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 Even if they call to the Most High,
 he will by no means exalt them. (Hosea 11:1-7)*

How Could We Ever Forget?

Was your Christmas memorable this year? I’m sure in the broadest sense, it was. You will remember that it came and that you celebrated it and maybe even whose house you went to. But when it comes down to really specific things, how memorable was it? When you think back next year, what will you actually recall? The answer may surprise you. Sometimes things that we think we will remember forever slip away from us. One of my favorite pictures of my wife hangs over my desk in my office here at church. For years, I was convinced that it was taken on the front porch of friends of ours in another state. My wife insisted that it wasn’t, although she couldn’t remember where it came from either. Well, several years later, we visited those friends again and she was right. There’s a brick wall behind her in the picture and our friends’ house has vinyl siding. It’s still one of my favorite pictures, but I don’t remember where I took it. Sometimes, we forget things that are far more important than that. In fact, sometimes people are hurt that we don’t remember something that meant a great deal to them. They may even get angry and ask, “How could you forget that?” That is very much the point of our Old Testament lesson today. God is asking Israel how they could ever forget him and his love. We are not Old Testament Israel. Yet, God’s Word here does apply to us. **How could we ever forget?**

I.

Now it may seem strange to study an Old Testament lesson on the day after Christmas, but the things God said to Old Testament Israel teach us about how God deals with us, his New Testament people. We dare never lose sight of those lessons. My friends, **how could we ever forget Israel?**

The lesson we have before us comes from the prophet Hosea. Long before he lived, the ancient nation of Israel had split into two parts. Hosea lived in the northern part, which was ruled by unbelieving kings. These kings had brought prosperity and wealth to Israel, but they led God’s people to worship the idols of the peoples around them. So during Hosea’s lifetime, God’s people were more and more self-conscious about how different their religion was from that of other people. More and more they wanted to be like those other people. They wanted to be respected. They wanted to be liked. They wanted to be included. So they began to worship idols, even while they claimed to follow the true God.

So God sent Hosea to call them back to him. Through him, God says, **“When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.”** God pictures Israel as an orphan which he adopts from Egypt. What does that mean? The people of Israel are the descendants of Abraham through his grandson Jacob. Jacob’s family moved to Egypt to escape a famine. When they went there, they weren’t a nation at all. They were a clan of about 70 people. But for three hundred years, they lived in Egypt and increased in numbers. In fact, there were so many of them that the Egyptians began to fear them. So they enslaved them and took steps to reduce their population. Finally, God sent ten plagues, ten disasters, on Egypt and he freed his people and through Moses, he led them out of Egypt. Out of Egypt God called his son, Israel. Moses brought them to Mt. Sinai God where God adopted them when he gave them the old covenant, the laws by which they were to live and to worship him for the next 1500 years.

God said, **“It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realize it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love; I lifted the yoke from their neck and bent down to feed them.”** God is talking about 800 years of love and care for his people from the time of Moses until the time of Hosea. And how did Israel respond to God’s love? They worshipped other gods. They wanted to be like all the other nations and worship like they did. So in the end, God gave them what they wanted. They weren’t his people anymore. Hosea talks about swords flashing and foreigners ruling them. The northern kingdom was destroyed. Her people went into exile and they never returned.

Now, what does all that have to do with us? Very simply, we are God’s new people. At the time that Israel was destroyed, God preserved a remnant, a believing portion in the southern kingdom. But that remnant also proved to be unfaithful. God also sent them into exile, but he brought them back so that Jesus could be born in Bethlehem when the time was right. And yet, when Jesus came, only a small number of the Jewish people believed in him. Most rejected him. So God established his New Testament people, a people that did not consist of the physical descendants of Abraham, but rather a people that shared the faith of Abraham. The thing that makes us members of his new people is our trust in Jesus as our Savior.

Yet, there is a lesson for us in Israel. We American Christians also live in a land of prosperity. We Wisconsin Synod Lutherans are a part of this society. When I went to a school like the one we operate here, our teacher once read to us an article from the old *Northwestern Lutheran* that talked about how different we WELS members were from the society around us. Our divorce rate was one percent of the country’s divorce rate. Blended families, drug abuse, and the other banes of modern life, according to this article, just didn’t touch us the way they did most other Americans. That was true, I think, because we were culturally and spiritually isolated from American life. But that is no longer the case today. We Wisconsin Synod Lutherans are fully integrated into American life. And we wrestle with all the temptations that a wealthy and spiritually dead society inflicts on us. Our attitudes towards marriage and children, toward work and spending money, our attitudes toward entertainment and how our children dress and how they relate to authority – all those things are naturally in tune with the society we live in. It takes effort to think differently.

Does that scare you? It should. Because no human society is truly a “Christian nation.” In Catechism Class, you learned about the devil, the world and our sinful flesh, the three great enemies of Christian faith. The world around us reaches into our hearts through our connections with society and through our fascination with what our society thinks. The devil eggs on the sinner in our heart to embrace what an unbelieving society embraces. That’s the road that Israel went down. And the devil would love us to follow.

