

Hosea 2/3: 11:1-11

Prayer:

Preface:

So last week we were introduced to Hosea, the only Northern Prophet to the Northern Kingdom, Israel. We saw as Hosea was given his prophetic calling, which led him to marry Gomer, a prostitute, who had children by other men. He raised them, giving them names that were symbolic of the way God was going to give Israel over to their radically unfaithful life.

Hosea and Gomer's relationship is lifted up as a metaphor for the infidelity Israel has shown God by way of their persistent idolatry. But God loves Israel too much to divorce them, to end the special, marriage-like covenant relationship He has with Israel, so he promises to re-marry them, renew their covenant, and pursue them and their restoration simply because he loves them.

We saw that many of these promises were realized around Jesus, came true in the early Church, and in what Jesus calls the New Covenant, which Hosea imagines. The Gentiles were gathered into what Paul calls "all Israel," those out of Judah, out of Israel, out of the world that respond to God's loving, gracious, self-motivated pursuit of humanity. Of me, you.

Context: Structure

And this metaphor that we see in Hosea's life isn't just crazy and intense, it's also one of the main things Hosea uses to structure his book.

There are always all sorts of ways to outline something. I particularly like this one, though. Here it is in it's most basic form:

I. Hosea: 1:1-3:5: The Wife/Israel and God

I. Hosea 4:1-11:11: The Son/Israel and God

II. Hosea 11:12-14:9: The Wife and Son/Israel and God

Hosea is made up of three sections, which we can think of as centered around some metaphor that describes God's relationship with Israel. We talked last week about the one that is most, oh, arresting, attention-grabbing: Israel as God's wife, who abandoned her marriage vows and had a bunch of illegitimate children. Chapter Four leads us into a section which has as it's great metaphor the idea of Israel as a son, which God has raised like a good parent, who then rejects his father. This doesn't feel much like a metaphor, really, given that Israel--Jacob, before he was renamed by God--was, in fact, a son God promised to raise and bless the world through. But these two metaphors are sort of both in play, both drawn on, in the last third of the book. Chapters 3, 11, and 14 conclude each section.

Pretty straightforward, right?

And each of these sections ends on an emphasis of returning and repentance, which includes God's forgiveness to Israel as they return to him, and God's pursuit of Israel. We see in these sections a journey-like movement in play: the return of husband to wife, return of son to parent, a return home from exile, a journey from barrenness to fruitfulness. There's movement in these chapters that we, as contemporary readers, just get, because the idea of spiritual journeying is such a huge part of our way of talking about walking--journeying--with Jesus.

Today's Passage: vv1-4

Today's passage comes at the end of that second chunk of Hosea, and is a strong last word that lifts up Israel as God's own son, which He rescued, and they, in turn, rejected Him.

We read this:

***“When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son.
2 But the more they were called,
the more they went away from me.[a]
They sacrificed to the Baals
and they burned incense to images.
3 It was I who taught Ephraim to walk,
taking them by the arms;***

but they did not realize

it was I who healed them.

***4 I led them with cords of human kindness,
with ties of love.***

***To them I was like one who lifts
a little child to the cheek,
and I bent down to feed them.***

First of all, Matthew understands this passage as referencing Jesus, whose parents fled to Egypt to avoid being murdered, who then live there as refugees, and return to Israel when Jesus was older, after wicked King Herod had died, bringing Jesus back to his own home, society, and culture, which of course would be very strange to him. We'll come back around to this.

We see here, though, the Israel-as-child stuff that I mentioned: God has loved Israel as a good parent loves a child, here a son. God nurtured them, raised them, protected them, and provided for them. Of course they were meant to grow up and take on the family business--blessing the world, worshipping God, bringing honor to the family name. But even as Israel was, metaphorically, growing up--developing as a people, a society, a kingdom--they didn't fully realize God was parenting them along the way.

Chapter Four, the start of this second section of Hosea, started this way:

***“There is no faithfulness, no love,
 no acknowledgment of God in the land.
 2 There is only cursing,[a] lying and murder,
 stealing and adultery;
 they break all bounds,
 and bloodshed follows bloodshed.
 3 Because of this the land dries up,
 and all who live in it waste away;
 the beasts of the field, the birds in the sky
 and the fish in the sea are swept away.***

All the covenant blessings God promised would come on Israel if only they kept faith with Him have been lost. Their faithlessness has tainted the land; their idolatry is an environmental disaster. Immorality has a way of infecting things, and it did here.

And God goes on to outline just how, oh, we'd say unfaithful, but we ought to say "law-less," "Torah-rejecting," Israel has been. They've completely turned away from the opportunities and blessings their marriage with--or now, adoption by--God has offered them.

