

July 28, 2019

Hosea 1: 4-11

Prayer: God of ancient Israel and God of our world, We invite you to join us in our study of Scripture. We ask for your inspiration in its telling and hearing as it was with its writing. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Heeding Our Prophets

I wish you could hear some of our staff meetings:

Has anybody seen John lately?

John who?

You know, the one they call Slick.

Oh, you mean Gary.

Gary who?

John Gary Lee Simpson.

Oh, the one they call Simp-Man.

I have no idea who you're talking about. David, do you have a picture?

So David Gay passes around a picture.

Oh, him. He told me his name was Arnold.

No, that's his brother. And on and on and on.

In our defense, many people have more than one name. The man I call Dennis Killingsworth is known to the rest of the staff as Randy Crawford. When I met Melvin Simpson – point to the choir – he told me his name was Andre Jerome. Turns out he's Melvin Andre Jerome Simpson.

It's our version of "Who's on First?"

While I was out for a few days recently, our partners at Brookwood sent over a huge donation of food and a nice check. Pat, our associate director, told me that Pastor Hosea had brought it.

I looked through my emails so I could thank him, and couldn't find a Pastor Hosea. So I asked Pat to forward me his email address.

His name was Pastor Julio.

We are hopeless when it comes to names. At the end of the year, if your tithing statement doesn't look right, you can assume we credited it to someone else.

At the end of the Old Testament are 12 books by 12 prophets whose names you may not know. Zephaniah and Obadiah. Habakkuk and Zechariah. Haggai and Nahum.

We don't preach from them very often. There are many reasons for that: They are fiendishly difficult. They are written in very specific historical circumstances. And often, we modern preachers don't know what in the heck they are talking about.

And yet, they are part of our holy Scripture. And so if we are serious about studying Scripture, about wanting to know God's word, about being biblically literate, we have to tackle them from time to time.

Today is one of those days. We are going to look at the prophet Hosea. (Not Julio.)

Now prophets in the Old Testament were sometimes peculiar people. We think of them as forecasters, predictors of the future, but that's not really correct.

They were preachers. They were preachers called by God to look around at the current situation and tell people what God thought of it. That was usually a bad thing. God was usually not happy with what was going on, and so the prophets were preaching a message of repentance.

Repent and turn back to the one true God of Israel.

These prophets were not particularly popular, because often the people thought that everything was going just fine, politically and economically. And sometimes, the prophets were downright *odd*.

Isaiah, for instance, walked across Jerusalem for three days, naked. Jeremiah walked around the city with an ox yoke on his neck. And Hosea, as we will see, married a prostitute to make a point.

Hosea is one of the 12 so-called Minor Prophets. They are called minor not because they are less important than Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel and Daniel, but because their books are shorter. We believe that all 12 of them once fit on a single scroll.

In the years after the glory days of King David and King Solomon, the kingdom split between Israel and Judah. Israel was in the north, Judah in the south.

And to the north of Israel was the very frightening empire of Assyria.

Assyria was known as a nation of fierce warriors, and its kings were always trying to go down and conquer Egypt. But Israel and Judah were in the way.

In the eighth century B.C.E., things were heating up. Assyria was threatening its neighbor Israel. And God called the prophet Hosea.

Hosea's message was to let people know that God was unhappy with the way they were worshipping idols, especially Baal. Much of his imagery is about God as the rejected lover and Israel as a prostitute who has gone off chasing other men, other gods.

This is a common theme in the Old Testament. We see this strong language in Jeremiah and Ezekiel, too.

But in the case of Hosea, there is a twist. God instructs him to symbolically live out his message by marrying an unfaithful woman. The people will hear the prophet's message of unfaithfulness, but they will also see it in the prophet's life.

Now we don't know how literally we are supposed to take this, but narratively, that's what Hosea does. He marries the unfaithful Gomer. I'm going to skip some of the stronger language and start with **Hosea 1: 4-9**.

³So he went and took Gomer daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son.

4 And the LORD said to him, '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. ⁵On that day I will break the bow of Israel in the valley of Jezreel.'

6 She conceived again and bore a daughter. Then the LORD said to him, 'Name her Lo-ruhamah, for I will no longer have pity on the house of Israel or forgive them. ⁷But I will have pity on the house of Judah, and I will save them by the LORD their God; I will not save them by bow, or by sword, or by war, or by horses, or by horsemen.'

8 When she had weaned Lo-ruhamah, she conceived and bore a son.⁹Then the LORD said, 'Name him Lo-ammi, for you are not my people and I am not your God.'

God talks about the things he will do, symbolized by the children Hosea and Gomer bear.

Their first son is named Jezreel for the valley in Israel where wars were fought and blood was shed. Hosea says that God will punish Israel because its King Jehu shed so much blood, killed so many people, in that valley.

But here's where it gets tricky. Other books in the Bible say that God specifically called King Jehu to shed that blood, to kill those people. According to the book of Kings, none other than one of the prophet Elisha's men anointed Jehu to clear out the household of the evil King Ahab.

In doing so, he killed Queen Jezebel and 70 princes of Ahab and all the prophets of Baal. And the Lord called it “right.”

This is one of those instances in the Bible where different perspectives are shown. The writer of II Kings looks at King Jehu and says he did a good thing with all the killing. But Hosea says, no, it was too much.

That’s why I always say we must approach our Scriptures with humility. It’s hard to be dogmatic when two writers look at the same event and come to opposite conclusions.

In Hosea’s case, God threatens to end the kingdom of Israel.

