

Message: Hosea 3/3 14:1-8

Preface:

It's our last time in Hosea, and the last time we'll really talk about the Northern Kingdom, Israel. From next week on we'll talk about Judah, and how they'll now carry the promises God made to Abraham until God can work out a way to make good on those promises.

Today's passage doesn't invite difficult conversations or hard reflection, but the stuff leading up to it in Hosea really does.

And what I'm bringing to us today is simply a call for us to think about what we do when we're confronted with Scripture that makes us uncomfortable. What do we do when we're confronted with Scripture that makes us uncomfortable?

So, I'm not going to, you know, inspire us here. Today's message isn't built on a hope that we all pray 10% more tomorrow than today, I'm not offering us "this one weird trick" that'll help us grow closer to Jesus. I just want us to think about this question: What do we do when we're confronted with Bible we don't like.

Let's pray before we talk about it!

Prayer:

Yeah

Introduction: Another Listen

So today's passage ends our time in Hosea. And it ends so, so well, doesn't it?

Let me just read it again, and if you didn't hear it before, here it now. This is Hosea's last word to Israel, God's last words through their last prophet, and they are a warning, and an offer of grace, and wisdom all rolled into one:

Return, Israel, to the Lord your God.

Your sins have been your downfall!

2 Take words with you

and return to the Lord.

Say to him:

“Forgive all our sins

and receive us graciously,

that we may offer the fruit of our lips.[b]

3 Assyria cannot save us;

we will not mount warhorses.

We will never again say ‘Our gods’

to what our own hands have made,

for in you the fatherless find compassion.”

This is what God asks of them. This is what God wants to hear from Israel. It's Hosea's, God's, last plea: Please, just return to the Lord and give voice to your needs: give up your sin.

**4 “I will heal their waywardness
and love them freely,
for my anger has turned away from them.
5 I will be like the dew to Israel;
he will blossom like a lily.
Like a cedar of Lebanon
he will send down his roots;
6 his young shoots will grow.
His splendor will be like an olive tree,
his fragrance like a cedar of Lebanon.
7 People will dwell again in his shade;
they will flourish like the grain,
they will blossom like the vine—
Israel’s fame will be like the wine of Lebanon.**

God promises a time when Israel will be all the things it was ever meant to be. Their fame will be like the most famous thing; they’ll refresh those around them, and God’s People will be cared for.

And, I’ll read this last bit from a different translation, because it’s better:

“Ephraim, what do idols have to do with me? It is I who answer and look after you. I am like a green cypress tree; your fruit comes from me.”

What you have, Israel, is from me; I have borne it, given it life, made it come about, like a tree bears fruit. And your role in the world is an echo of mine; I am the image that you'll be made in. And I am a God who answers, unlike the useless nothing idols you've been making yourselves, and worshipping, for so long.

The Book of Hosea ends, then, with a tiny word of warning:

9 Who is wise? Let them realize these things.

Who is discerning? Let them understand.

The ways of the Lord are right;

the righteous walk in them,

but the rebellious stumble in them.

To say that the ways of the Lord are right, and those who live up to their covenant obligations are able to walk in those right ways, while those who don't trip and fall, is to say, at least in part, that all that God has asked of Israel is to do what will keep them from falling over.

This warning isn't just a typical proverb, though; it's an epilogue. A reminder to all those who came after Hosea that Israel stumbled, and fell, and didn't "renew their strength" and "soar on wings like eagles" as Isaiah promised. This is a word of warning to Judah to not forget what happened to Israel.

Judah, of course, neglected the warning.

Setting It Up:

So, let me set us up for what we're going to talk about now, because it's really, really important that we remember this is how God ends Hosea's message to the Northern Kingdom. God's last word to Israel is pleading for them to return to Him.

And God makes it easy. He gives them the words that they need to say. He presents a few major things that they need to do: stop worshipping idols they've made, stop going to war, stop depending on Assyria. Just stick close to God. If they do, God will give to them more than they need, He'll give them fruitfulness and fame.

It's one last plea. It's hands out: "C'mon. Do this. Please." But we know that Israel simply ignored the plea. They jump, let go, turn their backs.

And yet, since chapter 11--which we read last week--and today's passage, there are terrible things that God has said.

