

Sermon Series: *Four of the Strangest Books in the Bible*

Sermon IV: "Hosea"

Texts: Hebrews 1:1-4; Hosea 11:1-11

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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. Hosea 11:9

There are altogether 66 books in the Old and New Testaments. For four Sundays this summer, Chris Henry and I have tried to acquaint or reacquaint you with a few of the strangest books among the 66: Ezekiel, Revelation, Philemon, and today, Hosea. Often, we are told that the Bible is the best-selling book in the world, but it does not follow that it is the most widely read book in the world. It would be hard to overestimate the number of Bibles that languish unopened on bookshelves and bedside tables; yet, the Scriptures of the Jewish and Christian tradition are, arguably, the most significant foundational documents of western civilization. For centuries, they have been understood by both synagogue and church as the most important means by which humans come to understand both the nature of God and their own place in the world.

I hope this brief sermon series has taken you places in scripture you have not been before, but even more, I hope that we all had our minds expanded to encompass the greater depths of our tradition and to a greater depth of understanding the ways of God who reigns over our complex and often out-of-order world.

As we turn today to Hosea, I advise you to buckle your spiritual seat belts, because we are in for a bumpy ride. Before we take off, I will share with you two memories from my seminary days. Though still a student, I was asked to teach a Sunday School class on the Prophets at a large church in the city. Since Hosea is the first of 12 books in the collection of what are called Minor Prophets, I began with him. About half-an-hour into the lesson, I was repeating one of Hosea's prophetic harangues against the people for their infidelities and shortcomings, when a man raised his hand and said, "I don't know you or where you came from, but this is the biggest bunch of nonsense I have ever heard, and if I had anything to do with it, it wouldn't even be in the Bible!"

The second memory is from a class I took on the Minor Prophets at seminary from Dr. Ludwig Dewitz. (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah and so on are called "minor" because of their relative brevity, compared to the prophets whose works are longer, such as Jeremiah and Isaiah.) This time, it was a female classmate who was horrified by Hosea and suggested to the professor it ought to be

removed from the canon. Her problem was the story itself, which basically is as follows: "Obeying the Lord's command, Hosea marries a woman of known promiscuous nature." (1) (If you want to get right down into the sordid details, you need to look no further than Chapter 1, verse 2 and following. The language is entirely too blue for sanctuary use.) The woman's name is Gomer, and she is traditionally identified as a Canaanite cult prostitute whose sexual interactions with others, shall we say, during the worship of the fertility gods Baal and Astarte, were believed to be conducive to a good harvest. A caveat: I have recently read that no substantive evidence exists to verify that Baal prostitutes ever existed or such sexual rites were ever performed. Whatever the case, Gomer had a really bad reputation. "She bears the prophet three children, each of whom is given an ominous name that announces doom for the nation's future." (2)

My classmate was upset, not about the prophet's condemning the nation, but rather about Gomer herself. I understood her anger. Gomer is never given a chance to make any choices. They are all made for her. Neither does the writer allow her to say even one word. She is the fallen woman and as Hosea's literal wife, she is also given the metaphorical role of God's adulterous wife, representing Israel and its ruinous ways, which have broken the Lord's heart and engendered the Lord's wrath. (3) In the symbol system of Hosea, holiness is presented as male and sinfulness and infidelity as female.

I don't remember how Dr. Dewitz answered my classmate's question. I do remember that the student left class and didn't come back.

OK, so a metaphor is just a metaphor, and after all, what do you expect from a period in history 750 years before the birth of Christ in the rugged, Middle Eastern area of the world when patriarchy permeated everything? Still, a proper reading of Hosea today requires an awareness of the bias built into the way the story is told. Across the centuries, God's legitimate punishment of ancient Israel as described by Hosea has been used as license for the ill treatment of women.

In Romans, Paul writes, "Since all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, they are now justified through God's grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus..." (Romans 3:23) Women, men, all have sinned and fallen short; yet, ever since Eve offered the apple to Adam, women have been labeled as the originators of sin in the world, and the way Hosea told his story did nothing to dispel the perception. That said, let's plunge in and learn what we can learn from this emotionally wrought prophet of long ago.

The first thing to say about Hosea was that he had a call from God which he fulfilled at great sacrifice to himself. It is no easy thing to speak God's truth to people who do not want to hear it.

The second thing that needs to be said about him is that he was one angry man, his own anger reflecting the anger of the Almighty whom he represented. Why

was he so angry? Because Israel had been unfaithful to the Lord; indeed, the people had carried on a flirtation with the Canaanite gods, specifically Baal, since early in their history. Alliance with nations that followed other gods had become a pattern everyone but Yahweh took to be the norm. “Every section of the book that bears Hosea’s name contains accusations and announcements that divine punishment is on the way.” (4)

To illustrate the depth of the doom and gloom, let me return to the matter of the names of the children of Hosea and Gomer, names picked out not by the mother or the father but by the Lord: When the first son arrived, the Lord said to Hosea, “Name him *Jezreel*, for in a little while I will punish the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel.” The name itself has a pleasant meaning: “God plants,” but in this instance it refers to a valley which was well-known in Hebrew history as a place of violence and mass murder. “To name a child *Jezreel* would be like naming a baby today *Auschwitz* or *Hiroshima*.” (5)

When the second child is born, a girl, Hosea is instructed to name her “Not pitied.” Though in Hebrew, the name has a beautiful ring to it, *Loruhamah*, it means, “The Lord will no longer have compassion.”