It's framed this way:

1. 4:1-5:7: A Perverse Priesthood, Promiscuous Cult, Promiscuous People

2. 5:8-8:14: Self-Destruction Politics

3. 9:1-11:11: Unfaithful People

First, Hosea will outline the way the priests and all the religious celebrations that they're overseeing--most of which have been wholly given over to worshipping pagan gods--are faithless and foolish. But Israel's people love these things; they're all in. Hosea takes special offense at the, oh, let's say orgiastic nature of these things, the way so many of these so-called worship services are oriented around sex.

Hosea describes the political leaders, who got panicky--they've basically all been assassinated, after all--and decide instead of helping their society live up to Torah, they'll just strike a bargain with Assyria for political help.

And God doesn't lay blame at the feet of the political or religious leaders for everything; He simply blames them for their very real role in promoting and positioning Israel for all their, oh, faithlessness. Licentiousness. But, in a way that we ought to resonate with, God lays out the personal responsibility each Israelite has. He talks about their pile of behaviors that are each their own, and the way these, collectively, have set the nation up for what's to come.

We're told, in a famous like, "They sow the wind and reap the whirlwind." They've invested in what is truly nothing--false gods, false security of a patron empire, false idols that

they've come to treat as if the empty statue really had power, false kings, set in place without God's approval--and because of all that they've "sown," that they've invested into these things that aren't anything at all, what they'll receive is their investment back, the harvest they've nurtured, which is...nothing. Nothing.

They've nothing, and it's what will return to them, but when it does return, they'll be worse off for it. And this makes sense; our wasted energies don't leave us where we are, they leave us worse off. This is particularly and always true of faithless choices.

And Chapter 10 talks about the exile that's coming on Israel, a "whirlwind," which is the nothing--no national identity, no covenant blessings, no presence of God--that they've been sowing.

And then God relates his history of caring for Israel, as a parent cares for a child, a good father for a disinterested, disobedient son.

Today's Passage: vv5-7

God had bemoaned, as he outlined in Chapter 7 how deeply abandoned he was by Israel,

***Woe to them,
because they have strayed from me!***

***Destruction to them,
because they have rebelled against me!
I long to redeem them
but they speak about me falsely.
14 They do not cry out to me from their hearts
but wail on their beds.
They slash themselves,[a] appealing to their gods
for grain and new wine,
but they turn away from me.
15 I trained them and strengthened their arms,
but they plot evil against me.
16 They do not turn to the Most High;
they are like a faulty bow.
Their leaders will fall by the sword
because of their insolent words.
For this they will be ridiculed
in the land of Egypt.***

God returns to this in today's passage, in vv5-7:

***5 "Will they not return to Egypt
and will not Assyria rule over them
because they refuse to repent?
6 A sword will flash in their cities;
it will devour their false prophets
and put an end to their plans.
7 My people are determined to turn from me.
Even though they call me God Most High,***

I will by no means exalt them.

God isn't going to lift up Israel, make sure they are blessed and honored and have an amazing reputation in the world because they've done such a great job rejecting Him. And here, there's the same religious, political, and people-at-large condemnation that makes up most of chapters 4 through 11. He wants his son, this child he's raised.

Today's Passage: vv8-11

8 "How can I give you up, Ephraim?

How can I hand you over, Israel?...

My heart is changed within me;

all my compassion is aroused.

9 I will not carry out my fierce anger,

nor will I devastate Ephraim again.

For I am God, and not a man—

the Holy One among you.

I will not come against their cities.

10 They will follow the Lord;

he will roar like a lion.

When he roars,

his children will come trembling from the west.

11 They will come from Egypt,

trembling like sparrows,

from Assyria, fluttering like doves.

I will settle them in their homes,"

declares the Lord.

What we see is that God takes no joy in seeing His People, who he loves--as a good parent loves a child they've nurtured, raised, protected, and given themselves over to, as a good spouse loves the one they've married, and vowed to honor, to protect, to cherish, to support--God takes no joy in seeing His People, who he loves like we humans love when we are most fully human--parent to child, spouse to spouse--he takes no joy in seeing them punished. He takes no pleasure in seeing them reap what they've sown. He's torn up about allowing them to have what they've wanted, because what they've wanted will kill them.

And it did, in some ways. Some faithful Israelites certainly fled to Judah when Assyria came; some ran to Egypt, and returned, but the reason that Matthew lifts up this passage as a proof that Jesus was he he said he wasn't isn't just because Jesus happened to go to Egypt and come back, it's because he realizes that in the life of the Messiah, Israel's potential was truly realized. Jesus was the Son of God; Israel as they ought to have been.

And those that fled to Egypt and returned and incorporated themselves into Judah wouldn't have expected that their great grandchildren, too, would be eventually exiled as they had been when Judah took the same path Israel did.

But what we see is that over and over and over, even though

God knows that His People will continually disappoint Him, he knows also that He can work out a way for them to have what He has, what Hosea, even temporarily has, which is His Spirit alive in them, a remarriage, a New Covenant, that will make it so that His People--his son whom he loves--no longer abandons Him.