Right before today's passage, a passage of God promising, if Israel would only, only do a few simple things, the least of all the things they could do, he'd save them from themselves, right before that promise, God says this, talking about Ephraim--that largest territory whose people made up most

of Israel, the Northern Kingdom:

***“I will have no compassion,
 15 even though he thrives among his brothers.
 An east wind from the Lord will come,
 blowing in from the desert;
 his spring will fail
 and his well dry up.
 His storehouse will be plundered
 of all its treasures.
 16 The people of Samaria must bear their guilt,
 because they have rebelled against their God.
 They will fall by the sword;
 their little ones will be dashed to the ground,
 their pregnant women ripped open.”[b]***

And we could say, when we hear things like this, “Must the people of Samaria bear their guilt?” Really? If this is what it means to bear it, can’t you, God, just...give them a break.

It doesn’t make us feel better to shake our heads and realize: God has been giving them a break for a century. It doesn’t make us feel better to read, just a few verses before this that God’s People have become known for offering human sacrifices. It doesn’t make us feel better to read the verses immediately before this, where God promises that death won’t be the end of the story for these people who just constantly and joyfully reject any grace God offers them. God

says, there: “I will deliver this people from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death. Where, O death, are your plagues? Where, O grave, is your destruction?” Okay. It’s great...but...babies and pregnant women? Couldn’t you have done something.

Must they bear their guilt if bearing their guilt means something so, so terrible will happen to them, and their children, and the children not even born yet?

The rub is that this “must” is a warning, right? It’s one more warning. What we realize, if we step back, is that by this point in Hosea all the warnings, all the appeals, all the pleading, and reminders, and everything God has done aren’t worth responding to, as far as Israel is concerned. Famous for their human sacrificing, for their Ba’al worship, for their warfare and their dependance on Assyria, they’ve given up entirely their connection to God. Even Hosea, this last effort, the last place God’s Spirit is alive among His People, is ignored, his book ending with an epilogue that’s almost a shrug, “What do you expect?”

Isn’t that what Love does?

So why doesn’t God intervene, right? I mean, why doesn’t God intervene, to protect them from themselves. Isn’t that what love does? Certainly for children, anyway, and hasn’t God talked about Israel as His son? What does love do, if indeed God loves Israel as He’s said he does?

What we see, of course, and I've had time you haven't to reflect on this, but what we see is that God did intervene, over and over and over and over, and what we realize is that love doesn't protect people from themselves, doesn't exert control over others. Love woos, and persuades, and pleads, with the other party's best interests at heart, hoping they'll respond. Love never asserts power over those who have, by virtue of age and wisdom, gained their own agency, grown into their own rights over themselves.

Inviting a Question: What do we do?

The stuff that leads up to today's passage invites this question:

What do we do with the passages of the Old Testament that make us uncomfortable? What do we do with the passages of the Old Testament that make us uncomfortable?

See, when friends, neighbors, family, or tv or God Himself presents to us a passage that's incredibly difficult to hear, we have to be able to respond to that moment well, not only because, you know, we might want to bring God glory or something, but for our own health, our own making-sense of Scripture, our own faith and faithfulness.

I think we generally do a few things with passages of the Old Testament that make us uncomfortable, like today's terrible

description.

What do we do? Avoid

The first thing we do is avoid them. That is, we know that the passages are there, but we just try to read past them, try to pretend that they aren't there. Someone asks about them, and we just sort of say, "Let's talk about something else." We just avoid those passages, and the questions that they raise, entirely.

What do we do? Dismiss

The second thing we do is dismiss them. That is, we automatically, without any critical thinking at all, say to ourselves or someone else, "Oh, that's irrelevant. We don't even have to think about it's implications." I actually think dismissing some passage is a little healthier than avoiding it, but it's like saying too much sugar is healthier than too much fat.

What do we do? Engage

The last thing we do, and it's a dangerous thing, is that we engage them.

This is rare, and takes courage, because to engage anything that causes us discomfort automatically triggers all our self-protective reactions. It causes us fear, anxiety, worry, and for we people who deeply care about the Bible, it invites, maybe, questions that we know certain answers to could destroy our

entire worldview!

And it's dangerous, because to engage a passage that makes us really uncomfortable very likely means we'll have to deal with more than just the passage, but some theological fall-out, some more questions that might take work and time to answer, which have popped up because of the passage.

