

Luke 12:13–21
Hosea 11:1–11

The two Scripture passages set before us today present two very different ways of responding to uncertainty. In Luke, Jesus shares a parable of a wealthy man who, fearful of future loss, plans to store away vast amounts of grain to save for a rainy day. In many places in American and Christian culture, he'd be celebrated—a wise and prudent planner whose success will help maintain security and comfort for him and his family into the future.

In Hosea, there's also anxiety and uncertainty seeping through the culture—here it is a fear of violence and political unrest as Hosea speaks to a community living through the decline and fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Like the wealthy man in Luke, many have turned to things they hope will offer security, but time and time again those paths of political certainty, violent dominance, and diligent devotion to things that are not God have left them coming up short. Hosea doesn't focus on the problem of idols, though. Hosea focuses on the character of God who is steadfast in God's promises throughout the uncertainty. These texts leave us with a question: will we spin our wheels trying to store up enough material resources, cultural capital, and political power to stave off any uncertainty? Or will we face the reality of our human limitations and accept the gentle, outstretched hand of God who promises to journey with us through the frightening moments?

Last week I was backpacking with my brother in the Sierra Nevadas, and let me tell you, backpacking is a time when I will shamelessly plan, hoard, and control the exact material resources I have brought with me. It's down to a science so as to not carry more weight than necessary, and if my brother needs one more granola bar, too bad, you packed what you packed and I'm not carrying extra weight for you. That's probably not the right way to phrase it, because he is way more likely than me to be precise and accurate to the exact amount of things he needs on the trip. I'm much more likely to try to "borrow" a few extra Welch's fruit snacks from him while we're on a particularly difficult ascent. Still, our process is calculated and precise. I pride myself in preparing the right things, knowing where and how to cut a few ounces of weight from my pack, and deep in the wilderness a significant part of my joy comes from being utterly self-sufficient with the tools I carried in on my back.

Now, as a pastor who preaches the virtues of interdependence and asking for help wherever possible, I know I'm in hypocritical territory here. But I'm sure you've felt similarly. On a short-term scale, it feels good to be entirely self-sufficient. Very often, though, our yearning to be absolutely independent means hoarding and hiding away, without letting the kindness and generosity of others reach us. It can also mean not sharing that kindness in return, when we convince ourselves that we are self-made, and others should be as well.

Jesus's parable in Luke isn't a condemnation of being prepared or planning ahead—there are lots of places in the Bible where thoughtful stewardship is celebrated and encouraged—but for the wealthy man

in Luke, the problem comes when he puts so much faith in his own ability to gather and store resources that he looks over his own finitude, ignores the present needs of many of his neighbors, and doesn't leave room for himself to receive care from others with humility. He pads his own nest egg to push away all fears of the future, rather than trusting in God and listening to the true call of stewardship—one that might ask him to give up some of his own riches for the sake of others in immediate need.

Where Hosea's poetry points to the character of God, it is also grounded in a vision of human connection and human interdependence. God is the parent who loved Israel as a child and gently led them by the hand. God lifts the people in God's arms and draws them close, even when the people are not aware of what God is doing and may not respond with gratitude. These metaphors help us understand God when we cannot literally see, touch, or feel that gentle hand leading us along. But Hosea also points to something that we can actively witness, writing, "I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love."

There are so many times and places in this world where we may feel like God is far away, only to encounter the tender, surprising love of another human being. The nurse who goes the extra mile to be gentle, the co-worker who remembers you're experiencing a hard anniversary, neighbors and first responders in Kentucky this week putting themselves in harm's way to rescue others from destructive floods. Backpacking is my example of when I desperately want to be self-sufficient, to attribute my success to my own good planning and preparedness—but even there, my most transformative moments in the wilderness have been ones where I am astounded by the vast beauty of God's creation, struck by my smallness and insignificance, and surprised by the unexpected kindness of friends and strangers on the trail. Cords of human kindness pull us away from our own egos, and tug us back to God. They remind us that we can't do it alone, but also that we are beloved children of God, and we don't have to do it alone.

And sure, there might be a more cynical reading of this that could say God has nothing to do with our experience of human kindness—people are good and bolster each other along with or without divine intervention—but think of a time when you were most surprised by love in the darkest of moments. When you needed help, and no amount of preparation or self-confidence could get you through. Yet someone reached out and offered the care you needed. For me those times have been filled with a deep sense that God must have something to do with it.

We understand God a little more easily when we can witness who God is in the context of those visible human experiences. It's why John Calvin wrote about "divine accommodation"—the way God lowers Godself to communicate and accommodate our capacity for understanding. God's self-revelation accounts for our limited perspective, our skepticism, and our questions. In the kindness of others, we can comprehend a tiny fraction of the profound goodness of God.

Hosea takes us one step further, beyond just understanding God through the kindness of other people. And it might be the most comforting piece of this whole passage. Because while we are encouraged by the "cords of human kindness" that lead us along, Hosea's audience, like the community in this room today, is also acutely aware of how often human brokenness wins out over human kindness. We're baffled by violence, racism, and division in our country. We're frustrated with ourselves when we're short with a loved one or reluctant to forgive. As humans, we'll give each other grace to a certain extent, but not like God does. We get caught up in nationalism and systems of oppression, fears for our own well-being, and impatience with one another's shortcomings. If our image of God is only rooted in what we see in ourselves, we have good reason to be fearful.

But Hosea comes to us with these words, God's words for a fearful, messy, and rebellious community:

*How can I give you up, Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, O Israel?
My heart recoils within me;
my compassion grows warm and tender.
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.*

God leads us with human kindness, God reminds us of God's presence through gestures of goodwill from our neighbors, but when we start to give up on each other, or give up on ourselves, God comes back and says, "I am God and no mortal." That love is deeper and wider and more lasting than anything we can imagine. That is the promise that stands behind us when we fearfully want to hoard our resources for ourselves or close ourselves off to the pain of others. Like a gentle parent in a frightening moment for a child, God is whispering in our ear, "Don't worry, you are safe here."

Invited away from the pressure of building bigger barns to secure our future, God calls us to rely on God and on one another. God reveals enough of God's goodness in the world around us that we can trust God's character, and yet God also reminds us that where humans fall short, God remains strong. It will be a lifelong challenge for many of us to lean into vulnerability and trust that we can rely on the help of others. But when you're brave enough to do so, may you be led with cords of human kindness and trust in the God who is there every step of the way.

Thanks be to God. Amen.