

Love Story

7th Weekend of Kingdomtide – July 22/23, 2006

Sermon Background Study

*Hosea 1:1-9 (NIV)*¹

The word of the LORD that came to Hosea son of Beeri during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and during the reign of Jeroboam son of Jehoash king of Israel:

²When the LORD began to speak through Hosea, the LORD said to him, “Go, take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness, because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the LORD.” ³So he married Gomer daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son.

⁴Then the LORD said to Hosea, “Call him Jezreel,² because I will soon punish the house of Jehu for the massacre at Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of Israel. ⁵In that day I will break Israel’s bow in the Valley of Jezreel.”

⁶Gomer conceived again and gave birth to a daughter. Then the LORD said to Hosea, “Call her Lo-Ruhamah,³ for I will no longer show love to the house of Israel, that I should at all forgive them. ⁷Yet I will show love to the house of Judah; and I will save them—not by bow, sword or battle, or by horses and horsemen, but by the LORD their God.”

⁸After she had weaned Lo-Ruhamah, Gomer had another son. ⁹Then the LORD said, “Call him Lo-Ammi,⁴ for you are not my people, and I am not your God.

How much does God love us? How much does God want us to love him? How much does it hurt God when we don't? The story of Hosea is a most unusual love story.

The opening verses of Hosea certainly don’t read like a love story. God tells Hosea that he is to go find an adulterous woman, marry her, and be a father to her children. Nothing about affection or courtship – just go and do it. The only portion of the book that deals with Hosea’s personal life is 1:2-10 and 3:1-5. Even here, the Hebrew is ambiguous and scholars are all the over the place on how best translate it. Is Gomer a prostitute as some translations have it, or is she “merely” promiscuous? Is she promiscuous before she marries Hosea or only after? But if we keep in mind that we are getting the story of two relationships in parallel, Hosea/Gomer and YHWH/Israelites, then we can get the author’s point.

Hosea is to enter into a marriage covenant with a woman who is not faithful to the covenant, committing adultery with other men. Similarly, God has entered into a covenant with the Israelites and they have been unfaithful to that covenant by committing adultery with foreign gods. The way that makes Hosea feel is the way it makes God feel, but Hosea is to be faithful to Gomer as God is faithful to Israel.

Amos and Hosea

Presumably, Amos and Hosea are placed nearly back-to-back in the *Thru the Bible* reading plan because they come from the same historical context and share a common perspective.

Amos and Hosea were both prophets in the northern kingdom of Israel during the eighth-century BC, before the destruction of the northern kingdom by the Assyrians in 722BC.

During this time, Israel was at relative peace and enjoyed marked prosperity, as did Judah in the south. Assyria buffered Israel from historical enemies and was not herself troubling Israel. Taking advantage of her placement on the major trade route between Assyria and Egypt, Israel prospered economically. However, these good times were not shared by all. Because many of the poorer families had lost their farm land to Assyrian incursions and droughts decades earlier, there was a huge gulf between rich and poor. Amos’ prophetic work (i.e., telling forth the word of God) was focused on the social injustices in Israel and their lack of compassion for the poor.

Though Hosea also addressed these social injustices, his prophetic ministry instead focused on the religious practices of the Israelites and their embracing of foreign gods. The Israelites kept all the covenant rituals and festivals from the Law of Moses, but they also devoted themselves to numerous local deities and sex-and-religion cults. The people simply lumped YHWH, the one true God, in with all that idolatry, forgetting their covenant to worship God and only God.

¹As I explain more fully in the text, I’ve used the NIV translation here because it makes plain the parallel between the adultery of Gomer (unfaithfulness to a marriage covenant) and the Israelites’ adultery (unfaithfulness to their covenant with God.) In the Hebrew, it is unclear whether we are to understand that the children are themselves offspring from Gomer’s adulterous relationships or that they will grow up to be unfaithful like their mother. As a side note, there are more textual problems (uncertainty about the original text) in Hosea than in any other OT book with the exception of Job.

²This name means “God sows.”

³This name means “Not pitied.”

⁴This name means “Not my people.”

If you've been reading through the Bible with us (yes, I've caught up!), you know that the people's idolatry, the worshiping of foreign gods and idols, was a BIG problem during the long decline of Israel and Judah. In the biblical view, this idolatry, along with the people's abandonment of social justice, explains the decline of the Israelite kingdoms and their eventual destruction.