The third child is called the worst yet. “Not My People.” Since the days of Abraham and Sarah, the Hebrew people had been God’s covenant people, but now they must face a future without God. (6) Hosea, his wife Gomer, and their three children are what one Biblical scholar calls “walking visual aids in the service of the prophetic message of doom.”

The haunting question that hangs in the air is: Can this marriage be saved? (7) Can the relationship between the Lord and Israel be reclaimed? Has God really had it with his own chosen people? For 13 chapters, Hosea makes speeches to the people telling them of all they have done to displease God and how, because they have abandoned God, God is going to abandon them.

Have you ever been angry like that? Where you bring up everything that ever happened, and the more you go through your list of grievances, that basket of dirty laundry, the more lathered up you get?

Angry. So very, very angry, you want to say, “Go jump in the lake and swallow a snake and come up with a stomach ache.” So angry you want to pack your suitcase, kick the cat, open the door, and slam it behind you. These are moments when even the people we love most dearly appear utterly unlovable, unappealing. You get angry like that only with people you love.

Reading Hosea this week, I was reminded that the God of the Bible gets angry too. Sometimes, oftentimes, our anger is justified, but other times, we’ve made mountains out of mole hills, or our pride has been hurt, or our ego injured. When

God is angry, God is always justifiably angry. God makes covenant with the people. The people break it. God forgives the people. The people take that forgiveness and use it as license to go right ahead and do whatever they want.

Once, much earlier in human history, God became so frustrated with the faithlessness of the people that God had second thoughts about having created human beings in the first place. In Genesis 6, there is this description of God's sad and angry state: "It grieved him to his heart that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually." That's what you might call really bad. So God sent the flood. Afterwards, God put a rainbow in the sky to serve as a reminder not to destroy the earth with water again. Time passed. God faithfully kept the divine part of the covenant. God chose priests to help the people, but then the priests themselves became corrupt, along with the people. God tried kings, but they became more interested in their own power and pleasing idols than in serving the purposes of the Holy One of Israel. The prophets had done what they could, but things got worse instead of better.

Yet, if you read Hosea carefully, you will begin to sense that signs of hopeful change are in the air. Yes, there are countless predictions of doom, but interspersed all along the way are snippets of the larger story of God's everlasting love and unfailing mercy. In the 11th chapter of Hosea, we overheard the Almighty reminding himself of the kind of God he is: "When Israel was a child I loved him, and out of Egypt, I called my son. . . It was I who taught Ephraim to walk. I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them. Oh, how can I give you up, Ephraim, how can I hand you over, O Israel? My passion grows warm and tender...I will not execute my fierce anger...for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath."

What tempers God's legitimate anger is not change in the behavior of the people; what does it is God's unwillingness to break God's side of the covenant. To be related to the world in holiness and love was the original deal, and God is not a deal breaker. At the end of the day, of course, **God** had to do the heavy lifting to transform this world from a place of doom to a place of hope. In Romans, Paul puts it as perfectly as possible: "Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith." (Romans 3:23-25) Talk about channeling one's anger in constructive ways! God's indignation becomes Christ's passion. Through his blood, things are set right; the people of God are set free to do right, now that their bondage to sin has been broken once and for all.

We need to read the hard parts of our faith history, because we need to remember that what we do matters to God. Yes, we are redeemed through the grace of God, but we must never forget that redemption means restoration, and

restoration means responsibility, and responsibility means honoring our part of the deal to obey the commandments, to live honorable lives, to care for our neighbors, to turn away from idols. An idol is anything in your life that is more important to you than God.

Yes, there's a wideness in God's mercy, but there is also an uncompromising summons to move to deeper faith and higher ground.

I finish with a story William Muehl of Yale Divinity School once told about a modern day marriage. The husband had strayed from the path of marital fidelity, and though he and his wife had reconciled, he knew very well that he had not really been forgiven merely because the appropriate words of mercy had been said. "Neither was he persuaded by his wife's ongoing protestations of pardon. Such reassurances were actually as damning as anything hurled against sinful Israel by [Hosea]. No, the erring husband knew that he had been forgiven the day his wife told him to get off his behind and go do the dishes." (8)

God expects human beings neither to betray the good they know nor to wallow forever in remorse when they do. God expects human beings to take responsibility for the future, and there is no better time than now to get up and do what needs to be done.

(1) James Limburg, *Hosea-Micah, Interpretation*, 1988.

(2) Ibid.

(3) Carol A. Newsome and Sharon H. Ringer, Editors, *The Women's Bible Commentary*, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992, Gale A. Yee, p. 195 ff.

(4) Limburg.

(5) Limburg.

(6) Limburg.

(7) Limburg.

(8) William Muehl, *Why Preach, Why Listen?* Fortress Press, 1986, p. 69-70.