



WHAT WOULD HOSEA SAY?

August 14, 2016, The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Hosea 1:1-11

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God of ancient truths, your Word comes to us from voices long ago, yet your Spirit continues to move today. Loving God, we are humbled because we need you. We need love, even when we don't see it, even when we, like wayward children, go our own way. We fear that all is lost, but voices like Hosea remind us that you call us home. We are grateful, and we are ready to hear you. Speak to us again as we draw near to you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

This week I was meeting with a church member as we discussed a children's project we're working on related to our 250th anniversary at Brick. We want to help children find all of the many animals hidden throughout the church—in the art, stained glass, ironwork, furniture, some even in the sanctuary. As the children go on a scavenger hunt to find these animals at Brick, they'll learn even more about the history of this church and its buildings.

In this conversation this week, it dawned on me, that we have art in this church connected to my sermon series this month. As I began last Sunday, during the month of August, I'm preaching on 4 of the minor prophets of Israel—voices that are in our lectionary this year who need to be heard. Last week was Amos, the farm boy of the southern kingdom who preaches in the northern kingdom. This week is Hosea, another preacher in the northern kingdom, but a local. Next week I'll focus on Micah and then end with Joel.

But here's what I noticed this week, all 4 of these prophets are imaged in the artwork in the sanctuary. Behind me, above the communion table, is the gold reredos artwork designed around the dominant image of the cross. If you follow down the left side of the cross, you'll see a book of the Old Testament with a tree of 8 prophets growing out of it. The 8 prophets in the branches of that tree include



Amos, Hosea, Micah, and Joel. Amos, our farm boy from last week, is imaged on the second row with a shepherd's crook and sheep. Hosea, who you'll meet today, is on the top row symbolized by a broken idol. After worship, you'll have to come up to the chancel and take a closer look.

So, even in our own sanctuary the prophets' messages remain significant, but we could easily overlook them. Like I said last week, the prophets were an unpopular group of God's leaders; they said the things the people didn't want to hear. They do the same for us today. In the midst of the corrupt noise and chaos among God's people, it was the prophet's role to get Israel back on track. We too are surrounded by a lot of chaos and noise; therefore, the prophets are calling to us as well.

So let me tell you a little bit about Hosea this week, especially since we don't know much about his biography like we did with Amos. Hosea is from the northern kingdom and is preaching to his own people. Chronologically, as a prophet Hosea comes after Amos and there are some differences between them. Amos relies on strong language and dramatic climax to get his point across. Hosea, on the other hand, has greater rhetorical skills and uses metaphor and imagery in his preaching. For God, Hosea uses images like husband, parent, physician and the dawn of the early morn.¹ For the people of Israel, Hosea describes them as a wife, a child, a person needing healing, and like chaff on the threshing floor. Hosea uses all these images and more to describe the faithful and covenantal God of Israel who has been let down by the unfaithful and temporal love from God's people. Even Hosea's own life has become a metaphor for God's relationship with Israel, because early on in this book Hosea is commanded to marry a prostitute and raise children with names that reflect God's anger and disappointment. Imagery dominates the prophecy of Hosea.

Socially, Hosea preached to the northern kingdom during a time of political upheaval and violent transition. Leaders fought with one another, killed each other, and made all kinds of allegiances in order to keep the Assyrians, their enemies, at bay. But political chaos aside, Hosea is called to confront further issues within the

¹ Taken from James Newsome, Jr. *The Hebrew Prophets*, John Knox Press, 1984. Pp. 34-35.



religious life of God's people. You may have heard it mentioned before, but the worship of the Canaanite fertility god Baal is a dominant part of the culture of the Ancient Near East. And Israel, like the peoples around them, has mixed themselves up in this worship. Baal was worshipped for fertility for individuals and the land. Worship of this god led to immoral sexual practices between men and women, but more importantly it demanded that the worshipper rely on Baal for protection and survival, over and against any other god.

So in the midst of this political and religious corruption, Hosea enters the scene as a preacher, painting word pictures, condemning Israel's lack of faith. Hosea uses two main metaphors to describe God and Israel. The first is shown through Hosea's own family: God is a spurned lover whom Israel has rejected. But Israel is not only the unfaithful partner who has left the relationship; Israel is a harlot, giving herself over to multiple partners. In Hosea's prophecy we see that God desperately tries to woo back his lover Israel, but strongly condemns her infidelity.

The second metaphor is that of a parent grieving over the waywardness of her child. This is where our text for today picks up. Most of us are probably familiar with the parable of the prodigal son in Jesus' ministry, but this morning you'll discover that Jesus borrows from Hosea when he tells that story. Here in Hosea 11, the passage that Marc read, is the original version of the child who squanders his parent's love. Reading these words is like looking inside the bedroom of parents who are grieving over their child's disobedience, struggling to find the way forward.² God is no longer just the spurned lover, God is also the disregarded parent.

