

Prophets Series #7
Hosea 1:2-10, 11:1-11

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Hosea

[Hosea lived in the Northern Kingdom of Israel at the same time as Amos. Hosea is known for his metaphors. In this first passage he announces God's disappointment with the people of Israel by speaking of Israel as the Lord's promiscuous wife. The strange names given to the children are plays on words in the Hebrew language.]

When the LORD first spoke through Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea, "Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD." So he went and took Gomer daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son.

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. On that day I will break the bow of Israel in the valley of Jezreel."

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. But 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."

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

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." 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.

[In this next passage, Hosea uses a different metaphor for Israel — the Lord's faithless son. He refers to the people of Israel as "Ephraim", the name of the largest tribe.]

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols.

Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. 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.

They shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me. The sword rages in their cities, it consumes their oracle-priests, and devours because of their schemes. My people are bent on turning away from me. To the Most High they call, but he does not raise them up at all.

How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? [According to Deuteronomy 29:23, Admah and Zeboiim were cities destroyed with Sodom and Gomorrah.] 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.

They shall go after the LORD, who roars like a lion; when he roars, his children shall come trembling from the west. They shall come trembling like birds from Egypt, and like doves from the land of Assyria; and I will return them to their homes, says the LORD.

One of the challenges of doing a sermon series the way we are this summer...covering a broad range of different prophets...is that we don't have the opportunity to work our way carefully through each one. Nor can we read them in their entirety during worship. So we try faithfully to choose bits of Scripture that reflect some aspect of each prophet and we encourage you to read them more fully at home.

Hosea is particularly difficult to wrestle with. As you could hear a glimmer of in the first part of the reading, the language is jarring and sometimes violent. The Book of Hosea begins with a very graphic description of God's command that Hosea marry a woman of whoredom, that Hosea's own life must reflect the life of God with the people of Israel. Like the wayward, unfaithful Gomer; Israel continually betrays God by consorting with idols. The imagery used to portray this is stark and disturbing. God speaks through Hosea like a bitter, angry husband. A man or woman who has been similarly betrayed could empathize with God's feelings, but the language still presses the limits of comfort.

What is probably most challenging for us is the language that portrays God as a husband who has full authority over his wayward wife and who has the right to exact his retribution on her for her sins. Here is a tame example of the graphic language to be found in Chapter 2: "I will expose her as in the day she was born, and make her like a wilderness and turn her into a parched land, and kill her with thirst. Upon her children I will have no pity, because they are children of whoredom..." And so on and so on.

We no longer understand men to own their wives. We no longer support the idea that a husband has the right to punish his wife for her mistakes or her sins. We live in a society that says it will not tolerate abuse or violence. Although, sadly, it is still too often the case. And yet these are the very challenging words in our own Scriptures. There is no way to sweep this language under the rug. There is no way to pretend that the language is not abusive, that the language doesn't frighten us more than a little bit. And the truth of the matter is: Scriptures like this have been used for millennia to justify the subjugation of women and children and to scapegoat them for the sins of men. So this language is particularly troubling for those who are victimized by abuse and violence. How do we explain this image of God? How can we persuade and exhort others to love and trust this God with all of their heart and soul and mind?

It might help to understand a little bit about the role of a prophet, especially those we read in the Old Testament. By doing so, maybe we can get a window into the heart of God. Which is, after all, the best gift that Scripture can give us.

Here is a very learned sounding definition of a prophet: *A prophet is a messenger called by God to bring an embodied word of judgment and grace to his or her contemporaries in language that is both imaginative and traditional.*

The prophets were not commissioned to stand as representatives for the suffering of the people. They were called as representatives of the suffering of God. And Hosea, like many of the prophets, did this not only in his words but in his life as well. Biblical scholars are uncertain if Hosea's marriage actually occurred before his call as a prophet or after. But what is clear is that God was able to use Hosea's earthly marriage to Gomer as an embodied example of what it is for God in relationship with Israel. And what is key to understanding Hosea is that Hosea's emotional solidarity with God is apparent through the entire book.

If a prophet is, as we believe, called to speak the truth to the people of God; if a prophet is called to be the embodied word of judgment and grace in language that is both imaginative and traditional; then it would make sense that the language would have to be understandable to the particular people God is trying to reach.

It is sad to me that there was ever a time when men had the right to treat their wives as is described in this book. But if it is true that men were, at this time, able to exercise ownership rights and punishments over their wives, then the marriage of Hosea and Gomer portrayed in jarring language might be the way that God could best communicate God's feelings about the people of Israel.

The people of Israel went a-whoring after the pagan gods of the area not only out of faithlessness. The local gods were thought to be in charge of limited, tangible things like weather, fertility, and grain. If there is one way in which we should be able to completely relate to the Israelites, it is in how hard it is to get our heads around the idea of a big God. A God that created everything we can see and even things we can't. A God that has full authority and power. A God that is so vast and so much more than we, in our limited imaginations, can begin to comprehend. The Israelites turned to things they thought they could manage, understand or control...how very like us they sound!

So God used something else they could understand, the relationship between a husband and a wife. And he used the relationship the way they would have understood it...one of ownership and authority. And what it told them was this:

"I, the God of Israel, love you. But because I am in relationship with you, I cannot stand by and be true to who I know myself to be, and let you wander off with the pagan gods that delight your whims. I must act my part in this relationship. I must act as the one who has authority over you and the power to respond." This is clear, this is tangible, this is embodied language.

Yes, it is true that the culture of the day was patriarchal. Yes, it is true that we have to understand that as we read these texts. This language doesn't resonate for us the way it must have with the Israelites. But if Scripture is a living thing and if God can continue to speak through these ancient texts today as God did so many years ago, then there has to be a word in there for us, too. It will be hard for us to mine out of there if we focus only on the jarring language and violent images. But if we listen to Hosea in its entirety we learn not only how God is feeling at this time and in this place. Hosea gives us a sense of the broad emotional range of God. We get a sense of what one scholar calls: "the eternal and basic disposition" of the Lord. (Heschel) We hear of the tenderness and mercy of God, expressed as compassion, as a mother's tenderness and as love between spouses. In tension with this we hear wrath and anguished suffering.

Perhaps what makes it hardest for us to understand the imagery used here is not a problem with their culture, but with ours. At its best we still see marriage as imbued with restraint, involving duties and responsibilities. But as a culture, we seem to have lost the sense of marriage as a symbol of eternity. To the people Hosea addressed, marriage as a symbol for eternity would have lent much richer meaning to the words of the prophet. For them, the marriage commitment as permanent, steadfast and mutual would have been a powerful metaphor for the permanent and durable love of God. The people of Hosea's day would have better understood going to such great extremes for the restoration of a relationship that was expected to endure, even in the face of betrayal and the resulting anger.

And that is what rings clearest in the midst of all the metaphor and imagery: God's unwavering love. God is in love with us. We hear in Hosea the deep, keening of God pleading for loyalty, for reconciliation, for restoration. Listen to the deep intimacy in these words: "Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms but they did not know that I healed them. 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." (11:3-4)

At the end of the day, Hosea is not where I would turn if I were comforting a victim of violence or abuse. But if I want to understand the breadth of God, if I want to hear a word of God longing for me, longing for us to return, Hosea might be a place to go. I would go humbly, because God is jealous for us. God desires our faithfulness. And I would go in confidence knowing that God who suffers because of us, also suffered for us. Amen.