

# Enduring and Steadfast

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From the Pulpit of  
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Psalms 107:1-9, 43

<sup>1</sup>O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever. <sup>2</sup>Let the redeemed of the LORD say so, those he redeemed from trouble <sup>3</sup>and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south. <sup>4</sup>Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to an inhabited town; <sup>5</sup>hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them. <sup>6</sup>Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress; <sup>7</sup>he led them by a straight way, until they reached an inhabited town. <sup>8</sup>Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind. <sup>9</sup>For he satisfies the thirsty, and the hungry he fills with good things. <sup>43</sup>Let those who are wise give heed to these things, and consider the steadfast love of the LORD.

## Hosea 11:1-11

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. <sup>2</sup>The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols. <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>They shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me. <sup>6</sup>The sword rages in their cities, it consumes their oracle-priests, and devours because of their schemes. <sup>7</sup>My people are bent on turning away from me. To the Most High they call, but he does not raise them up at all. <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>They shall go after the LORD, who roars like a lion; when he roars, his children shall come trembling from the west. <sup>11</sup>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.

I'll never know the full story and to be honest I don't need to—I remember that it was early morning, and a very long flight and just before they closed the flight door when two harried parents came sprinting onto the airplane with their baby caught in that space between infant and toddler, you know the age peak wiggling, peak screeching, peak I-don't-want-to-be-on-an-airplane-at-5-in-the-morning-ing. The dad was making his way down the center aisle like a packhorse carrying 15 different bags while mom was trying to calm down the baby. The child did not appreciate it when the flight attendant tried to help letting out a shriek that I think might have made it into the Jurassic park special effects.

The plane took off as planes are apt to do. My truest talent is the ability to fall asleep on airplanes to zone out well before the announcements about cruising speed and temperatures. But just as I was dozing off, the first cry echo through the light dimmed airplane. There were still tears falling when we hit cruising altitude.

Eventually, the parents started walking up and down the aisle. I'm sure a few people offered helpful comments and I'm sure some offered unhelpful ones as well, but both parents were determined. As they walked by cuddling that child close, I heard one parent and later the other whispering, "Shhhhh, shhhh, I've got you. Shhhhh, shhhh, shhhh." Even as the tears subsided into those post meltdown hiccups. The sound continued "shhhh, shhh, shhhhhh."

That image of a parent holding a child, of one lifting a child so close that cheeks touch, is a powerful one. Some of you may have a memory of being lifted, and some of being the lift-er. I think of the paintings by Mary Cassatt—a toddler's pudgy hand reaching out for his mother's face. The way an arm can conform to the body of a little one giving support while the child's body is slowly collapsing into sleep.

For those of you unfamiliar with the Book of the Prophet Hosea, you might wonder if such images are sprinkled throughout the book. Please note that chapter 11 with its beautiful imagery is distinct from the others. These are not the images you will find in the rest of the book.

The book of Hosea, one of our lesser prophets (I'm not sure what Hosea would think of that particular title), is an extended object lesson. It is not a kind book. The prophet Hosea uses human relationships to demonstrate to the people of God their failings, their inability to uphold covenants and faith. Let me repeat it is not a kind book and over time its verses have been used to apply cruelty and exact shame.

Hosea is exacting in his critique. The prophet is doing the prophet's job trying desperately to show the people a new way. He uses every trick in the prophet's book to try to shame, fear, derision, all to call the people to something different.

But mostly relies on this extended object lesson to be sure the people of God know just how faithless they have been. He goes so far as to call the children he adopted:

"Jezreel" meaning God scatters alluding to the valley where Jehu massacred the house of Ahab. "Lo-Ruhamah" meaning "not pitied" or "no mercy and perhaps cruelest of all" "Lo-Ammi" meaning "not my people". Hosea makes a clear point in a cruel way, and that is one of the less scandalous parts.

Throughout the book the prophet speaks—but rarely speaks in God's voice. Hosea almost uses the third person, a constant warning of what will come and what dire consequences await if we do not change and follow God. But here in chapter 11 the voice changes. We lose the third person, and we hear God speaking. We also hear a tonal shift. Everything about this passage sounds different—the rhyme schemes in the Hebrew are even distinct.

Hebrew scholars love to debate the translation of this passage and spend pages arguing over each letter and phrase, but they all agree on this dramatic shift: The tone, the rhythm, and most significantly its movement to the first person. Hosea is no longer speaking on behalf of God, here God is speaking directly. There is no intermediary this is God.

As someone who occasionally gets to hear a really good guilt trip-- the passage could be setting up one humdinger. "I loved you, I drove you to every game, I washed every dirty sock, I cared for you, and you .... And YOU, out there with Egypt and Assyria." It's building and building and building towards, what?

I can imagine the people listening and almost flinching waiting for that moment when a parent shifts from "I'm angry to I am disappointed." They were listening as the next harangue comes, God names the exile and destruction they are already seeing and must have been waiting for the shoe to drop as God declares them lost forever.

