israel is my firstborn son, ... Let my son go, so he may worship me*” (Exodus 4:22-23). After ten plagues Israel was leaving Egypt, going to the homeland the Lord had promised to their ancestor Abraham. What a wonderful Father the Lord was!

But the children were not so nice. God says through Hosea, *2The more I called Israel, the further they went from me*, kind of like a two-year-old. The parent says, “Come here.” The child looks at the parent, turns, and runs the other direction, often toward danger. If the adult gives chase, the child begins to cry just as it is snatched to safety: “I don’t wanna. I don’t wanna.” When children become adults, they still run away from God. They still have the attitude, “I don’t wanna do it your way, God.” That’s what Israel had been doing ever since God brought them into the promised land. They remembered none what the Lord had done for them. *2They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images* for most of their history. The false god Baal was often portrayed by the Canaanites as taking a ride on a tall thunderhead cloud and hurling down bolts of lightning. Sort of make Baal seem powerful, steering the clouds and bringing the rains so the crops would grow and the pastures would stay green with grass. The people feared that if they stopped worshipping Baal, he would withhold the rain they so depended on.

But Baal didn’t send the rain. Baal didn’t even exist, except in the imagination of those who worshipped him. The Lord sent the rain. The Lord was their tender Father.

3It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms. You know what that’s like, holding a young child by two hands as it puts one leg in front of the other. Soon you have to hold only one hand. Shortly thereafter the child walks on its own. And then you say, “Come here.” And the child looks at you and walks the other way. Never mind all the hours you just spent teaching the child how to walk, or eat, or speak. Parent, did you ever regret the years you invest teaching your children to read, write, and act responsibly? Yet how do teenagers sometimes repay all this love? “You watch over me too carefully, Mom. You never give me any freedom, Dad. Don’t stand so close to me. Stop hugging me. My friends will think I’m not cool.” And the Lord says, *3“They did not realize it was I who healed them.” 4I led them with cords of human kindness* by bringing them through all their wandering in the desert, *with ties of love; I lifted the yoke of slavery from their neck and bent down to feed them with manna every day for 40 years.*

Hasn’t the Lord been just as good to you and me? Who of you has ever had to go a whole day without food because there wasn’t any to eat? How many sicknesses has the Lord let you die from so far? How many of your sins is the Lord holding over your head like a club to beat you with? No, he loves us in Christ Jesus. That’s why God protected baby Jesus from all harm: so Jesus could grow up and rescue us from all sin by the cross. Of course, sometimes the loving thing to do is to let a child bear the earthly consequences for a sinful choice in order to train the child to be wise and to

obey willingly. So if God lets us bear the earthly consequence of our sinful choices, we can find ourselves in our own Egypt, enslaved to a sin that doesn't want to let us go (see Hosea 5:4). But then our loving Lord sends us our own Moses, usually someone in our family or a Christian friend, and God calls us out of Egypt, out of spiritual slavery. **OUT OF EGYPT I HAVE CALLED MY SONS and daughters.**

Yet what do we then say to God? "You watch over me too carefully, God. You never give me any freedom. Don't stand so close to me. Stop hugging me. My friends will think I'm not cool. I want to lean on my own understanding" (see Proverbs 3:5). Too often we choose to enjoy only earthly things rather than living to please God. Think about it: there's plenty of time in a day for ten minutes of Bible reading the Bible and hours of talking with friends or watching a game or playing a video or shopping or snowmobiling. Think of something you really enjoy doing. If the Lord came to you right at the height of your enjoyment, like during the 4th quarter of a Vikings game, and said, "You didn't have your devotion yet today. Stop doing that earthly thing, sit quietly for ten minutes, and read or listen to the Bible," would you obey your gracious God with a happy heart? When we keep preferring to spend time away from God's Word, we repeat Israel's history, and then we need this rebuke from Hosea.

Listen to what God says about stubborn Israel. *5Will they not return to Egypt and will not Assyria rule over them because they refuse to repent?* Yes, that's what's going to happen. Because they are not sorry for their sins, they are going to be enslaved again in a new kind of Egypt called Assyria. The Assyrians will conquer Israel and carry them off into exile. *6Swords will flash in their cities as they are swung and reflect glints of the sun. Swords will destroy the bars of the gates on their walled cities and put an end to their plans for more sinning. 7My people are determined to turn from me. Even if they call to the Most High, he will by no means exalt them.* Woah! The Lord is promising to ignore the prayers of the Israelites when they are conquered by the Assyrians. He won't lift them up out of the pit of exile they fall into. They will be lost to history. Wow, you're in bad shape if the one entity who can help you, God himself, won't answer your prayers because you're not sorry.

Is angry judgment fun for the Lord? No, he'd much rather show his tender love. *8How can I give you up, Ephraim?* (Ephraim is another name for Israel.) *How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I treat you like Admah? How can I make you like Zeboiim?* Admah and Zeboiim? Who are they? You've heard of Sodom and Gomorrah, the two cities who were so wicked that the Lord rained down fire and brimstone on them. Well actually the Lord also destroyed two other nearby towns named Admah and Zeboiim

(see Genesis 10:19, Genesis 14:2,8, and Deuteronomy 29:33). “How can I treat you like I treated those four cities? I don’t enjoy sending judgment on unrepentant sinners. I do it when they leave me no other choice, but I never enjoy it. I prefer to show sinners my grace and mercy. As I look at you, *My heart is overturned within me; all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I turn and devastate Ephraim.* Not yet.”

How can the Lord keep giving sinners another chance? Would you let your enemies keep flicking your nose or pulling your hair or giving you a purple nurple? That would be unreasonable! But the Lord is full of grace and mercy. He says, *I am God, and not man—the Holy One among you. I will not come in wrath.* And so when Jesus came the first time, he did not come in wrath. He came in swaddling clothes to show us the tender mercy of our God.

In today’s Gospel lesson Matthew quotes from Hosea 11. Matthew is reporting how the angel warned Joseph in a dream: “Flee to Egypt. Herod will try to kill baby Jesus.” *14 So Joseph got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, 15 where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.”*

Through Matthew the Holy Spirit is trying to help us see a pattern. What happened to Israel, happened to Jesus. Israel was

called into Egypt to save God’s people from death by famine. Then Israel was called out of Egypt to save them from slavery. By this same pattern, Jesus was called into Egypt to save him from death by Herod, and then God called him out of Egypt back to his homeland so he might save God’s people from slavery to sin. See how Israel was a picture of the coming Messiah?

Well, at least a partial picture. God’s first son Israel was a naughty, disobedient child. God wanted a son who would obey him. So he started over and sent Jesus, his divine Son. To help people recognize Jesus as his Son, God called him out of Egypt, just as he had once called Israel out of Egypt.

How tenderhearted our God is! He repeats the pattern so we can see his love. He called Israel into Egypt to save them from death by famine, and then out of Egypt to save them from slavery. **OUT OF EGYPT I HAVE CALLED MY SON.** He called Jesus into Egypt to save him from death by Herod, and then out of Egypt to save us from slavery to sin. **OUT OF EGYPT I HAVE CALLED MY SON.** Now Jesus calls to us, “I saved you. Follow me out of all your sinful behaviors and habits. Follow me to freedom from spiritual slavery. Follow me all the way to my heavenly home so you can hear me say in your hearing: Wonderful! You’ve arrived! **OUT OF EGYPT I HAVE CALLED YOU, my daughter, my son!**”