The second child of Hosea and Gomer is named Lo-ruhamah. “Ruhamah” means “compassion,” and “lo” means “no.” God is threatening to have no compassion on Israel for its transgressions.

The third child is named Lo-ammi, or “not my people.” This is a harsh reversal of the promises of Exodus 6:7: **“I will take you for my people, and I will be your God.”**

Now God is warning, *you will **not** be my people, and I will **not** be your God.*

This opening passage in Hosea is a warning of doom. The kingdom of Israel will be destroyed. God will have no compassion. Indeed, he will not even recognize the Israelites as his people any longer.

But let's look now at the verses that immediately follow this passage.

Hosea 1: 10-11.

Yet the number of the people of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which can be neither measured nor numbered; and in the place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people', it shall be said to them, 'Children of the living God.'

11 The people of Judah and the people of Israel shall be gathered together, and they shall appoint for themselves one head; and they shall take possession of the land, for great shall be the day of Jezreel.

On the heels of these terrible threats that God would end the kingdom, that he would have no compassion, that he would not be Israel's God any longer, he reversed himself. Israel would multiply. The curse of not being God's people would become the promise, "Children of the living God." The kingdom would reunite. And the land that is Jezreel would be "great."

In other words, forgiveness was possible. Restoration was possible.

Compassion was possible despite what a hurt and angry God said just four verses earlier.

This cycle of doom and hope continues throughout the book of Hosea. It is the central message of Hosea.

The people of Israel have hurt and angered God by following other gods, just as a lover is hurt and angered when his beloved cheats on him. But God stands willing to forgive.

In chapter 11, Hosea switches metaphors, but the cycle continues. Now God is a parent and Israel the wayward son. But the imagery is much the same. God talks about lifting the people like infants to his cheek, of bending down to feed them. But **“they shall return to the land of Egypt and Assyria shall be their king.”** (Hosea 11: 5)

In other words, the children of Israel will be in bondage once more. And sure enough, in the year 722 B.C.E., at the time Hosea was preaching, Assyria came in and conquered Israel’s capital city of Samaria.

Israel ceased to exist as a nation.

But the cycle of doom and hope alternates, even verse to verse. In the next breath, God says, **“How can I hand you over, O Israel?” (11:8)**

We can get whiplash reading this prophet.

Hosea gives us a picture not of an *angry* God so much as an *anguished* God, a God who has loved a wife and a child unconditionally and has been slapped in the face with adultery and ingratitude. And yet, at every turn, he offers forgiveness, a way back.

For I am God and no mortal, he says.

As foreign as the writing sounds to our modern ears, Old Testament prophets such as Hosea behaved exactly as preachers do today. He looked around at the culture and the leaders, and reported what he saw in the light of the word of God.

Isn't that exactly what our preachers are supposed to do today? Stand up to the kings and the presidents who are behaving in ways antithetical to God's teaching?

Whereas Hosea looked around and saw his people chasing after Baal, celebrating festivals to Baal, worshipping Baal, what is it we look around and see?

A president who tells four elected Congresswomen to go back where they came from? I am firmly for the separation of church and state, but that is offensive to me both as an American citizen AND as a Christian.

Whereas Hosea looked around and saw his people chasing after Baal, *what is it we look around and see?* People and industries choking our oceans with plastics? Consuming energy to the point of melting our ice caps and raising our oceans?

When I was in seminary 15 years ago, I remember thinking that the so-called theologians of nature were artificially laying their grid over the gospel. That while caring for the environment was important, it didn't really have much to do with our faith.

I've changed my mind. I think now that if we don't care for creation, no other issue is going to matter at all. If the earth becomes uninhabitable, what will immigration and democracy and disease and freedom of speech matter?

I was a little late to this party. The hymn we opened our service with, "All Creatures of Our God and King," tells us that St. Francis of Assisi was preaching this theology of nature in the 13th century.

What is it we look around and see?

I turned on NPR this week and heard someone say, “If you are doing well in this economy, this society, you will see a need only for slow change.”

But if your family is separated at the border, if you cannot find affordable housing whether you live in San Francisco or Greenville, if your home is threatened by wildfires in California or floods in Charleston, you probably see our nation in crisis. In crisis over immigration. Over housing. Over the environment.

Right here in South Carolina, Charleston and Myrtle Beach are experiencing several days a year of what they call sunny-day floods. That means that with no rain or storm surge, plain old high tides are flooding streets and closing roads seven or eight days a year. (*Coastal Conservation League and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration*).

Nearby Conway experienced three catastrophic floods in four years. City managers are trying to move people out of harm’s way and prohibit development in flood-prone areas.

If we are living in relative safety and isolation from those issues, we might not recognize them as the crises they are.

We might not heed our prophets.

We may have a hard time understanding Hosea and his prophetic brothers because we are not familiar with their history, their culture, their crises. But what they were doing is *exactly* the same thing we should be doing in our churches.

We are trying to call people back to the Creator God who gave us dominion over creation not to stomp on it but to care for it.

We are trying to remind people that God commanded us to love our neighbor, whether she is from Samaria or Somalia or the streets of Greenville.

We are trying to find metaphors of love and mercy that resonate.

Hosea's metaphor for God was a wounded, abandoned lover in the throes of agony over his loved one's betrayal. Hosea's metaphor for God was a tender, bewildered parent in the throes of agony over his child's ingratitude.

Our metaphor might be that old Indian warrior on TV, looking out over a wasted land with a single tear running down his cheek.

Amen.