



“Following Other Gods”
Scripture – Hosea 1:2-9
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, October 20, 2019

Searching for someone to add some zest to your social gathering? You can scratch the Hebrew prophets from your list. They were grumpy malcontents who could drain the joy out of any celebration.

God summoned these individuals when God’s patience was exhausted and the people were about to drive full throttle over the edge of a cliff. The wake-up call the prophets were assigned to deliver was not like those gentle ring tones we can select on our smart phones. They were a strident shriek intended to unnerve. When the people had gone astray and a warning needed to be sounded, the prophets were just the medicine for getting the job done.

Most of the Hebrew prophets were summoned to express God’s anger at the people for neglecting the poor and the vulnerable. Hosea’s mission was different. God called Hosea to chastise the people for becoming disloyal.

To deliver his message, Hosea employed a unique approach. He used graphic language about his own marriage to convey his message. Whether it was literally true or a literary device, Hosea claimed that his marriage to an adulteress wife symbolized Israel’s relationship with God. As Hosea’s wife was cheating on him, so the Hebrew people were being unfaithful to God.

We zoom back in time to 750 BCE. The Hebrew tribes were divided into a Northern Kingdom and a Southern Kingdom. Hosea lived and prophesied in the North which was rife with deceit, violence, and immorality. According to Hosea, they broke most of the Ten Commandments, they were worshiping a fertility god they credited with their material success, and they were putting their trust in a dubious king who was making nice with foreign adversaries (Assyria and Egypt).

With words carefully selected for their shock value, Hosea announced that God had instructed him to marry a promiscuous woman. Further, he was to have children with her and to shackle each of them with an abhorrent name.

God was infuriated by the people’s rejection and needed a messenger who could convey the divine disgust. So God did not select a Presbyterian who would dress things up with respectful language. God wanted a crusty firebrand who would offend the people in the hope of jarring them to their senses.

When the first child was born, Hosea was to name his son Jezreel, after the town made infamous by violence and bloodshed. I will spare you the gory details of the decapitations, but suffice it to say that the mere mention of this town evoked horrific images. Today, it would be equivalent to naming your child Auschwitz.

God instructed Hosea to name his second child “Not loved” or “No mercy.” The message was obvious: God would no longer be merciful toward the people. Finally, Hosea was to thrust the dagger by naming his third child “Not my people.” God threatened to revoke the covenant. They would be cut off.

Marrying an adulterer and branding each of his children with dreadful names brought great anguish to the prophet, but extreme times called for extreme measures. The people had to be warned that replacing the ultimate claim on their lives with imposters would lead to disaster. And it did. Assyria obliterated the Northern Kingdom.

Prophetic spirituality insists that we give our ultimate allegiance to God and to God alone. No person, no institution, and no state can usurp our unconditional obedience. It is reserved only for God. Faithfulness to God is the Christian litmus test. Everything must be judged in light of God’s demands on our lives.

When God is replaced as the ultimate claim on our lives, things go awry. That is what led to the destruction of the Northern Kingdom in the time of the prophet Hosea. For a modern example, we can look to Germany in the 1930s.

On account of World War I and the Great Depression, Germany’s economy was in shambles, national pride was in the dumps, many were out of work, and a sense of gloominess hovered over the nation like a threatening cloud.

A leader who promised to “make Germany strong again”¹ ascended to national leadership. He stood for law and order, hard work, and devotion to him. Dismissed as a joke by many intellectuals, they wondered how such a buffoon could be elected.² But, he restored national pride and with lightning speed took control of the large labor unions, the universities, the press, and the military.

The other institution he needed to control was the church and in July of 1933, Adolf Hitler signed a government order establishing the National German Protestant Church. At the time, there were 65 million Germans and 45 million of them were Protestants. Most of them simply went along with Hitler’s order.

In 1934, “Hitler expressed his contempt for German Protestants to a group of Nazi insiders. He said, ‘You can do anything you want with them. They will submit...They are insignificant little people, submissive as dogs.’”³

However, some faithful Christians refused to go along with the Führer. Those who opposed Hitler and his policies called themselves the Confessing Church. Of the 18,000 German clergy, 3,000 strongly adhered to Hitler’s new Church, 3,000 strongly adhered to the Confessing Church, and the remaining 12,000 sat on their hands.

The Confessing Church held meetings around the country and one of these groups met in the town of Barmen in the spring of 1934. They produced what may be the only statement by an organized group in Germany that said “No” to Hitler and the policies of the Nazis.

No organized protest emerged from the universities, the business community, the trade unions or the military. In fact, most of these groups endorsed their new leader who was a master at finding scapegoats for Germany’s problems. American journalist and war correspondent, William Shirer, who wrote *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* said he was surprised “that the vast majority of German people simply were not terribly concerned with what happened to a few “socialists, pacifists, defiant priests and pastors, and the Jews.”⁴

Prophetic spirituality reveals evil and injustice. Some seem blissfully unaware that they participate in injustice because they fear being ostracized, so they go along with the crowd. In Germany during the rise of Nazism, many churches lost their prophetic voice. They fell silent and accommodated the authoritarian government. But not all Christians acquiesced. The young pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer resisted and personified a quote that many attribute

to him. “Silence in the face of evil is itself evil; God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.”⁵

According to Hitler, Christian values were to be shaped by the state. Germany’s values became Christian values, and other countries and ethnic groups were branded as evil. In addition, Christian service was no longer directed toward the poor, and the vulnerable. Rather, Christian service was to focus on glorifying the state.