Make no mistake about it, we could. God promises that there will always be believers on this earth. But he does not promise that Peace Lutheran Church will always be here. He does not promise that the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod will never fall into false doctrine or sinful practices. If we, like the northern kingdom, forget what God has done for us, if we forget the lesson of Israel’s unfaithfulness, if we forget that God calls to be different, we are doomed to lose the gospel as a church body and to lose our faith as individuals.

II.

That’s a terrifying thought, isn’t it? It’s not very Christmas-y, I’ll admit. Yet, Hosea warns us about this, even as he warned his own people. But that’s not all he says. The Holy Spirit made Hosea a prophet of the gospel. And God wrote the gospel even into this warning. Don’t forget that gospel message. How could we? **How could we forget Christ?**

Christ is what Christmas is all about. He is the heart of this text, too. But this is one the most difficult Old Testament prophecies. You heard Matthew quote it in our gospel lesson. After the wise men came to

worship Jesus, Herod tried to kill him. Before his soldiers got to Bethlehem, God warned Joseph to take Mary and the child and flee to Egypt. That's when Matthew says, **“And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘Out of Egypt I called my son.’”**

That's the quote. Now, any honest evaluation of Hosea 11 has to conclude the Hosea was talking about how God led Israel out of Egypt under Moses. There are many Old Testament prophecies that speak directly about Jesus, but this just isn't one of them. So what did Matthew mean? Was he wrong? No. Rather, Matthew was doing something that the New Testament often does: he was pointing to an Old Testament event as a prophecy of Christ.

Many persons and institutions and events in the Old Testament serve as living prophecies about Jesus. Every sacrifice was a prophecy about Christ. They taught that our sins had to be paid for in blood and that God was going to send a substitute to pay for us, Jesus. The priesthood was a prophecy of Christ. It taught that sinners cannot come into God's presence until their sin is removed and Jesus would offer the sacrifice that removes our sins. Matthew shows us that Israel taking refuge from a famine in Egypt also serves as a prophecy of Jesus taking refuge in Egypt. This was all according to God's plan.

Now, why Egypt? One of my sons asked me about that the other day. He wanted to know if it was because it was easier to get in there. He was thinking of passports and things like that. It's true, Israel was on the major trade route to Egypt. People went back and forth between the two all the time. There were many Jews in Egypt, so Joseph and Mary could easily find people with whom they could live until it was safe to come home. But the real point here is simpler than all that: God sent Joseph, Mary and Jesus to Egypt to preserve his plan. Herod was a tool in devil's hands to stop the plan of salvation. God rescued them because God planned that Jesus would take away our sins.

That plan rescues us from the sinful attitudes of our own hearts. We face the same danger to our faith that Israel faced at the time Hosea. We live in a world that does not accept our faith. We live in a world that offers so many lies that seem so good to believe. We live in a world in which it would be easier and more pleasant if we just got along with the false religions around us. The sinner inside us longs to do that. Sometimes, that temptation wins. Sometimes, we let go of what we were taught. Sometimes, we even get tired of pastors and teachers who insist on all this old fashioned WELS stuff. I've had angry people say to me, “You guys won't bend, even when it means that you won't have any members left!”

Sometimes, the sinner inside us wins and we think that. We may use all those arguments as an excuse to let go of the hard truths that Scripture teaches. That is sin. It deserves nothing but death and hell. But God preserved the life of the Christ child to save us from death and hell. Jesus did not come only to save strong people, only to save people who are never weak or confused. He came to save us poor, weak WELS members who wrestle every day with how hard it is to be faithful in a world that does nothing but criticize our faith. He came to pay for our moments of doubt and weakness. He came to offer his own life on the cross to buy us out of the hell we deserve for all the times we caved in, for all the times we compromised, for all the times we longed to think and teach what the world teaches and wished our pastors and teachers would just get over it.

Jesus died and paid for all that sin. He rose and he took it all away. Remember his coming. Remember that we are forgiven and take comfort in that victory. You don't need to beat yourself up for your past weakness. Remember that we belong to him and stand firm. Fight the good fight against the sinner in your own heart, the sinner who wants to accept the world's perspective on faith and life and marriage and sex. Fight the good fight against all the pressure this world brings to give up what God says and just join it. Fight the good fight, because Jesus has already fought and won eternal life for you.

How could we ever forget that? The sad truth is, it's easy. Too many times in my ministry, I've heard people who no longer come to church tell me they will never forget their faith. But the fact that they don't come shows they are already forgetting that faith and life are always linked together. If we don't stay connected to Christ, we will forget. We need to hear about Jesus. We need to hear what he has done for us. And the beauty of God's plan is that he has given us exactly what we need: a church where Christ is at the center. We won't forget as long as we keep coming to hear how much God has loved us in Christ because that gospel message is the power of God. Amen.

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