



“It’s a Scandal!”
Scripture – Hosea 1:2-9
Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, August 7, 2016

Before all the women stand up and march out, let me take a shot at making sense of Hosea’s message!

Let me be clear. Emerging from ancient, patriarchal societies, the Bible tells stories from a man’s point of view. So, it should not surprise us that from a book written by men in cultures that typically suppressed women, a woman has been cast in the role of wickedness. It also should not surprise us that for centuries, a male-run institution would occasionally turn to such stories to prevent women from assuming leadership roles.

Thanks be to God that in the majority of cultures, we no longer live in such an age. We are not all the way there yet, but we are much closer than ever to honoring the Apostle Paul’s words, “There is neither male, nor female, for all are one in Christ.”

However, we ought not gloss over the fact that it is precisely repulsive caricatures such as this one in Hosea, that give religion an odious name. It prompts some to slam the Bible shut and walk away in disgust. It prompts others to slam the entire Old Testament shut and focus only on the gospels where Jesus – despite his culture – has a demonstrably higher view of women.

In our day, we are well aware that unfaithfulness is not limited to one gender. In fact, studies indicate that more men are unfaithful than women. So, as we try to extract a message from this passage for our place and time, remember that Hosea was reaching for a metaphor with shock value and it pertained to men and women alike.

Secondly, if we focus too much attention on Hosea’s wife, we will downplay the specifics of his message, which is conveyed not through his unfaithful spouse, but in the names of their children.

What’s in a name? Juliet first posed this question to Romeo in Shakespeare’s famous play. She sought to downplay the significance of their family names, but the names carried too much freight to be overcome.

What’s in a name? Many people have names that are neutral. Mom or Dad simply liked the name or it happened to be popular at the time the person was born. However, some names carry certain expectations.

Raise your hand if you were named after a relative. Many of us who were named after a parent or grandparent, aunt or uncle, felt that certain expectations came along with the name. As you were growing up, people would say, “He was always kind and thoughtful and I’m sure you will follow in his footsteps.” Or, “She was a born

leader and so are you.” If your name was laden with expectations, you know that you could either live into that script or rebel against it.

Some people end up with an odd or ironic name. In Richmond, there is a dentist named – I kid you not – Dr. Hurt. Why he displayed his name prominently outside his office was a mystery to me. He might as well display a sign that reads: Enter here for pain!

Many in Tulsa knew about the Fail brothers and their construction companies. Sure enough, Will Fail went broke and ended up working for his brother, Never Fail. Then, there is that Texas Governor. Whatever possessed James Hogg, to name his daughter, Ima?

Well, Governor Hogg did not corner the market on bestowing a cruel name on his child. The prophet Hosea beat him to the punch 2700 years earlier, by giving not one, but all three of his children appalling names. More on that in a couple of minutes.

First, we remember that throughout Scripture, metaphors and similes are used to describe God. One of the most popular images in all of Scripture teaches that God is like a shepherd who leads us beside still waters. It is a warm and comforting image.

In addition to speaking of God as a shepherd, Jesus added other images. He said God is like a father who rushes down the road to welcome his wayward son back home. God is like a woman who has lost a coin and will search every corner of her house until she finds it. God is like a farmer who separates the wheat from the chaff.

Jesus and the biblical writers used a slew of metaphors and similes to portray God because no single image can convey the breadth and magnificence of God’s character.

The prophet Hosea may hold the record for the number of different portrayals. As already mentioned, Hosea used the metaphor of God as husband and the people as unfaithful spouse. But he did not stop there. He also pictured God as a parent and the people as a rebellious child. If we read the relatively short Book of Hosea, we find that he also says that God is like a farmer and the people a trained heifer; God is like a bird catcher and the people are a mindless dove; God is like a physician and the people are a sin-sick patient. Hosea even adds images from the animal world, saying that God is like a lion, a leopard and a bear.

Today’s passage should be enough to award Hosea a special prize for conveying the most repulsive depiction of God’s relationship with God’s people: God as the faithful husband and the people as a whore. Yes, this is the word Hosea uses.

To recapture the setting, Hosea was a prophet to the Northern Kingdom of ancient Israel in 750 BCE. It was a time of violence and deceit, immorality and oppression of the poor. Adherence to God’s Law was in the dumps and foreign nations could sense a fracturing nation ripe for conquering. God sent Hosea to tell the people that their day of reckoning was near.

With words carefully selected for their shock value, Hosea announces that God has told him to find an unfaithful wife and marry her. Further, he is to have children and give each of them an appalling name.

Hosea uses language that is outrageously offensive because the people have wandered so far from God that they needed a severe jolt. God was infuriated by the people’s depravity and needed a messenger who could convey God’s disgust. So God did not select a Presbyterian or Episcopalian who would dress things up with respectful language. God wanted someone who would jar the people and force them to recognize that their actions were abominable.

After telling Hosea to marry a woman destined to be unfaithful, God then instructs the prophet to have a child. When the child is born, Hosea is to name his son Jezreel, after the town Jezreel, a place made infamous by violence and bloodshed. The most gruesome of the atrocities was when King Jehu – in an ISIS-like approach – decapitated the 70 sons of Ahab and displayed them like trophies in Jezreel. You can imagine the revulsion that was invoked just by naming the town. The modern day equivalent would be to name your child Auschwitz or My Lai.

