

New Year; Same Faithful, Loving God

Hosea 11:1-11 (ESV)

¹ When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. ² The more they were called, the more they went away; they kept sacrificing to the Baals and burning offerings to idols. ³ Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk; I took them up by their arms, but they did not know that I healed them. ⁴ I led them with cords of kindness, with the bands of love, and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws, and I bent down to them and fed them. ⁵ They shall not return to the land of Egypt, but Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me. ⁶ The sword shall rage against their cities, consume the bars of their gates, and devour them because of their own counsels. ⁷ My people are bent on turning away from me, and though they call out to the Most High, he shall not raise them up at all. ⁸ How can I give you up, O 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. ⁹ I will not execute my burning anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath. ¹⁰ They shall go after the LORD; he will roar like a lion; when he roars, his children shall come trembling from the west. ¹¹ They shall come trembling like birds from Egypt, and like doves from the land of Assyria, and I will return them to their homes, declares the LORD.

Welcome to a brand new day in a brand new year! It's shiny, a fresh start, full of promise and of great possibilities. Maybe you're determined to do what you can to make 2023 a great year by making certain resolutions. You want to eat better. Exercise more regularly. Work harder for that promotion. Or maybe you're resolving to decrease your work time to create a better balance of work and home life. For your mental health, you're resolved to get more sleep, keep a more consistent bedtime. For your spiritual health, you're committing to reading the Bible more, be at church more often. Can you do it? Can you keep these New Year's resolutions?

Looking back on this past year, I have some statistics to share with you regarding New Year's resolutions. About 25% of people quit their resolutions in the first week. Roughly half quit by the end of January. Only about 9% of people actually keep their resolutions. There are a whole bunch of reasons as why, but, at the end of the day, it's as simple as a failure on our part to be faithful.

This is not a new problem for humanity. Even God's chosen people, the Israelites, failed to be faithful in their resolutions. Following their rescue and exodus from their slavery in Egypt, Israel vowed that they would commit to keeping all the commands that the Lord had given to Moses on Mount Sinai. They did the same after they had finished the conquest of the promised land, vowing that they and their households would, along with Joshua, serve the Lord and serve him only. Yet, the reality was summarized here by the prophet Hosea in about the mid-8th century B.C.: "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more they were called, the more they went away; they kept sacrificing to the Baals and burning offerings to idols." (verses 1-2)

God had faithfully cared for his people throughout that whole time. "Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk; I took them up by their arms, but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of kindness, with the bands of love, and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws, and I bent down to them and fed them." (verses 3-4) Despite God's faithful care, Israel, God's chosen people, kept breaking their resolutions. They were unfaithful to God.

When you were confirmed, when you joined our church, you made resolutions to the Lord. We vowed to faithfully conform all our whole lives to the teachings of God's Word, to be faithful in attending worship, partaking in the Lord's Supper, continuing steadfast in all God's teachings and even suffer death rather than fall away from any of them. When you were baptized, you vowed to continue to learn all that God commanded. When you had your kids or grandkids baptized, you promised to instruct these children in the truth of God's saving Word so that they would grow in their faith in God. When we witnessed those baptisms, we made a resolution that we would assist in whatever manner possible so that those newly baptized would remain children of God until death.

How well have we done with our resolutions to God? Are we hanging on as the 9% fulfilling our resolutions? Have we done all that we can do so that these people grow in their faith and remain children of God? Have we faithfully at every moment of every day of every year conformed our lives to the teachings of God's Word? Did we ever despise going to church, neglected gathering with other believers? Have we not also been unfaithful to God like the Israelites in Hosea's day?

How should God respond in the face of our unfaithfulness? Maybe we brush off the question because he's God. He's supposed to patiently endure any and all unfaithfulness on our part. He should just understand and take it that we won't always be faithful because nobody's perfect. In fact, as we see so many others failing to keep their resolutions to God, it kind of makes it more

acceptable to us to be unfaithful. It's like when we comfort ourselves seeing other people sin, telling ourselves that we're not the only ones to be unfaithful to our resolutions.

This is where God gives us a powerful picture meant to break down our indifferent unfaithfulness to him. Earlier in the book written by the prophet Hosea, we learn that this prophet was commissioned by God to be a living example of what God's relationship to his people is like. Hosea was told to marry an unfaithful woman named Gomer. God even told Hosea in advance that his wife would continue to be unfaithful.

Would you commit to a marriage knowing that your spouse was and would be unfaithful to you? Would you stay married if your spouse cheated on you – not one time in a lapse of judgment, a moment of weakness, but consistently, whenever they had the opportunity to do so? Wouldn't we, observing such a relationship, tell Hosea to leave that adulteress wench? So, why should God be the exception in dealing with our unfaithfulness? Why can we ever justify breaking our resolutions to the Lord? Why should he not leave us?

In this moment, I feel pretty awful about myself, about my unfaithfulness. I've cheated on God. I have done wrong when I knew better. My resolve was not enough. God should leave me.

But what does God do? Looking at the past, has he ever turned his back on us? Did he leave us because we cheated on him, because we were unfaithful to him? Did he abandon Israel after all the care that he had bestowed on them? We should rightly expect him to only do what we heard in verses 5-7: "They [the Israelites] shall not return to the land of Egypt, but Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me. The sword shall rage against their cities, consume the bars of their gates, and devour them because of their own counsels. My people are bent on turning away from me, and though they call out to the Most High, he shall not raise them up at all."

However, Hosea's prophecy from the Lord doesn't end there. The Lord gives us insight into his heart in the face of our unfaithfulness: "How can I give you up, O 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 burning anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath." (verses 8-9)

God is just and must punish sin, but he is also love and compassion and mercy. It's because of this that he doesn't just discard us and turn his back on us, even though he has every right to do so. He gave us the picture of Hosea always taking Gomer back as a picture of how he always remains faithful even when we are unfaithful to him. He tells us that even after having the Israelites exiled to Assyria that he is coming to their rescue and did, in fact, return them, faithfully returning the unfaithful.

Why would God do this when we've been so unfaithful? The answer is in the cross. We go back to the cross to see that here all our unfaithfulness has been paid for. It was suffered upon the Christ Child, not us. God does not take this gift back from us or remove the historical fact that he paid the price for our sins. He is faithful to his love and mercy to us because he has paid the price for our unfaithfulness. This means that as we start this new year of 2023, it is a fresh start. This is a time of hope and promise and great possibility because this year we have the same faithfully loving and forgiving God.

To keep that same faithful God before you in 2023, this is what I want you to do. This week, I want you to search for the word "faithful" in the Bible. Every time you read from the Bible, highlight how God is faithful. Do a Google search of "God's faithfulness in the Bible." If you have an electronic Bible like me, use the search function for the word "faithful." If you do this like I did, you will be overwhelmed with how faithful God is all the time – Old Testament through the New Testament. As we struggle with our unfaithfulness, go to God and see how his faithfulness overcomes our unfaithfulness.

We start a new year today, and we start it with our same, faithful, ever-loving and ever-forgiving God. That makes this year bright no matter what else is going on in the world because we know who will continue to forgive us, who will continue to renew us. We have a fresh, new start this year and every year as we have the same faithful, loving, and forgiving God. Amen.