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Lent 4 – Hosea 5:15-6:3 – Do You Really Mean It?

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“Do you really mean it?” How do those words hit your ears? Do you hear something good or something bad? Maybe what you hear in those words is hypocrisy or disappointment or distrust, someone who maybe talks a good game but never backs it up, or someone who just tells you what you want to hear but lets you down time and time again. “Do you really mean it?” can be hard to hear sometimes. But there are other times when it hardly gets any better than that. “Do you really mean it?” says the boy whose parents are taking him to Disney World, or the girl who’s getting a car for her 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, or the husband who just found out he’s going to be a daddy. There’s a special excitement and gratefulness there that only comes from selfless love and undeserved generosity.

And that question, “Do you really mean it?” plays the same part in our sermon text for today from Hosea. The LORD called unfaithful Israel back to him again and again and they knew how to talk the talk to try to get right with him, but their hearts just weren’t into it. The LORD asked them, “Do you really mean it?” and they both knew that the answer was no. They didn’t really care about their relationship with God unless they needed help getting out of a jam; otherwise, they could take him or leave him. But for those people who recognized their sin and trusted their Savior, they asked God, “Do you really mean it?” because they never could have imagined that God would do such great things and give such full and free forgiveness for failures like them. God’s goodness blew their minds and changed their lives, so that nothing they did or thought or said was about them anymore. They turned from idols to the LORD and from selfishness to selflessness, and in the same way our God still calls us today to return to him, to seek him, and to find him, because when we do, we find healing, salvation, and eternal life.

You know, the nation of Israel really had a sad history when it came to their relationship with the LORD. The LORD was committed to his people and promised his devotion to them time and time again, but they kept cheating on him. He was a faithful husband to them and did awesome things for them all throughout their history, but they acted more like a promiscuous prostitute – that’s a picture that the prophet Hosea keeps coming back to again and again throughout his whole book. See, at

the time of Hosea, much like many other times throughout Israel’s history, the Israelites were really more interested in following the sex cults of Baal and Ashtoreth rather than worshipping the true God. Normally they couldn’t have cared less about the LORD, but when the unstoppable force that was the Assyrian army showed up on their doorstep with bad intentions, the Israelites figured they better go back, tell the LORD they messed up, get him to help them, and get the Assyrians out of their way, so they could get back to their lives and once again put their Savior-God back up on the shelf.

But that’s not the way it was going to work this time, the LORD said. “*I will go back to my place until they admit their guilt. And they will seek my face; in their misery they will earnestly seek me.*” They weren’t going to treat God like a good luck charm or an ace in the hole, they weren’t going to schmooze him with a smooth line or two, and if they thought they were going to take advantage of God and pull one over on him, they were sorely mistaken. God let them suffer for a time at the hands of the Assyrians to give them a taste of the ultimate punishment their sins would bring. He showed the Israelites what misery it really was to be separated from God and his grace so that maybe they would realize how miserable they were without him and truly understand the consequences of their sins. It was tough love, but it was love nonetheless, because this was the LORD’s way of trying to get through to them about how much they really needed him and how little any of their other gods, their other flings, could help them.

The LORD wanted the Israelites to know that no matter what they said, no matter what they did to try to get right with him again, if they didn’t really *mean* it, if it didn’t come from their hearts, it would never be good enough for him. He’s not a God that will be mocked – not then, not now, not ever, and if we take that same attitude about God that the Israelites did, that we really only need God when times get tough, we shouldn’t expect him to play along. And so that means if you’re a little spooked lately about this coronavirus situation and it’s making you think a little more about God and his place in your life, don’t let it just be now. He wants our love and our trust not just when we’re in quarantine or lockdown, but every day of our lives.