And between you and me, whose got time to deal with all that, you know? Geez. There's bills to pay and games to play, man.

Personal Risk (Or Not):

Let me just lay something out here. It's feels risky to say, because...I dunno. There's a pressure, as a pastor, to make God, and everything about God, oh, digestible, understandable, non-threatening. I don't give into the pressure much, but still....who wants to open themselves up, right?

I've come to a place where I don't think I'll ever be comfortable with some of what I read in the Old Testament. And it's not simply because God seems to act in strange and uncomfortable ways, ways that I sometimes find hard to see the character of Christ in, it's because the world itself is strange and alien and foreign to me. Israel itself is other.

Different languages, different assumptions about sex, about

gender, about work, about death, about spirituality, about economics, debt, human development. And the Old Testament itself spans generations, spans cultures, spans nations--or, I should say, geography, because of course, politics and political entities, like religion and economics, it's all different. It's scary different. And most of it I don't like. Our Western society has been deeply, deeply shaped by Greek and Roman cultural assumptions, and the Ancient Near East, and Judaism, before it, but...I'd rather lose my legs than live in the world Hosea lived in, where children and wives are property, where human sacrifice was normal, where violence was met with greater violence, and a relationship with God was still private property, not yet in the commons, not yet broadcast to whoever would turn to Jesus and realize just who he was and what he did. And of course, if I did lose my legs in Hosea's culture, they'd just assume I was cursed, deserved it, and they'd let me die.

I'll never be comfortable with some of what we see, not just in the Minor Prophets, but in the Old Testament as a whole. There are passages that make me uncomfortable in part because despite all the very legitimate ways I can minimize their discomfort, I can't take it away, because it is alien, and strange, and comes from a way of viewing reality that I find distasteful and less good than what this side of Jesus brings us. I'll never be comfortable reading about how Assyria is going to dash little children to the ground and rip open pregnant women. I don't care that they practically begged

for it, and rejected every opportunity God gave them to be free of it. It chafes against everything lovely in the world.

Making Peace:

And I'm left with just one option. It's an option that I want to suggest to us, too.

I think that the only thing that we can do is make peace with the fact that we will never be able to take away some of the discomfort that certain passages in the Old Testament make us feel. I can pile up rational, well-argued, well-attested, clever, theological, even humorous explanations for almost every passage that we'd find offensive in the Bible. It's, like, my profession, you know?

But none of that will satisfy the emotional, instinctually negative response we'll have to things that we see here and there in the Old Testament, and guess what?

I think, in part, that's exactly because of Jesus. Jesus has so deeply changed history, and more deeply changed each of us, that we've been set up to perceive the world and how the world works way, way differently that Hosea's peers did. I think our discomfort and distaste is because of our faithfulness, not because of some lack of it. We believe Jesus just so much that we can't believe that God had to work through this society that acted this way...but, of course, God did.

Does this make sense? I hope so, because I'm moving on.

Let me suggest a few responses that we can have when we come across biblical passages that make us uncomfortable.

Responses: Non-Reactivity

First of all, we can't allow ourselves to be reactive when these difficult passages come up. We have to be measured. Because by-and-large--there may be one or two saintly outliers among us--reactivity doesn't leave a lot of room for the Holy Spirit to help us respond constructively.

I mean, if someone pulls you aside and says, "Well. The Bible says right here [throw up noise]." And we ourselves want to throw up when we read what it says, too, but feel compelled to somehow defend all of God's work through history in that moment, what we can't do is...well, be reactive. We can't react with defensiveness. We can't react with anxiety. We can't react with retort or accusation or some rote response that we don't even believe, but was hammered into us.

But imagine: "You know what: That passage makes me uncomfortable, too. I mean, really. Can I study some things, reach out to people, pray through this and get some good responses that might satisfy the discomfort we both feel?"

And if it's not a person whose accosted us with this thing, but some other situation: We hear someone quoting something, we see something somewhere, we feel as if the Bible or God or Christianity is misrepresented in some way on TV, or in the news, or whatever...than the response is the same: Study, reach out, pray, and explore our discomfort rather than react to it.

