

Hosea: The Anguish and Loving-Kindness of God

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Prayer of Illumination

Gracious God, give us humble, teachable, and obedient hearts, that we may receive what you have revealed, and do what you have commanded. Amen.

Introduction

Hosea is the first book in the Book of the Twelve also known as the Minor Prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures. Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel are the Major Prophets and each book entirely filled one scroll. The Book of the Twelve all fit on one scroll—and so these twelve prophets were read as a unit together. Hosea is widely used in Jewish liturgy because it powerfully speaks of hope in the midst of hopelessness and the depths of God's love for us, his people.

Hosea is similar to the prophet Jeremiah—both were men of strong feelings who spoke of and experienced within themselves God's feelings—love, anger, anguish, disappointment, helplessness.

And so there's a tension and agony throughout Hosea—where God swings back and forth between judgment and love, destruction and restoration, exasperation and tenderness for his wayward, yet dearly loved people.

Hosea is the lone prophet from the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and he wrote during the Decline of the Northern Kingdom, in the mid-700s BC. He prophesied for three decades as Assyria was about to vanquish his nation.

The name Hosea means "rescue" or "save" and that's exactly what God longs to do for his people—to save them from themselves and their wantonness. And so Hosea didn't announce doom as say, as the prophet Amos often does, as plead for his people to return to God and be reconciled.

Do you know who is the most tragic character in all of the Bible?

God.

We, the people of God, are the bride of Christ, and God is love-sick for us. Crazy in love with us. The scriptures don't paint God as a distant, detached God. God longs to be with us, to commune with us, to be close with us.

Hosea pictures God as a devastated and disillusioned husband because his people have broken their vows to God and spurned his love—by turning to something and someone other than God to meet our deepest longings.

It broke God's heart that Israel turned not to him, but to political alliances with Egypt and Assyria for salvation.

The worship of these lesser gods was the easy way because they didn't require commitment—only incense and pleasures of the flesh. But God had much loftier and nobler expectations of his people—such things as mercy, love, loyalty, and justice. God's way was a more demanding way, but a much richer way.

But the good news of Hosea is God in his loving-kindness will not and does not give up us, on his errant bride. God doesn't want to be distant or estranged from us.

Hosea shows us better than any other book that God wants to take us back to the place he originally began with us. He wants a second honeymoon. To renew our wedding vows. God is a God of love. We are his creation—created in his image. And we've been made to be passionate lovers—not cheap one-night stand lovers with the latest god or second-rate idols.

And so as we listen to Hosea, I want you to think about these questions in your relationship with God.

- Are you afraid of committing to God? Are you dating around? Playing the field?
- Are you staying true to your marriage vows to God? Are you still saying "I do" to God in your covenant with him?
- Do you need to renew your vows? To come back to God?
- Is it time to have your irreconcilable differences with God reconciled?
- How can you respond to God's hesed, with love back to God?

As we're about to hear, Hosea is unique in that his life ran in parallel with God's life. He experienced in his own family life what God experienced. He lived out the message he was called to share.

Let's hear now from:

Scripture: Hosea 1:1-2:1 (REB)

The word of the Lord which came to Hosea son of Beerī during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and during the reign of Jeroboam son of Joash king of Israel.

This is the beginning of the LORD's message given by Hosea. He said, 'Go and take an unchaste woman as your wife, and with this woman have children; for like an unchaste woman this land is guilty of unfaithfulness to the LORD.' So he married Gomer daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son. The LORD said to Hosea, 'Call him Jezreel, for in a little while I am going to punish the dynasty of Jehu for the blood shed in the valley of Jezreel, and bring the kingdom of Israel to an end. On that day, I shall break Israel's bow in the vale of Jezreel.'

Gomer conceived again and bore a daughter, and the LORD said to Hosea, 'Call her Lo-ruhamah; for I shall never again show love to Israel, never again forgive them. But Judah I shall love and save. I shall save them not by bow or sword or weapon of war, not by horses and horsemen, but I shall save them by the Lord their God. After

weaning Lo-ruhamah, Gomer conceived and bore a son; and the LORD said, 'Call him Lo-ammi; for you are not my people, and I shall not be your God.

The Israelites will be as countless as the sands of the sea, which can neither be measured nor numbered; it will no longer be said to them, 'You are not my people;' they will be called Children of the Living God.

The people of Judah and of Israel will be reunited and will choose for themselves one leader; they will spring up from the land, for great will be the day of Jezreel.

You are to say to your brothers, 'You are my people,' and to your sisters, 'You are loved.'

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – Hosea: The Anguish and Loving-Kindness of God

Who are some famous couples in history?

- Antony and Cleopatra
- King Louis and Mary Antoinette
- Napoleon and Josephine
- King Arthur and Guinevere
- Romeo and Juliet
- Tarzan and Jane
- Superman and Lois Lane
- Ken and Barbie
- Mickey Mouse and Minnie
- And of course, we can't forget peanut butter and jelly!

