

Sunday, January 16, 2022
Martin Luther King, Jr. Weekend
Brewster Baptist Church, MA
Rev. Joe Greemore
“Hosea’s Heart”

Hearing the Word Proclaimed

Hosea 6:1a, 2-4, 6, NRSV

A Call to Repentance

“Come, let us return to the Lord...
After two days he will revive us;
on the third day he will raise us up,
that we may live before him.
Let us know, let us press on to know the Lord;
his appearing is as sure as the dawn;
he will come to us like the showers,
like the spring rains that water the earth.”

Impenitence of Israel and Judah

What shall I do with you, O Ephraim?
What shall I do with you, O Judah?
Your love is like a morning cloud,
like the dew that goes away early.
For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,
the knowledge of God rather than burnt
offerings.

Hosea 6:1a, 2-4, 6 NIV

“Come, let us return to the LORD...
After two days he will revive us; on the third
day he will restore us, that we may live in his
presence.
Let us acknowledge the LORD; let us press on to
acknowledge him. As surely as the sun rises, he
will appear; he will come to us like the winter
rains, like the spring rains that water the earth.”

“What can I do with you, Ephraim?
What can I do with you, Judah?
Your love is like the morning mist,
like the early dew that disappears.
For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and
acknowledgment of God rather than burnt
offerings.”

Through the prophet Hosea, “We are confronted with the reality of God’s persistent and unlikely love for an unfaithful people, the Israelites, even as we marvel at the tragic and remarkable beauty of one prophet’s unconditional love for his wife that exemplifies the love story between God and people.”
(Layman’s Bible Commentary, p. 56)

Prophets and Prophecies

First, a word about the prophets: “their common purpose was the declaration of the word of God to the people of God” (Twelve Prophets, The Daily Bible Study Series, Peter C. Craigie). Sometimes their speeches were difficult to comprehend. Sometimes they took extreme measures. Sometimes they gave great advice, but to the people and their leaders, the timing was all wrong. Just as good advice followed at the wrong time is bad advice, wisdom followed at the wrong time is folly.

Consider the advice given by Job’s friends for him to repent; surely he must have sinned! Or when those near Jesus told him to get a PR plan, or to heal himself, or not to go to Jerusalem. From a certain point of view, all the people who spoke those words thought they were giving good advice; however, looking not from a human point of view, but through a divine lens, Jesus had a far greater and more lasting perspective. Proverbs 11:14 reminds us, “Where there is no guidance the people fall, but in abundance of counselors there is victory.” Success, victory, and safety; these are all goals of the good advice we hear daily, including the goal of God’s prophets to God’s people.

Some may have misconceptions about prophets and their prophecy. Prophecy pertains to speaking, or telling forth, the very words and truth of God. In this view, we are all called to be prophetic witnesses to the reality of God's sovereign power and steadfast love. Scripture says, "Whoever speaks should speak as though speaking the very words of God" (1 Peter 4:11). In the prophets, we hear the words of God spoken *to* and *through* people at a particular time and for a particular purpose, inspired by God in order to bring restoration to all things.

Prophets may speak about the truth of how things are, the truth of how things will or could be, or the truth about things of the past. To prophesy simply means 'to tell the truth.' Just as God is not bound to time, so those who share God's message share timeless truths, both contextual and far-reaching in their implications. **Through the crucible of discipline, displacement, depression, and discouragement, God's prophets dare to speak as harbingers of divine deliverance at hand.** They speak out against trusting in false confidences, those things that are not worthy of our trust to which we might turn rather than to God (see the Questions for Further Reflection below for more on this).

Remember Jonah, who had a monumentally difficult calling? Preaching toward repentance to the heart of the nation poised to do so much harm to his own people of Israel and Judah. We'll hear about him in coming weeks. Malachi told the truth about stewardship (Malachi 3:10). Zechariah spoke of the temple (Zechariah 6:13), and Joel's words reverberate through Pentecost in the New Testament (Joel 2:28-32; Acts 2). The work of being prophetic is never easy, simple, or without risk, but in the great scheme of God's kingdom, it is always necessary and always worthwhile.

"The Book of the Twelve Prophets, Little Books That Make a Big Difference"

Today's book, Hosea, is our first little book that makes a big difference, the beginning of the Book of Twelve prophets, sometimes called minor not because of importance, but due to their size. Whether a major or a minor prophet, whether a former prophet like Moses, Joshua, or Samuel, or a latter prophet, the work of being a prophet is one of the most crucial roles in times of national transition. Just as prophets abound, so do the voices of false prophets, which we are called to test and guard against. We are to guard against self-love in preference of loving God and others. Which brings us back to Hosea.

What God began in love would ultimately culminate in love. The power of the Lord's message spoken through Hosea's life was to be a lasting example and bear lasting heed. It was spoken by the prophet's actions as much as from his lips.

All that we know about the prophet is contained in the first chapter and verse of the book bearing his name (Hosea 1:1). Hosea prophesied during the reigns of four kings in the southern kingdom of Judah and at least one king who is named in the northern kingdom of Israel before its destruction at the hands of the Assyrians in 722 BCE.

Often we use the Old Testament as an object lesson for the New Testament. By way of example, 1 Corinthians 10 begins with a section entitled in some Bibles, "Warnings from Israel's History." 1 Corinthians 10:11 reads, "These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come."

During our journey through the 66 Books of the Bible, our study of the Books of History was entitled "Learning from History So We Don't Repeat It." History is a powerful teacher. Perhaps it is for this reason that the list of kings during Hosea's prophetic work included leaders of the southern kingdom, which fell to the Babylonians over a hundred years after the northern kingdom, where Hosea prophesied, fell to the Assyrians. For over a hundred years, the inhabitants of Judah would have heard

the story of Hosea and his family, would have been confronted by the dire consequences of national and widespread faithlessness in God.

