

Hosea 5:15-6:3 *Then I will return to my lair until they have borne their guilt and seek my face—in their misery they will earnestly seek me.* ¹*“Come, let us return to the Lord. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds. ²After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence. ³Let us acknowledge the Lord; let us press on to acknowledge him. 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.”*

Dear friends in Christ our Savior,

The hospital room was dark when I entered. The patient was a 49 year-old man who had just had a heart attack. I had been working with him for quite a while to gather more frequently for worship at God’s house and to take the Bible Information Class to become a communicant member. He never gave an outright no to these encouragements, but he passively was ignoring them. The heart attack came out of the blue. It was a serious heart attack that could have taken his life if he hadn’t received help when he did. As I approached the bed, it was just him and me in the room. I had a good relationship with him so that I could bluntly open with: “Well, do you think God is trying to tell you something?” He gave a short sigh with a slight smile and said, “You know, I was just thinking the same thing.”

God uses all sorts of things to grab our attention. It’s too easy for us to get caught up in ourselves or focused on everything that is going on around us and lose sight of him. It’s easy to have no sense of urgency when it comes to God thinking he will always be there and there will always be time for him later. Other things become greater priorities in our lives or take importance in our lives and God and His Word slides further down the list of important and necessary things to us. So God at times allows and sometimes even sends difficulties and challenges into our lives to grab our attention and remind us that he is to take the place of most importance in our lives. God uses hardships and illnesses to focus our attention back on him. Could that be what God is doing right now in allowing this world-wide health crisis? That’s an interesting question to ponder. Did God allow—maybe even send—this virus into our world to grab our attention and that of the rest of our world? Did he allow this to re-focus our attention back on him, to remind us what is most important and how much we need him, to demonstrate our faith as we lean on him and trust in him, and to give us the opportunity to witness our faith to those in the world around us? I just can’t help but wonder if God is using this virus to ask the question, “***Do I Have your Attention Now?***”

God needed to grab Israel’s attention. Hosea’s words were spoken primarily for the people of the northern Kingdom of Israel. The time was about 735 B.C. For a long time, God had sought to call his people back from the terrible idolatry they had fallen into as they worshipped the false god’s of Baal and Ashtoreth of the heathen nations around them. In prosperity, they forgot God and pursued these idolatrous pleasures. Then, when they faced adversity, rather than turning to the Lord, they turned to earthly helpers who would fail them. This time was no different. As a judgment against their idolatry, the Lord sent the Assyrians under the leadership of Tiglath-Pileser III to attack Israel and slowly take away their territory and nation. This judgement came from God himself. Earlier in chapter 5, the LORD described himself as a lion who pounces on his prey, tears it to pieces and then carries the prey in his mouth back to his place and lies down to devour it. Like a lion, the Lord was tearing apart the people of Israel by the Assyrians who were ruthlessly attacking them.

But God had a loving purpose in tearing them apart. He said: “*Then I will return to my lair until they have borne their guilt and seek my face—in their misery they will earnestly seek me.*” God didn’t send the Assyrians to his people just to hurt them or get revenge on them. He was trying to get their attention. He wanted them to understand the danger of their sin and lead them to repentance. He wanted them to see the error of their ways and return to him as his people.

If you read the words of the first three verses of chapter 6, it sounds like it worked. *Come, let us return to the Lord. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds. ²After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence. ³Let us acknowledge the Lord; let us press on to acknowledge him. 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.”* It sounds like they understood that God had sent the Assyrians to lead them back to him. It sounds like they were willing to acknowledge their God and return to him. They were saying the right words. They were doing what God wanted them to do. We would expect God to be full of joy at their words and actions. We would expect him to pour out words of love, mercy and forgiveness. But the words of God which follow these verses tell a much different story. In verse 4 God says, “*What can I do with you, Ephraim? What can I do with you, Judah? Your love is like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears.*” Though it appeared they were doing what was right, they were not. They were not sincere. It’s as if they were saying, “Look, this works every time. We’ll just say the right words and God will deliver us and we’ll be just fine.” You note, there is no confession in their words. There is no recognition of how they had turned away from God nor sorrow for doing so. They didn’t want to change their behavior nor did they want to obey the Lord. We see this time and again throughout their history. They weren’t sorry enough about their actions to change their behavior. They did what they had to do to remedy the situation but no more. Their words were just that: words. They didn’t come from sincere hearts and they meant nothing. Their love was like the morning dew that is there for a little while but quickly fades away. God might have had their attention, but he didn’t have their hearts.