Throughout history humans have been captivated by love stories—but most of them are tragedies where forces come between the two, like:

- Fate
- Society
- Wars
- Death

Many of the most famous love stories in literature and film are stories of betrayal or unrequited love.

Our story this morning falls into that last category. And it is of a most unusual couple—Hosea and Gomer. One a prophet, the other a prostitute. And as you can imagine, their story is quite a dysfunctional love story—one that you wouldn't expect to be in the Bible. It takes Real Housewives to a whole 'nother level.

For a time Hosea and Gomer were happy together—but the honeymoon didn't last long. She turned to religion—bad religion—the Canaanite fertility religion which involved prostitution. A good woman got sucked into a lifestyle of drugs, sex, rock 'n roll, and bad religion.

They didn't have paternity tests back then, but in all likelihood, Hosea was not the father of all their children. Yet God called Hosea to take his wife Gomer back, even though the Jewish law forbade it. God was calling Hosea to the spirit of the law. And despite the hurt and the odds, their relationship was restored.

Hosea is called the Love Prophet. His love story is a living parable of God's love for his people. Hosea became a living metaphor to help him slip into God's shoes for a bit and experience God's pain over his people who forsook him for other gods.

Before we start pointing fingers, we've got to admit that there's a bit of Gomer in all of us. It's easy to try to identify with God or with Hosea in this story. But we shouldn't do that too fast—it misses the point. We have to be honest with ourselves: We play, I play, Gomer in my life, in our lives.

Sometimes we start off great with God, but soon forget our First Love, and abandon ourselves (and God) to cheaper imitations of God's true love. We forget that it's God that's the giver of all good gifts. We think our true joy will come from somewhere else than God.

And so we stray and wander away from God, thinking the grass is greener on the other side. That we'll find fulfillment or escape in:

- addictions and attachments, we crave
- money, status, flashier things or flashier people
- it might even be in religion and formulas and self-help, but not God-help.

The good news is that we have a God who isn't going to walk out on us or desert us—even when we've been unfaithful. We can trust God. God wants desperately to reconcile and restore his bride, the church. God isn't going to allow us to ruin this love story. God's calling us back—he wants to untie the knots we've gotten ourselves into and to tie the knot with us again.

As Hosea says,

"It was I God, who took them in my arms and secured them and led them with bonds of love."

Like Hosea's children, once we were "Not pitied." Now we can be loved by God when we come back. Once we were "not God's people." Now with God's forgiveness we can be God's people. God renames us and reclaims us as children of the Living God. We can have a fresh start, no matter how questionable our past.

There are two key words that Hosea gives us to help us experience our relationship with God as a divine marriage or a sacred romance: to know and to love.

First, to know. The Hebrew word for “know” is **yada**. Not yoda, not yoga, but yada.

Hosea says, “My people are destroyed for a lack of yada—lack of knowledge.”

The Hebrew concept of knowledge is so much more than:

- head knowledge or book knowledge
- fact memorization or
- head nodding to a check-list of core beliefs

Yada is a relational knowing. Intimacy.

Presbyterians are good at loving God with our minds and intellects, but knowledge of God must go so much deeper. Really knowing God means we engage our emotions, our spirit, our body—the whole person. All of us.

To know God is to receive him into your soul.

To yada Yahweh is to have a real care and tenderness for God—just as he does for us.

In the Bible, yada can even refer to sexual union. Not just the physical act, but also the emotions of opening your entire being to God—your mind, body, and spirit. God’s love for us like this—totally self-giving, as shown to us by Christ.

To yada God in our relationship with him involves:

- Being concerned, engaged, dedicated, and caring.
- To not just love God, but to like God. To have feelings.
- To want to be around him.
- To share life with God. To suffer with God.
- To care about what God cares about.
- To be true to God. God has first place.

I like how one person describes this kind of knowing:

“where your heart is broken by the things that breaks God’s heart.”

We yada not merely in words, but with deeds, and with affection. It’s a desire to please and to serve God—with single-hearted devotion. Even now, God is wooing us, alluring us, drawing us into real yada.

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Second, Hosea calls us to love. Not just to know God, but to love God.

"I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings," says Hosea.

The Hebrew word Hosea uses is **hesed**. Hesed is one of the most beautiful words in Scripture. It's steadfast love. Loving-kindness.

Hesed is given, promised, and initiated by God. Poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. We, the recipients of hesed, are commanded to do one thing—respond back to God with the same hesed love that God gives us.

Hesed isn't forced on us. God never says, "YOU WILL NOW HESED ME!!!" Just as in a marriage, love cannot be forced—but it is commanded. And God aches for us to return his hesed love back to him. God goes after us at our worst, keeps after us until he gets us, and makes lovers of men and women who know nothing of real love.

Immanuel, let's say YES to our loving God who gets down on his knee for us and says:

I shall betroth you to myself forever, bestowing righteousness and justice, loyalty and love, I shall betroth you to myself, making you faithful, and you will yada and hesed me, you will know and love the Lord.

Amen.

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