But it doesn't happen. For 10 chapters, Hosea has been setting up the people for a promise that God will burn them to the ground and walk away without a second glance. Instead of a final admonition spoke in the first person, instead God declares: I cannot abandon you.

Despite everything the 10 chapters that come before, God says I won't do it. I can't give up on you. I love you too much.

Now there is debate if the imagery has more to do with a powerful general or a mighty king rather than a parent and a child. There is debate if bands of loving kindness are really more chains or a bit and bridle. But when we get lost in those details, we miss the gift God is extending here in these verses.

However, you interpret the image they capture the same devotion and the same love. I appreciate that we are lifted by more than just one person in our lives and to think that only parents aren't the only ones who hold you close when the world is falling apart is a lie. So, yes, there is an element of a comrade-at -arms, a merciful king, a parent and a spouse all held together in these verses; all pointing in the same direction. Pointing to a God who draws close out of love. A God who will not walk away. A God who will remain even when we run away. For 10 chapters, Hosea explains why God should give up, and here God is resolute. God will not abandon God's people. God is steadfast in God's love and we cannot change that reality.

The psalmist calls the people to remember the steadfast love of God in psalm 107. It is a 43 verse, litany about the steadfast love of God. If you're bored, you should spend your time reading the rest of the psalm. I won't be offended. How God is with the people when they are wandering without a home, at sea, in prisons, when they are cast down and when they are lifted, God is there.

There is a constancy and enduring quality to God that we sometimes try to theologize into words like immutability or the unchangingness of God.

We use these traits to both know God, but just as often to bind God to our own preconceptions. If God is unchanging, then we can put God up on a

shelf and know exactly what God will do in any given moment. But scripture challenges us. Scripture bears witness to a God who is yes unchanging in God's love and God's pursuit of justice and God's presence but also describes a God who is as movable as the rushing wind and as a still small voice. A God whose heart breaks when the people cry out. A God who is moved with compassion and a God who moves alongside God's people.

Psalms 107 and Hosea tell us something about God: our constant and unchanging God chooses to be a part of our everchanging lives: an arm crooked around us, a steady breath when ours is ragged, a calm sea after a storm. Psalm 107, of course, writes in hindsight. I am 100% sure that when the shackles were locked into place and when the ships were lost and when the ground was dust and nothing would grow that God did not feel close by. In fact, I can imagine that a few of you have experienced a verse that could be added to Psalm 107. Maybe your verse starts with when the diagnosis came or when the accident happened. When the answer was no, when rock bottom hit, when I was alone, when there was nothing left. Maybe you know your verse that can be added in verse 48 and 49. But maybe, just maybe, you aren't to the point where you're in hindsight yet. And maybe these are the moments now in the present tense. Maybe it's when you are feeling alone and afraid and on your own. Maybe you can't see God in the story, yet, and instead feel like you are with the



community around Hosea just waiting for another list of failures to be thrown your direction and another promise of destruction waiting. But friends, what these passages teach us and why we need to read them again and again is not to tell us that God loves us, but to remind us that we are not the first to face our failures or be shaken to our core. To remind us that even in those impossible places, God is present, bowing and bending and drawing close. There is a reminder that God's constancy is found in God's willingness to stay with us. Like a coach who is still cheering when you're down by 30. Like the friend who shows up to help you make that dish you promise to make but don't really know how to cook. The uncle who sits in the car until you finally figure out how to shift. God is there, present. In the ancient prayer of St. Patrick he begins to capture the reality of God's close presence of God's constancy and faithfulness both as a request and a reality. You might know the words, but listen to them again:

*Christ with me,*

*Christ before me,*

*Christ behind me,*

*Christ in me,*

*Christ beneath me,*

*Christ above me,*

*Christ on my right,*

*Christ on my left,*

*Christ when I lie down,  
Christ when I sit down,  
Christ when I arise,  
Christ in the heart of all who think of me,  
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,  
Christ in every eye that sees me,  
Christ in every ear that hears me.*

Christ with me. God With me. With you. With us. With them. God with.

God with a God who is so close that the eternal presence, the unchangeable force chooses to bow and bend and breathe into our own being, our own safety, our own lives. Not far off, but beside. I think of that parent walking up and down the aisle. I think of that steady “shhhhh shhhhh shhhhhh.” The voice was gentle despite the child's cries, “Shhhhhhhh shhhhhhhh.” Neonatologists are quick to tell you that that sound is not a sush. Rather, the “shhhh” we use is powerful because it is the sound of a mother’s heartbeat that an infant hears in the womb. That “sh” is a reminder and testimony of just how close and how safe we are. It's a reminder of care and safety extended. It replicates that closeness. I don't know if Hosea would have had those terms, but I wonder if he might have described God in this way. The one whose whispers “shhhh shhhh shhh” again and again. A reminder of the one who teaches us to walk,

who lifts us up in arms, who heals us when we do not know, who leads us,  
who lifts us, and who promises us that we will never be alone.