German Christians were faced with a difficult decision. Would they give their ultimate allegiance to the German state, or would they give it to the God revealed in Jesus and the prophets?

What would you do if our government declared that only the American way is the Christian way, and that people from other nations cannot be trusted? What would you do if our government arrested Christians who gave sanctuary to refugees from other countries?

Jesus said, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” (Mark 8:34-35)

For three days in May of 1934, 139 German Protestants from different denominations, who called themselves the Confessing Church, gathered in the town of Barmen to confess their Christian faith and their opposition to the Nazis. What resulted was the Theological Declaration of Barmen, which included these words: “Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death.” It went on to declare that Christ “is God’s mighty claim upon our whole life,” and there are simply no “areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ.”

Unfortunately, the convictions of these courageous Christians did not have a widespread impact. There were isolated acts of bravery and some saved the lives of Jewish neighbors. But without the professors, the attorneys, the business leaders, the union leaders, and the military, and with Hitler’s popularity among the masses, their protests did not influence large numbers.

One brilliant young scholar who agreed with the sentiments of the Barmen Declaration was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was born to a well-educated and prosperous family. He and his seven siblings were taught to be critical thinkers and to serve the needs of others.

Bonhoeffer’s paternal grandmother was a model of “courage and grit. In April, 1933, at the age of 91, this elderly matriarch defied the Nazi boycott of Jewish shops, marching right past an armed group of Nazi Storm Troopers to shop at a Jewish-owned business in Berlin.”⁶

Less than a year after the Barmen Declaration was written, the Confessing Church commissioned Bonhoeffer to create and direct a new seminary. The seminary was committed to training candidates for the ministry who would be taught the absolute supremacy of God.

Bonhoeffer’s students were committed to their studies and to their mentor. They became pastors and continued to oppose the Nazis. Over the next few years, Hitler increased his control, and in time, most of these pastors who studied under Bonhoeffer were thrown into prison.

Bonhoeffer became involved with conspirators to overthrow Hitler, and though he had earlier professed to be a pacifist, he became involved in two attempts to assassinate Hitler. Unfortunately, both attempts failed.

In 1943, the Gestapo arrested him and he spent two years in prison. Then, on the morning of April 9th, 1945, Bonhoeffer was led from his cell and down a flight of steps to a secluded place under a grove of trees. He knelt one last time to pray. Then he was hanged. Only three weeks later, Hitler committed suicide and the Third Reich fell.

Prophetic spirituality inspires courage in the face of evil and injustice. May we deepen our faith, clinging tightly to what is right and true and good.

NOTES

1. William L. Shirer, *The Nightmare Years: 1930-1940*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1984), p. 148.
2. Michael Jinkins, "God is with Us – Bonhoeffer's Germany," *Thinking Out Loud*, Part 3, May 3, 2016.
3. Ibid.
4. Michael Jinkins, (quoting Shirer), "Then and Now Bonhoeffer's Germany Part Two," April 26, 2016.
5. While attributed to Bonhoeffer, it is not found in his writings.
6. Michael Jinkins, ""Then and Now Bonhoeffer's Germany Part Two," April 26, 2016.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were born, before you brought forth the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

You formed all that is – earth and sky, trees of the field and birds of the air. And still, You – the Creator of the Cosmos – choose to draw near to us. Long ago, you made a promise to our ancestor Abraham, saying: "I will be your God, and you will be my people." You fashioned us into a covenant community, giving us your law to guide our feet, sending your prophets to call us back when we wandered from your way. In the fullness of time, you dwelled among us to show the fullness of your love. Even now you claim us as beloved children – washing us in the waters of baptism, extending as ever the enduring promise: "I will be your God, and you will be my people."

We confess, Faithful God, that we have not always been a faithful people. Throughout time, we have turned a blind eye toward injustice, abused the earth, and failed to love you with heart, soul and might. We have pursued selfish ambitions and chased after the desires of our hearts; we have pledged our energies to serve the gods of success or status or power. Yet, you love us so much that you will not let us go. Time and again, you choose mercy over anger and grace over the punishment we merit. When we have not deserved your compassion, you have led us with cords of human kindness, with bands of love.

Eternal God – You have been our help in ages past; you are our hope for years to come. Send your Spirit upon us now, we pray, and fashion us again into a covenant community. Give us ears to hear your Word afresh, give us minds to discern your voice amidst the clamor of this world, and give us hearts to respond to your call with faith and faithfulness, that we might serve you ... and you alone. Help us, O God, to live as the people you created and called us to be.

This we pray in the name of your Son, our Lord, who gave us words to pray:

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. Amen.