What God wanted from Israel, he also wants from us. He wants our hearts. He doesn’t want us to give our hearts to ourselves, to the pleasures and lusts of the world around us nor to anyone else but him. He wants our attention first and foremost. He wants us to return to him and to understand that we cannot make it through life without him. He wants us to understand our need to repent of our sins and turn to him for his mercy and compassion. In Israel’s case, their trouble was

caused by specific sins. Our current situation can't be traced back to any specific sin that we have done, yet it still grabs our attention nonetheless. It pulls our attention out of our naturally selfish lives and forces us to look elsewhere for help. God allows situations like the one we are facing now to come into our lives and rock our worlds to help us see realistically how little control we have, to remind us in a blunt way about our mortality, to help us better see how all that we have are gifts from our almighty God and His grace, and to know firsthand how weak we are on our own and how much we need him. He allows these significant challenges to confront us to draw us closer to him.

Adversity can push us in one of two ways. It can either separate us from God if we allow it to or it can bring us closer to God. While this world-wide crisis was not caused by any specific sin, it does remind us that we are sinners living in a broken world. This gives us the opportunity to evaluate our relationship with God and place our trust fully in him. Take a moment and evaluate where you are at in your relationship with God right now. Be honest with yourself, some of you are living in total fear right now—scared to death that God will not keep his promise to watch over and take care of you. Some of you have failed to trust that God will provide for you as he promised and selfishly jumped in front of people or bought way more than you needed and are hoarding supplies to make sure you look out for number 1 first. Some of you are looking to doctors and nurses and scientists to provide the help that we need to make it through. Some of you have worshipped yourselves and your success more than you care to realize—probably unintentionally and without knowing it. But you have. At the very least, this time of adversity calls us to return to the Lord, examine our relationship with him, and purge ourselves of the impurities that separate us from him. God may be asking us: Do I have your attention? Do you realize how much you need me? Are you willing to turn your attention away from the world around you and off of yourself to focus on me? Do you realize how dangerous your sin is and how deadly the devil's temptations?

I pray that the answer to these questions is a humble and sincere: Yes! So we heed our Lord's call to repentance and come before him with sincere and repentant hearts, not going through the motions or merely saying the right words without meaning them in our hearts, but truly sorry and repentant and beg our God for forgiveness. God is serious when it comes to sin and the lives we live as his people. We find so many ways in which we just go through the motions when it comes to acknowledging our sin. Sin is real and God is serious about sin. Sin isn't just a moral smudge or a slight deviation. It is a total corruption of what God created us to be. It is a complete loss of the image of God. Sin is with us every day of our lives. We need to hear about our sin regularly. We need to be reminded of the danger of our sin and the eternal consequences our sin brings. We need to be reminded of how God hates sins. We need to regularly take our sin to our God and lay it before his feet in repentance—not going through the motions, not with empty and meaningless words, not through rote memorization—but with sincere sorrow over our sin and a passionate turning away from that sin to go and sin no more. We need to pay attention to our sin because it is dangerous and deadly!

Although God spoke very tough words to the Israelites and uses harsh challenges to grab our attention he always has a loving purpose in mind. He wants nothing more than for terror-stricken hearts to cry out to him and plead, "Lord, have mercy on me a sinner!" Though the Israelites did not mean what they said, they did give a beautiful description of the patience of the Lord. If his people return to him, he appears to them and pours his blessings out on them. His past favor has been like the rain that softens the earth for plowing. When we confess our sins to God, he forgives them...every time! This is why God sent Jesus into the world. This is the confidence we can have in approaching God with our sin. He forgives us. He restores us as his people. When we confess our sins, God never says, "No. It's too big. That's too many. Not this time." He never says that. In Jesus, every time we lay ourselves bare before God and with sincerity confess our sins before him...he forgives us. He relents of his anger. He promises life and salvation. This is the joy we have. So let's see this crisis as a time for us to draw closer to God who loves us. The slowing down of our lives as we stay home gives us more time to read scripture and more time to focus on God's promises. We have a very specific application for our faith in the crisis which we face to see God's hand and love through this as he watches over and protects us.

Let's also use this as a time not only to remember who we are, but also to remember what we are about. Having everything shutting down around us gives us the opportunity to reflect on the special purpose the church serves. We, the church, not Northdale Lutheran as an institution but every one of you as the church, have the unique opportunity to use this time to point people to the love of Jesus. This is a great opportunity to think through the questions: How can I be the church to my neighbors or my community? How can I serve others right now with the Gospel of love and peace and salvation? What unique opportunities does the uncertainty of this time give me to share God's love with others? Trust me—God has grabbed everyone's attention right now! People all around you are searching for answers, peace, certainty. And you have it. This is a great time to put your faith in action, to let your actions give testimony to the faith that is in your heart, not only as you trust in God during this time but as you help others to do the same.

It's easy to look around at our world today and wonder what in the world is happening. Let's be sure to see the Lord's hand and love in all of this. The uncertainty of the world around us does not shake God's love for us. Though this crisis may have rocked our world, it doesn't remove the covenant of peace God made with us at our baptism. Focus your attention on God's love for you in Jesus and his faithfulness to his promises. Listen closely as God asks us, "Do I have your attention?" Amen.