For anyone who's ever thought that the God of the Old Testament is full of wrath, you need to read Hosea 11 more closely. The anger we see from God in the Old Testament comes from a place of grief and sadness. God is in love with the child Israel, desperate for her faithfulness and obedience. As a loving and devoted parent, God is hurting. God wants to give in to anger and punish her child, but in

² Taken from ideas from Jacob Morris at Wesleyan Lectionary Commentary, <http://www.aplainaccount.org/#!Hosea-1118/bhul0/57960a1b0cf2779eabf6b293>



beautiful truth Hosea tells us *“I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.”*³ In chapter 11, Hosea offers us an intimate window into God’s pain, because the people of Israel have caused it. Yet still, God acts with mercy.

So there you have it: Hosea, the prophet to the disobedient children of the northern kingdom. With all of his ancient metaphors... what is Hosea saying to us today in 2016?

First, Hosea’s metaphors for Israel could easily be used to describe the Church, and they have. Although we may not like the harsh language, theologians for centuries, most recently Dorothy Day, have referred to the Church as a whore whom Christ has married. And this is not meant to be a gendered metaphor—it’s an image of our unfaithfulness and our devotion to gods of our own making. We are adulterous, but God has married us regardless and kept covenant with us. The second metaphor of parent and child rings just as true. We, God’s children, disobey and hurt God, mother and father of us all. But the God who created us will not let us go.

In the midst of all of the turmoil in the northern kingdom, Hosea asks: “Israel, who is your true God?” “Who is the one you’re supposed to follow?” Politically and religiously God’s people are a mess, and Hosea’s prophecy is to get them to name their sin and come back to God their loving parent. You might say our own social climate is in the midst of political chaos. Hosea’s prophecy reminds us to be wary of leaders who claim to be our savior and demand our allegiance. In the Old Testament, Hosea has to remind Israel that they already have a Savior; their country’s upheaval reveals the painful consequences of relying on human leaders for deliverance. No king, no politician, no pagan god, no business leader, no celebrity is God—there is only one God, Hosea preaches. We are called to worship the one who created us, not the one with the most money, power, or prestige. So friends, Hosea would remind us that no person, no politician can be our savior. Only God, in Jesus Christ, can save us.

³ Hosea 11:9.



Hosea has one task: to bring Israel back to the God who loves her. And with his powerful imagery, Hosea shows Israel, and us, the pain we cause God when we disobey. So something else Hosea might ask us today is how do we, ourselves, cause the pain and chaos around us? We have a problem in our culture called “the blame game.” Rather than take ownership of our own faults, our own mistakes, we are encouraged to look for someone else to blame, someone else to point the finger at. Hosea won’t let us do that; in fact none of the prophets will let us do that. Hosea’s metaphors place us as the prostitute or as the wayward child—the one at fault and the one who needs to turn things around. Punishment is coming, Hosea says, I wish I could stop it, but you’ve been unfaithful. Heeding the prophet’s voice, then, we ought to spend some time considering where we’re at fault.

One final point. Hosea has an important reminder that he makes most clearly in our passage for today. God speaks: *I am God and no mortal*. In other words, God says, just when you think you know me, you’ve figured me out—I’m going to surprise you. Hosea reminds all of us that God’s love and grace don’t exist on our terms. God’s love, just like God’s justice in Amos, cannot be defined by our limited understandings. God is not mortal, Hosea reminds us; therefore God’s commitment to us goes beyond any human definitions.

Let me end with a story.

"Our son has been putting us through hell," the woman told her pastor.

"He'd disappeared before, but never for this long. We were afraid he might be dead. 'Til last night, at least. My husband and I were eating dinner, and suddenly, without warning, he busts in the front door and starts cussing us, demanding money, refusing to join us at the table. After an ugly scene, he stormed down the hall and slammed the door to his room."

"It's sad what parents are sometimes forced to endure from their children."

"Well, my husband gets up, goes over to the kitchen, pours himself a drink, turns on the TV, and slumps down in his chair. That's how he handles these moments. I decided to do something different. I walked down the hall and said, 'Son, can we talk? I just want to talk.' And I could hear him curse



me from inside his bedroom. I tried to open the door. Of course, it was locked.

"So I went to the garage, found the biggest hammer I could find. And I walked back to my son's bedroom door, and with only one blow, I knocked the doorknob clean off. Well the door flung open, and my son tried to jump off the bed, but I lunged at him, grabbed him around his throat, and I said, 'I'm not putting up with this crap anymore. You are better than this. Do you hear me? I gave birth to you! I labored for HOURS! I'm not giving you away. YOU ARE MINE!'

The woman sighed. "I think something important happened for us last night. I think he might've finally heard me." ... I believe God is something like that."⁴

Friends, Hosea does too.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.

⁴ Adapted from Will Willimon, *Who Will Be Saved?* Abingdon Press (April 1, 2008), p. 67.