The story of God's response to this covenant betrayal is told through the marriage of Hosea and Gomer in chapter 2. The expected anger, judgment, and punishment await the adulterous Israel (2:1-13). Yet,

Why does Israel fail?

In the eighth century BC, the Assyrian empire posed an ever-growing threat to Israel and Judah. Lying to their northeast, this pressure was most acute on Israel. Nonetheless, Israel enjoyed peace and prosperity at times. One of these periods was from about 785BC to 745BC under King Jeroboam. Despite this period of peace and the complacency it brought, twenty years or so after Jeroboam's death (722BC to be exact) the Assyrians overran the kingdom of Israel, wiping it from the map and exiling tens of thousands of the Israelites. The ten Israelite tribes that made up the northern kingdom would be "lost" forever, never again to be a national entity of any sort. These would be the lost tribes of Israel.

Why would this happen to Israel? We could leave God out of our explanation entirely, noting that Assyria was powerful and simply could not be stopped from their aggression. But this is not the biblical understanding. For Amos, Israel was no better or no worse than their neighbors and that was precisely the problem. From Amos 3: "Hear this word that the Lord has spoken against you [Israel] . . . You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for your iniquities." Simply put, God expected more from his people. He held them to a higher standard, the standard of the covenant he had made with them. For Israel to be accused of oppressing the poor, as Amos accused them, was no small matter.

In failing to care for the needy while resting in the luxuries of their own prosperity, Israel revealed the depth of their sin and the abandonment of their special relationship with YHWH, their Lord and God. Such abandonment could lead only one place – to their destruction. Israel had forgotten that they were to care for the widow because God had cared for them. They had forgotten that they were to "let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24).

that is not the end of the story. We are also told that God will win Israel back by showering her with tender affection (2:14-23): "Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her . . . On that day, says the Lord, you will call me 'My husband,' and no longer will you call me 'My Baal'⁵." The same emotional playing out of betrayal, forgiveness, and restoration is found in chapter 11: "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? . . . My heart recoils within me; my compassion 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." (11:8-9).

The over-arching Old Testament story is that of covenant betrayal, judgment, and restoration. Nearly every OT prophet comes bearing a word from God about the coming destruction of unfaithful Israel, but also brings a word of hope and restoration. The people will have to bear the consequences of their betrayal but God will one day restore them as his people, putting things right for them and for all of creation. It is this restoration (a.k.a. the coming of the kingdom of God) that the Jews are so anxiously awaiting in Jesus' day. It is the proclamation of God's kingdom, this restoration, that occupied much of Jesus' ministry and was accomplished in his death.

We can see that this is somewhat like a marriage between a man and woman that has been rocked by unfaithfulness. It is hard and hurtful, marked by anger and despair. Yet, the couple makes it through, emerging on the other side with a marriage stronger than before. Is this really possible? With God, all things are possible!

True love

In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson writes, "Hosea is the prophet of love, but not love as we imagine or fantasize it. He was a parable of God's love for his people lived out as God revealed and enacted it – a lived parable. It is an astonishing story: a prophet commanded to marry a common whore and have children with her. It is an even more astonishing message: God loves us in just this way—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. Once we absorb this story and the words that flow from it, we will know God far more accurately. And we will be well on our way to being cured of all the sentimentalized and neurotic distortions of love that incapacitate us from dealing with the God who loves us and loving the neighbors who don't love us."

⁵Baal was the chief god in the Canaanite pantheon and a main subject of the Israelites' idol worship.

Thru the Bible Daily Bible Readings

July 23 – July 30

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help.

Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Hosea 9-11; Song of Songs 8 Peterson calls Israel's life, "playing at religion with toy gods."</p>	<p>Day 2 Hosea 12-14; Psalm 95 See again in chapter 14, God's promise of a fresh start, blessedness, and prosperity.</p>
<p>Day 3 1 Corinthians 1-2; Psalm 96 Christ, the power and wisdom of God; proclaiming Christ crucified</p>	<p>Day 4 1 Corinthians 3-5; Psalm 97 Divisions in the house churches of Corinth; the ministry of the apostles; sexual immorality in the Corinth church</p>
<p>Day 5 1 Corinthians 6-8; Psalm 98 Paul's instructions to the Corinthian believers re lawsuits, marriage, and respecting the needs of new Christians</p>	<p>Day 6 1 Corinthians 9-11; Psalm 99 The rights of an apostle; the dangers of idolatry; using our freedoms for God; hairstyle and gender distinctions; abuses of the Lord's Supper</p>
<p>Day 7 A day for reflection and catching up</p>	