Matthew, Again:

Matthew isn't just proof-texting Hosea, saying, "Look! Jesus went to Egypt for awhile!" He's saying, "Look, Jesus is the one in whom Hosea's promises came true. Jesus is Israel embodied, God's Son who was nurtured, but stayed faithful, rather than turning away from God." And Jesus, through his own faithfulness, opened up that New Covenant Hosea hints at, that remarriage, not only to whatever remnant of Israel was around during his ministry who trusted him, but to us, too: those outside Israel, who have been adopted into the family of God.

Matthew recognizes that those passages in Hosea 1 and 3 that speak of the way Israel will be gathered together again, with Judah, under a new David, a new "head" or "authority," or "leader," depending on how you translate it, that those passages are talking about Jesus.

So God didn't give up on Israel, but he didn't save them from what they'd sown. They had just dug too deep, you know? And what they brought down on their heads didn't bury them

entirely, but very nearly did.

Some Things: Potential

We have to bear in mind that we ourselves have more potential for faithfulness than anyone before Jesus had, and God's power to shape us and use us in the world for its redemption and our salvation is something we only now and then get glimmers of, and we barely appreciate, with a few blessed saints and poets. And the very routine things that we do, simply because we recognize that God loves us, and is for us and not against us, and will redeem the world and us with it, those few things that we do, almost...unnoticed, matter-of-factly, our right-hand not knowing what our left does: things like helping people who need help, speaking up for people who aren't being heard, small acts of kindness and compassion and generosity. These things are redemptive acts when we do them, and they were absent, done without God if done at all, for whole swaths of human history.

Reaping What We Sow:

And yet, we who have the power to regulate our lusts and our hungers, our selfishness and our sin, we who are the children of God, temples of the Holy Spirit, siblings of Christ--Hosea's hinted at hope--we have to be careful that we ourselves don't sow the wind, and reap the whirlwind.

Or rather, we have to be attentive to whether or not we ourselves are pouring our energies and efforts into nothing,

or into something.

Israel invested in what was truly nothing--false gods, false security, false idols, false political and religious leaders. They've put all their energy and effort into these things that seemed to be something, but were in fact nothing.

And when they are in need, because what they've trusted turns out to be against them--Assyria, pagan gods, economic partners, murderous political leaders, and lying religious ones--they'll realize that they have nothing to save them. They spent all they had, made themselves slaves to appetites and fears, and they end up afraid and devoured.

And no matter how torn up God is about it, he knows that they have to receive what they've put in. They'll have for their strength and defense the things that they've given themselves over to, and what they've given themselves over to will turn out to be brittle, made of plastic, not real or effective or lasting at all. And Assyria will destroy them.

And despite the agony God has over how bad it will be, he'll allow it because it's what they've wanted all along, and because oh, because love makes room for the worst decisions, and God has done all that love can do to save Israel. Until Christ comes, who is fully God, and can ransom himself so that His People can be free, God is bound by His love for Israel to let them have what they want. Let them

reap the whirlwind they've sown.

We realize that the new covenant didn't just start to mend the broken relationship God had with his spouse, his child, Israel; it began to mend God's broken heart over how fully they'd abandoned him. God's agony in Hosea is Jesus's agony on the cross, and Jesus' triumph is for them and us both, as Paul goes at length to say.

Concluding Question:

My question is simply this: What are we giving ourselves over to? What are we investing in? Trusting in? Devouring? Pick your metaphor, I don't care. What are we sowing? Are we sowing wind; planting nothing, leaving nothing, doing nothing, because our time is just too given over to false things, "fake plastic things" that won't last?

Look at your checkbooks. Look at your clocks and calendars. These are the things, you know, that reveal to us where our time, and our treasure, and our talent goes. The world is full of empty things, and empty places that we can offer ourselves and our hearts and souls too. If it looks like worship from a distance, it's probably worship up close, too.

We are God's dearly loved children, in whom he takes great pleasure. God doesn't want to agonize over us as he did over Israel 3,000 years ago. If we have prophets among us, let's listen to them; if we have the Spirit and Scripture's guidance

revealing to us our empty efforts, let's embrace those guides and reject the nothing that we've been sowing.

I want us to reap resurrection, reap peace that surpasses all understanding, reap every fruit of the Spirit, and relationships that no sin can tear apart. I don't want us to receive anything like exile or destruction.

But we ourselves know where our clocks and our calendars and our cash take us, we know what we sow with our attention and our energy. God takes no joy in giving anyone over to worthless things; it's why He works so hard to remind us that we ourselves are so worthwhile to Him.

But are we sowing wind? Are our energies and attentions guiding us away from God, and toward things that will evaporate when we really need them? Things that will leave us worse off than we were before our empty choices?

Let's consider these things, because Hosea offers them to us as a well-intentioned warning, and Matthew reminds us of them in the belief that we can be more faithful than God's People once were.