No, when our God calls us to repentance for our sins, he wants us to seek him whole-heartedly – not just as a quick fix to get us out of a jam, but as

a husband to whom we are completely and forever devoted, because that's what he is to us. Yes, we've all cheated on God before in our sinful lives and thoughts, and we've all put him on the back burner when other things took priority. But that's not how our God wants it to be. He wants us to return to him, he wants us to seek him, and he wants us to glory in him so that he is everything to us, just as we are to him.

And when we come before our God with hearts that truly desire his love and forgiveness and that trust in him for salvation, he will never disappoint. Hear the promises he makes to you: "*He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds.*" See, our God uses bad things that happen in this world like discipline for his people – and actually, that's ultimately a good thing because that's how he trains us, he corrects us, and he makes us better reflections of him. He uses all the things that hurt us and test us to strengthen us, to bring us closer to him and build us up into him, and to focus us that much more on our heavenly home. And when the pain, the suffering, the grief, and the sorrow all seem like too much for us, then immediately your faithful God is there to pick you up when you've fallen, to bind up your broken hearts, and to heal every wound of sin and scar of guilt that you've picked up along the way. He tells you, "your sins are forgiven," and that's like a salve that makes all the pain go away; he tells you, "you are my child, whom I love," and that gives you peace and joy like you've never known, and he tells you, "you are an heir of my heavenly kingdom," and in overflowing thanks and love all you can say in return is, "Do you really mean it?"

And the answer is yes, without a doubt, a resounding yes – for the sake of Jesus Christ your Savior. It's all because of Jesus that we can say with Hosea, "*After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence.*" Our God restored us to perfect harmony and reconciliation with him and he revived us to true spiritual life when on the third day Jesus rose again from the dead. Because Jesus lives, we live a new life here in this world and we have hope for eternal life in God's presence one day. That means that even now God is our heavenly Father who loves us and cares about us more than anything, who provides for everything we need and more, and who will come to our aid with all his love and power as soon as we call, and he promises us that he will surely guard and keep us until the day when he takes us home to live in his presence forever.

So right now as our nation and our world are struggling with COVID-19 – and not just the virus itself of course, but also all the fear and uncertainty and hysteria that surround it – let's remember who's in control. Our God has promised to take care of us and save us, both now and in eternity, so while the world freaks out all around us, we simply, calmly, steadily keep on trusting God, loving our neighbors, and serving our Savior with every opportunity we get – no matter how abnormal and unprecedented the situation might seem.

In fact, there's nothing we can be more sure of than God's care, control, and salvation. "*As surely as the sun rises, he will appear; he will come to us like the winter rains, like the spring rains that water the earth.*" Our God wants from us our heartfelt trust, and he won't let us down. He says that we can be just as sure of his coming to save us as the Israelites were of the winter and spring rains watering the earth. See, back in Bible times, they could almost time those rains like clockwork, and it was only because of those rains that anything could live or grow in the Promised Land. So people of God, know that there is nothing more consistent and trustworthy for you than the LORD's care and protection, and it is entirely because of his goodness and grace that you live physically and spiritually, that your faith can grow, and that you can flourish as his children. In fact, our God is so dependable that we can trust in him as much as we can trust the sun's rising every morning. But really you can trust your God even more than that, because it's only because of him that the sun rises in the first place and long after the sun has been destroyed, he will still be your life and his presence will still be your joy. So people of God, return to the LORD, seek his face, and know that there is nothing more certain for you than his love and salvation.

So really, for God, I guess that question is a foregone conclusion. Are all of those promises you made really true? Is heaven really ours? "Do you really mean it?" Of course he does, because he sent your Savior Jesus Christ here to prove it. Jesus lived for us, he died for us, and he rose for us. He loved us so much that now all his people want to do is seek to know him that much better and serve and glorify him that much more. It's not selfishness that controls our hearts anymore now that we belong to Jesus; no rather, it's selfless service that's so devoted to him that our only care is loving him back. So then when our God asks us, "Do you really mean it?" we cling to Jesus, we trust in his promises, we look toward our heavenly home, and so we say with confidence, with all our hearts. Amen.