

## Hosea 1:2-11 “The Heart of Faithfulness”

We're on week six of our heroic prophets of the Old Testament series. We started out with Elijah and what it means to trust God even when things look bleak. Then we moved on to Elijah passing his prophetic ministry down to Elisha and what it might look like if people saw God embodied in us so much that others might ask, “How do I get some of that?” Then we leaped forward to Amos who fearlessly passed judgment on the corrupt King of Israel *and* on the people of Israel who let the nation stray so far from God that a corrupt king could rise to power in the first place.

This week, we're going to change channels completely and move on to the Prophet Hosea. Remember last week when I said that Amos is nobody's favorite prophet? Hosea isn't much better, but not because he was angry and judgmental like Amos. Hosea just makes people feel ... *uncomfortable*. Preachers look at the lectionary to see what's coming up for the next couple of months, and when we see Hosea, we say, “Oooh ... let's just stay in the New Testament for a while.” And folks in the church might say, “Yeah, but all the gospel readings are passages that you've preached on dozens of times over the last ten years! You've never preached from Hosea!” (Shudder) “That's okay. Repetition never hurt anyone. I'll find some new way of looking at, ‘Jesus Teaches the Lord's Prayer’ again and everything will be okay. Let's just keep it vanilla, right?” The problem with Hosea is that we feel uncomfortable about his circumstances. And, if we're honest, we feel even more uncomfortable about God calling Hosea into these circumstances in the first place. How are we supposed to feel about God when the first thing God says to Hosea is, “Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom?” I mean what are you supposed to do with that? So many things to unpack before you can even tackle what the passage is about.

I guess the best way to approach this book is to ask, “*Why* would God call Hosea to marry a ‘wife of whoredom?’” Again, this is disturbing!

Otis Moss, who is one of the leading scholars on eighth century prophets says, “It *should* be disturbing.” What Moss suggests that we do if we want to get the most out of Hosea is to read it alongside the Song of Solomon. Now that’s a book that the lectionary *never* gives us because Song of Solomon is Hebrew love poetry and apparently not worthy of consideration by the committee that puts the lectionary together. Or maybe it’s because it’s filled with some ... daring word pictures that are about as subtle as a Georgia O’Keef painting. I used to do a public speaking workshop for General Church youth leadership events, and one of the things I’d do is have kids try to read passages from the Song of Solomon without blushing or giggling. Most failed. So the reason Moss says that Song of Solomon needs to be read alongside Hosea is that the Song of Solomon compares the healthy, growing, passionate relationship between young lovers preparing for marriage to a healthy, growing, passionate relationship between God and God’s people. Hosea, on the other hand, compares the relationship between God and God’s people to a relationship that’s dysfunctional and falling apart. The difference between reading Song of Solomon and Hosea is like the difference between watching a sweet-spirited romantic drama on the Hallmark Channel and the Jerry Springer show.

And here’s the thing - the passage in front of us this morning is just the *beginning* of the story. When you work your way through the book, you learn that Hosea’s wife Gomer (whose name literally means “dead end”) continues to be unfaithful. She’s constantly running off with people, and Hosea keeps taking her back. In fact, one time Hosea ended up having to *buy* her back. It’s so easy to get bogged down in the cringe-worthy drama of this book that we miss out on the big-picture takeaway which is Israel’s unfaithfulness. It’s clear that the reason Hosea was told to marry an unfaithful woman was because Israel, at the time, was not being faithful to God. So what, then, was going on in Israel that would cause God to take this kind of extreme action? Well, first of all, Israel was still struggling with worshipping Baal and other Canaanite fertility gods. This was a big problem. Why? What’s the very first of the Ten Commandments? (“You shall have no other gods before me.”) Israel

couldn't even get past the first commandment! How in the world were they supposed to honor the *other* nine when they couldn't even get past the first? But we're still skirting the issue here. Just because Israel was being unfaithful, how does that justify God calling on a mortal prophet to marry a "woman of whoredom" and to give the kids he has by her names that literally mean, "No Mercy" and "Not My People." And his first kid was named after a ruler who allowed his descendants to worship Baal! There are so many problems here that make me cringe along with many others who read this passage. One could say, "Well, God sent Jesus into the world to experience the worst of humanity's sin. Maybe God wanted Hosea to feel the sadness and disappointment of being in a relationship with someone who God knew would not be faithful to him. I don't know.

