

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
Hosea 1:2-10
July 28th, 2019
The Rev. John Forman

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 God we come to know in Hebrew scripture is often the subject of our minimizing, characterizing and psychoanalyzing, and yet always remains beyond our categorizing. God is both in-dwelling and transcendent; personal and unknowable; all-powerful and suffering.

The God we encounter even in this rather vivid reading from Hosea defies any dogmatic efforts to compress Hebrew scripture into an anthology of an angry God and Christian scripture into the stories of a loving God.

It's natural and quite human, especially when we feel like we are being caught up in chaos, to want to take away from scripture an image of God as either consistently predictable or constantly changing. Mercifully, there is a way to have both.

The God of our grandmothers and grandfathers in the faith is relational. And in true relationships both parties can change even as they remain consistent. The God within us, among us and around us, that is to say, the God in relationship with us, can be surprised and delighted, or pained and angry, and sometimes a little too present. Still in relationship, God remains perfectly beyond us, mysterious and always, absolutely free.

It's also natural to wonder what has gone so horribly wrong with Israel, a community of God's people, that the prophet Hosea is compelled to deliver such a jarring message. To find an answer, we have to go beyond this reading to learn how Israel had committed "great whoredom by forsaking the Lord."

There's a clue in an interaction between God and another prophet, Jeremiah, where God refers to Israel's activities as adulterous whoredom. In that dialogue, there are two moments that shed light on Hosea's prophecy.

First, God tells Jeremiah that God cast off rebellious Israel and handed her a bill of divorce because she had committed adultery. And second, and this is essential, God asks Jeremiah to take a plea to Israel and Judah: "...yet return again to me."

Did you know that God was a divorcee? Full of surprises, this God!

Now, in the ancient world, the notion of marriage was quite different than ours. There was no specific Hebrew word for "marriage," and very little scriptural help for explaining what marriage was. Most arrangements were based in love, while others were set around financial considerations or on convenience. A man could have several wives as well as concubines and was allowed to visit prostitutes.

Legal regulations around divorce are equally sparse, though there is one reference in Exodus that is often forgotten. The text lays out the rights of a slave married to her master who has decided to marry a second wife. The point was to make sure the first wife was treated fairly and so the man was forbidden to withhold food, clothing or conjugal love from her.

Over time, the rabbis decided that if a slave wife had rights involving neglect then so did any second wife or an only wife. And by extension, a husband must also have these rights.

In this way, Hebrew scripture set the foundation for the vows that each person had to keep: They must supply material support and physical affection to each other, and be faithful to each other. Only the neglected person could initiate a divorce. Or they could choose to forgive and try to salvage the relationship.

Torah teaches that God married Israel at Mt. Sinai and then brought the bride back across the threshold of the Jordan into Palestine. And there, God gave Israel material support by way of milk and honey for food, and wool for clothing. God loved Israel and was faithful.

Once in Palestine, however, the people split: one kingdom in the north, called Israel, and one in the south, called Judah. In the northern kingdom of Israel, where Hosea was a prophet, the people began worshipping Baal, the nature-god of the Phoenicians, and Asherah, an ancient Canaanite goddess.

In short, Israel was behaving like a wayward spouse, withholding love and support from God, and breaking vows of fidelity by giving themselves to another.

In response, God urges Hosea to take actions that show the effects of the people's misplaced affections and God's desire to reunite. Whether it was a prophetic vision or an actual event, God tells Hosea to marry a promiscuous woman named Gomer, who may have been a Baal-worshiper. Their children also play parts in the drama. They give their son a symbolic name, Jezreel, after the valley where Jehu killed Jezebel and all the worshippers of Baal, but continued to lead Israel astray.

They gave the second child, an illegitimate daughter, the ominous name "Lo-ruhamah," meaning "Not Loved," "Not Pitied." She would be a reminder that God no longer loved the people of Israel, even as God's love for Judah remained.

They gave the third child, an illegitimate son, the unfortunate name "Lo-ammi" or "Not my people." With that, God sends the heart-rending message that God will stop being the God of Israel. The people of the northern kingdom will have no future. Without their strength, their "bow," they will lose their kingdom. Without God's mercy and forgiveness, they will lose the protection of God, their spouse. Next, the relationship will dissolve entirely.

And then finally, *and this is vital*, after this devastating display, comes the same shimmer of light God gave Jeremiah, the astonishing note of promise: "...*and yet*." "Yet the number of the people of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea...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 last words are God's. Always will be. This time, they are words of sheer grace that reverse the tragedy. God, the reluctant and forgiving divorcee, chooses to awaken Israel's best self as a community living out the love of God, without a shred of evidence that Israel has repented.

This gesture shows the Holy One graciously interacting with a particular people to reaffirm the marriage promise made to Abraham and Sarah: "I am YHWH...I will take you as my people, and I will be your God."

Hebrew scripture persistently illustrates God's on-going choice to be in covenant with Israel, with Judah and, by extension, with us. We recognized those astonishing choices in the Psalm we prayed together: "You have forgiven the iniquity of your people and blotted out all their sins. You have withdrawn all your fury and turned from wrathful indignation."

The God we learn about through scripture, both Hebrew and Christian, demands much, and yet remains faithful even when those demands are not met. Through Holy Scripture, we come face-to-face with the One category-busting God who differentiates and integrates what often appear to be

contrasting perspectives between justice and mercy; loyalty and truth; individual sensibilities and communal responsibilities; distinct time-bound instruction and the workings of universal perpetuity.

Through Hosea and Jeremiah, Esther and Ruth, Isaiah and Ezekiel – through these and the rest of our ancient forebears in the faith, we learn to bring injustices before God, to demand that God respond with compassion and righteousness. The prophets inspire us to question where God is when children are imprisoned, hurt or killed. To bring our anger to God when we see people treating others with contempt. To express our frustrations, when life feels like it's spinning out of control.

Hosea gives us a glimpse into the inner life of God as if we are listening in on God's own struggle to maintain a beloved relationship. The prophet leaves us an impression of God deeply, emotionally invested in humanity. The God of our grandmothers and grandfathers in the faith is relational. And their lives and their teaching give witness to the effects of the people's misplaced affections and God's never-wavering desire to reunite.

Without providing definitive descriptions of God, the prophets provide guidelines on how to approach God – yes, with gratitude and humility, but also with honesty, with all our emotions and with demands. Our motivation, like God's, like Hosea's, is love.

God is as free to act and as consistently eternal as the self-identification to Moses declares: “ehyeh asher ehyeh,” which means both “I am that I am” and “I will be that I will be.” To the child of God who has strayed, scripture says: “And yet...” To the skeptic who doesn't believe in God, scripture responds, “Tell me about the God you do not believe in and I will show you a much larger, more amazing God.”

The ancients were entirely human – sometimes annoying, sometimes a little batty – and they often spoke at an octave higher than we can hear. And yet, if *they* knew how to give such good gifts to us, their children, how much more will God give of Godself to those who insist?

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