God created human beings to live together in harmony, but too often we resort to violence. God was sickened by the bloodshed in Jezreel, as God is surely sickened by the bloodshed in Dallas, Baton Rouge, Orlando, Baltimore, Ferguson, Charleston, San Bernadino, and the list seems endless.

When virtually anyone can purchase an assault rifle, we should not be surprised when it is turned on police or people in a gay nightclub. When gun laws are so lax that people with mental illness can purchase weapons, we should not be surprised when little children at Sandy Hook Elementary School or college students at Virginia Tech are brutally murdered by young men with tortured minds. Name your child, “Jezreel,” God says, “Because I will put an end to the house of Israel.”

God’s judgment is harsh, but according to Hosea, God’s just getting warmed up. God commands Hosea to have a second child. It is a girl, and God wants her named “Lo-ruhamah.” The Hebrew root word was often used to describe one of God’s primary characteristics. Sometimes it is translated “compassion,” other times, “mercy.” However, with the negative prefix “Lo” attached to it, the meaning becomes the opposite. So the daughter’s name is “No compassion” or “Not pitied.” “Name the child ‘Not pitied’,” God says, “because I will no longer have pity on the house of Israel or forgive them.”

When it seems as if Hosea’s prophecy could get no worse, God delivers the final denunciation of the people. A third child is born and Hosea is to name him Lo-ammi. Since the time of the Exodus, 500 years earlier, the Hebrew people believed that God had formed a special relationship with them. They expressed their unique bond by claiming they were God’s chosen people.

But again, the negative prefix “Lo” is attached to the child’s name, making his name: “Not my people.” According to Hosea, God says, “You are not my people, and I am not your God.”

Hosea’s marriage and having three children with hideous names brought great anguish to the prophet. His experience of searing pain allowed him to glimpse the anguish God feels when people look out only for themselves and destroy their ties with others.

In today’s Scripture reading, we ended with verse 9, in which Hosea names his third child, “You are not my people and I am not your God.” It sounds as if God is calling it quits and nullifying the covenant. “I have had it with these stiff-necked people! It’s over! Good-bye and good riddance!”

However, verse nine is not the end of the prophecy. In the next verse, there is a distinct shift in tone. God says, “Yet the number of my people 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.’”

In the first three chapters of Hosea, the prophet weaves a perplexing allegory. As we heard in today’s passage, he delivers a declaration of doom, but then follows his prophecy of looming catastrophe with a message of hope. In chapter two, he repeats this pattern. First, warning of impending calamity, then assuring with words of promise. In chapter three, he does it a third time. He signals imminent disaster, then better days ahead. Whiplash anyone?

Hosea is not sending mixed messages nor hedging his bets. He is insistent that if we repeatedly reject the ways of God, it will sooner or later lead to anguish. He even leans frighteningly close to the threat that if we reject God enough times, God will turn away. However, in the end, he says, that despite continuously rejecting God, it is simply not in God's DNA to give up on us. Hosea forces us to recognize that there are consequences to our actions, and sometimes they can be devastating, but with God there are also moments of grace. We cause tremendous suffering by flaunting justice and neglecting goodness, but God never stops loving us, and God never stops trying to lead us to a better place.

Our world is at a crossroads. We could slide further into the ditch or we could choose to climb onto higher ground. God will not unilaterally sweep away prejudice, inequality, poverty and violence. God gives us the freedom to create the kind of world we long to inhabit. God also gives us the tools to forge dreams into reality – by the names of compassion and forgiveness, truth and respect, justice and generosity.

God refuses to give up on us even when we are at our worst. Imagine how much greater the human family could be if we were determined to become our best.

The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving (Communion) ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

Eternal God, we come to this table, rejoicing that you are our God! You made all that is – earth and sky, trees of the field and birds of the air. You formed humankind in your image, breathing into us the breath of life. When your creative work was done, you looked upon your children, and proclaimed us ‘very good’ in your sight.

But, we have denied our created identity and turned away from you. Throughout time, we have turned a blind eye toward injustice, abused the earth, and failed to love you with heart, soul, and might. Yet, you love us so much that you will not let us go. You have raised up prophets among us – men and women sent to speak hard truths and call us back to you. When we have least deserved your compassion, you have led us with cords of human kindness and with bands of love. Nowhere is your grace more clear than in the gift of your Son. Jesus lived among us, teaching us how to love you and one another. Faithful to your purpose, he went to the cross and gave himself up to death. Rising from the grave, he conquered death and made all things new! We rejoice in all you have done, O God!

As we gather around this table, we remember the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord. Send your Holy Spirit upon us, that this meal may draw us closer to you and to all who share this feast. May this bread and this cup sustain us, strengthen us, and encourage us for your work in this world. Send us out from this table, to love as Christ loved in all places that are hungry for your hope, your peace, and your joy.

We pray rejoicing in the name of Jesus Christ, the one who taught us to pray together: “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day, our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever.”