Hey, Otis Moss said this book was *supposed* to be disturbing, especially for those of us here in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. I guess it's *supposed* to prompt God's people to ask, "How have I been unfaithful in my covenant with God in the way that Gomer was unfaithful to Hosea?" Or to bring it a little closer to home, maybe we should be asking ourselves, "What are some of the 'false gods' in my life that keep me separated from God?" Uh-oh. This is where the preacher starts stepping on toes. And he's been on a roll lately too. I suppose I have. But, again, we're working our way through the prophets. Stepping on toes was part of their job. "You shall have no other gods before me." "You shall not make for yourself an idol." Those are the first two commandments. And in the same way that the people of 8<sup>th</sup> Century BCE Israel had a tough time getting past these, so do we. Notice how I've been making comparisons between the nation of Israel in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century BCE and our nation in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Common Era? That's why these prophetic books are so valuable for the church in all times and places.

I think one of the idols that we struggle with in our time and place is the relentless pursuit of material wealth. I've already touched on that on both weeks that we were in the book of Amos. Related to that is the pursuit of status which I mentioned a few weeks ago when I told you

that the number one things that kids said they wanted to be when they grew up was, “famous.” Here’s another one. What about our pursuit of technology? And yes, I recognize the hypocrisy of someone wearing an Apple Watch, standing under 60 inch video monitors, and speaking into a wireless microphone preaching about the pursuit of technology. But I’m talking about a much bigger picture. As Michael Crichton wrote in his 1990 novel, *Jurassic Park*, “Your scientists were so preoccupied with whether or not they *could*, they didn’t stop to think if they *should*.” *Jurassic Park* was a science fiction novel about bringing dinosaurs back to life through cloning and DNA splicing. And that was a big thing in 1990 because that was during a time when scientists were trying to clone a sheep. Fifty years before that, people were saying, “just because we can doesn’t mean we should” about developing atomic weapons. In the 1970s, people were asking the same thing about mechanical organs when scientists were developing the Jarvik 7 artificial heart. Today people are asking the same thing about trying to build machines that can potentially attain artificial intelligence. We’re wrestling with whether to use robots to fight our wars. We’re wondering about whether we should pursue synthetic life. We agonize over whether we should be able to edit our children’s genomes or DNA. And don’t get me wrong. I’m not one of these people who thinks science is a bad thing. I’m all about science. It’s just that I’m shocked, sometimes, about how we barge ahead without considering the moral and ethical implications of our technology.

Here’s another idol for us to consider: When did we start placing the value of ideology over the value of relationships? In other words, “When did being right become more important than being kind?” And of course, the answer is, “As long as recorded history.” But again, I’m talking about *our* time and place for the moment. I don’t know about you, but does it seem like people are becoming a lot meaner? Now I get it ... we’ve been mean throughout our country’s history. It’s funny to read the arguments and debates of our founders and the horrible things they called each other. But you know ... for a while there, in our lifetimes, it looked like we were making some progress. But then we started slipping again. Lately, it seems, we want to make sure we draw

our circles small and with very clear lines concerning who is “in” and who is “out.” What ever happened to talking about issues and finding common ground even when we disagree? I think this fits into the category of worshipping the idol of dogmatism. Oh come on, Jesse. Do you really think dogmatic thinking is an idol? Yes. Because what’s the definition of dogmatism? “The tendency to lay down principles as incontrovertibly true, without consideration of the evidence or opinions of others.” Oh. Well, when you put it *that way* ... yeah. We might even call this the idol of extremism.

On Thursday when LaMoyne, Margaret and I were eating breakfast and talking about what idols we’re guilty of worshipping, we came up with all sorts of examples. But then we realized that a lot of our examples fit into a much bigger category. “You shall have no other gods before me” and “you shall not make for yourselves idols” are tricky commandments to keep, because they both have to do with where our attention is focused. Or maybe I should say they have to do with where our attention is *not* focused, and that’s on God. If our attention was focused on God ... if God was our moral compass ... none of these “idols” we struggle with would even be an issue. We’d be able to set aside our egos and listen to others. We’d be able to take time to breathe and be silent and listen for God’s voice. We’d be able to set aside time to establish and build relations with others and to celebrate the divine spark in *all* who are created in the image of God. These things are acts of faithfulness. Like the young lovers in Song of Solomon, the relationship is healthy and grows day by day while they get to know each other. It’s very much the opposite of the selfish, desperate, toxic and painfully co-dependent relationship depicted in Hosea. One leads to peace and stability, the other leads to destruction. And that, I believe, is what Hosea was trying to demonstrate to the northern kingdom of Israel in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century BCE. And ultimately I believe it’s what God is trying to show us through these sacred texts today. The heart of faithfulness starts with our ability to enter into a loving, trusting, growing, healthy relationship with God. Unfaithfulness, on the other hand, inevitably leads to heartbreak and destruction. God’s word, for God’s people.