Responses: Jesus

And it's just simply the case that if we are Christians we read the Old Testament through Jesus. We read the Old Testament given the end of things. The ends never justify the means, but the ends do explain them, now and then, and if Jesus is the "image of the invisible God," as Paul puts it, our best picture of Yahweh's character and principles, than our starting place for hard passages of Scripture isn't the passage itself, but Jesus' character.

We start first knowing Jesus and knowing about Jesus, and then we seek to understand how Jesus, who reveals God to us, could be okay at all with what we're reading.

This may not explain away what makes us uncomfortable, but it can help us. It can help us to see the effort after effort after effort that God makes to persuade Hosea to return to Him before it's too late, and let that shape our reading of the more difficult passages that we see in Hosea, because of course: If Jesus reveals God, what we know about God is that

God is more merciful, more patient, more gracious, and more loving than anything else. So whatever God allows or doesn't allow has to make sense of that, before anything else.

Reading the Old Testament through Jesus means that whatever God did through history in committing himself to Israel, and committing to work through them, even though they were so, so often shameless and faithless, means that what God did was done with a purpose in mind: It was working out the redemption of creation. It was working toward a time when, as God puts it in Hosea,

“I will deliver this people from the power of the grave;
I will redeem them from death.

Where, O death, are your plagues?

Where, O grave, is your destruction?”

And look, the end of death, which was realized first in Jesus and will be fully realized at his return, is no small thing to work out, right? If, out of respect and love for His People, God accommodated himself to the world as it was run, he never did it without reshaping the world into something more lined up with His character. And this makes sense, because relationships affect both people who engage with them, God worked with Israel as they were, but called them to something more, even as God allowed Himself to be moved, changed, for Israel and all His People's sake.

So a response to any passage that makes us uncomfortable is to consider how Jesus makes sense of this passage or not?

Responses: Recognizing Other Things

There are other things we ought to, must, recognize, take into account, when we are faced with passages that make us uncomfortable, yet because of our own integrity, we choose to engage them.

We have to recognize that context matters. What makes us uncomfortable is found in a situation, and isn't simply part of God's redemption history, but is part of it's own moment in history. Noting that context matters.

We recognize our own limits, and seek out the wisdom, the insight of the community of others who believe alongside us.

We recognize too the difference between what God threatens and what comes to pass, which is often not at all what God threatened. We also recognize that just because God threatens something does not mean he causes it; most often what we read, which we find uncomfortable--like today's passage about children--is described not in causal terms, but in consequential ones. Because Israel has done x, y, or z, this is going to happen. We can split hairs so finely that they don't exist anymore when it comes to this, but how we understand God, by way of Jesus, matters here. The truth is that if a warning sign says, "flooding ahead," and you drive

into the flood, the sign didn't cause it. The messenger is, often, simply a messenger.

Let's recognize that it's not our place to defend God or condemn God. We don't have to do either. Seeking an explanation that satisfies us is good and important, but it doesn't mean we have to lie to ourselves, ignore what we've experienced to be true, or take on responsibilities for God that God hasn't asked us to take.

Conclusion:

I had so much more to say about all this. I was going to dive into the problem of evil--how a good God, who is in control, can allow anything bad to happen to anyone--and I was going to solve it once and for all, too, but I thought, you know, then where's the mystery? Where's the romance?

Here's what I want us to take on, if I'm honest:

When we find ourselves facing a passage that makes us uncomfortable, whether in a Minor Prophet or anywhere, please let's not avoid it, or dismiss it, but engage it.

When we engage it, let's do so knowing that we may never be free from the discomfort it causes us. It comes from a world alien to ours, a society none of us would want to live in, built on theological concepts that, this side of Jesus, no longer make any sense because they weren't revealed to

them fully yet. Let's make peace with that, or try.

And when we engage it, let's do so thoughtfully and not reactively, owning our discomfort without being threatened by it. Let's seek wisdom, council, and prayer about what we find uncomfortable. Let's read the Bible through Jesus, as we Christians ought to, and practice the best Bible Study practices we can: reading closely, in context, recognizing the huge differences in the world and how gracious it is that God would engage the world at all, but especially on its own terms, which so often stood against him.

Honestly, this isn't what I expected to talk about this morning, but I think it's the right thing to talk about. Maybe not today or this week or this year, but we will be confronted by Scripture that makes us incredibly uncomfortable. If we engage it well, we develop a great confidence that can't be bought, you know? I want that for us.