A Time of Social Unrest and Rebellion

The context of Hosea's audience and message is a time of rebellion: the people rebel against the Lordship of God, and the tremors are felt politically, militarily, and regionally. Israel tries to make a pact with Syria and strong-arm Judah into cooperating, and Assyria overwhelms the northern kingdom.

The northern kingdom of Israel fell in the year 722 BCE. It was not until 135 years later in 587 BCE that the southern kingdom would fall to the Babylonians after repeated warnings from the prophets. The central message of their words was, Don't put your trust in other gods, other nations, earthly powers, or anything else besides God. Trust in God alone.

This remains a challenging word in an age where we have the ability to fly into space, where we hold the world in our hands through the smart phone, and when we live in one of the most powerful nations in the world.

- What about self-sufficiency and self-confidence?
- What about the well-earned privilege of abundant possessions?
- What about having connections, wielding power, and pushing the limits of what has been?

As a powerful reminder from Hosea, God who created the universe and all that is in it, who has been faithful through the ages, continues to be faithful today, even when we are tempted to be otherwise, relying on ourselves or other earthly powers for deliverance and satisfaction.

Hosea Finds Gomer

The story of how Hosea meets his wife, Gomer, in the setup for the book, can hardly be described as a case of love at first sight. Hosea is given a divine directive to go and marry a certain kind of woman. A quick glance at "Bible Hub" searching Hosea 1:2 provides all manner of colorful language to describe the kind of woman Hosea was meant to marry. One worth mentioning is the New American Standard Bible, which reads, "When the LORD first spoke through Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea, "Go, take for yourself a wife inclined to infidelity, and children of infidelity..." That really softens our first impression if we're comparing the NIV or NRSV translations. But we don't really grasp the full meaning here unless we read the verse in its fullness. The qualifying phrase at the end, foreshadowing the sentiment of Romans 3:23, is "for the land commits flagrant infidelity, abandoning the LORD."

It would be hard for us to imagine the earth being unfaithful. This reference to the land means all the inhabitants of the nation, all who lived there, everyone in the country. It was not unlike in the time of Noah or the Judges. People went their own way. They had little need of worshiping God faithfully and wholeheartedly.

Thus the names of Hosea's children. Most of us when choosing names for our child want something auspicious, something familiar or popular, something that speaks of strong character, faith, or family bonds, something like "Near," or "Child of Faith," "Pleasant," or "Beloved." If a child has to live with their name their whole life, we want them to have a good start that will prepare them well for how they will relate to others and the journey ahead. No one wants to name their child, "Hopeless," "Friend of Nobody," or "Angry and Threatening."

So it seems to be a surprise when God further tells Hosea to name his children for Jezreel, a place of destruction; Lo Ruhama, “Not My Loved One,” and Lo Ammi, “Not My People.” Some scholars hope this is all metaphoric language. But whether literal or figurative, the metaphor sticks, and its lasting impact is felt for countless generations to come. Hosea’s life and that of his family was a message of national warning for Israel, Judah, surrounding nations, and people of faith down through the centuries. Hosea’s patience persistence in the face of trial is of great inspiration still for us today.

*If you need a mnemonic device to help you remember what this book is about, think of **Hosea’s heart**. His heart was inclined toward his spouse, his family, his nation, and God. Hosea spoke a message to the heart of Israel geographically, politically, socially, and in terms of religion. And Hosea’s heart is a living reflection of God’s heart, longsuffering, forgiving, faithful in spite of faithlessness.*

Israel Finds Deliverance from Bondage

For Hosea’s audience, Egypt and the time of national deliverance had happened a very long time ago! They and their children now knew a time of prosperity and plenty unknown to their ancestors. They had inherited the land, the promises, and the law. The first commandment presents a clear reminder: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.” Egypt, the Ten Commandments, and a cursory overview of its history would be for Israel a constant reminder that it had once been in bondage, forced into labor not of its own choosing, until God sent Moses to deliver them from bondage.

Sadly, this would be repeated again in Israel’s history under the hands of domineering, foreign, occupying powers; but even in these difficult and trying circumstances, as we heard with Daniel, God’s people find ways to faithfully serve God. For the Israelites, Egypt was synonymous with slavery, thus our theme verse from Hosea 11:1, “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.” We think of Jesus in Egypt as a child and Israel’s being mistreated for centuries.

Modern Day Slavery

Which brings us to the topic of slavery. Slavery is a scourge which has broken families, imprisoned men, women, and children, dashed the dreams of the faithful, and subjugated one person beneath the authority of another since well before 1776 or 1863. We find examples in Ancient Rome, Greece, Egypt, and on through history toward the present moment when slavery, like Israel’s sojourn in Egypt, was just part of how society works.

Tomorrow is Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, when we can honor and celebrate the life and work of a man who sought to abolish modern day slavery one hundred years after the Emancipation Proclamation. He laid down his life defending the freedom of others. Did you know that slavery is still alive and well in the world today? In one of its oldest forms, **human trafficking** still plagues our world.

It came as news to me that January is National Slavery and Human Trafficking month and that this past Tuesday, January 11, was Human Trafficking Awareness Day. Human trafficking, as pervasive as insidious as the coronavirus, involves the use of force, fraud, or coercion, whether physical, economic, or otherwise, to obtain forced labor or sexual exploitation for commercial purposes. According to Global Estimates of Modern Slavery, 40 million people are victims of the modern slave trade today. This includes 15 Million persons in forced marriage, 4.8 million persons in forced exploitation, and 20.2 million persons coerced into forced labor. (<https://www.dressemer.org/blog/dressemerreading1>)



As followers of Christ, what can we do, what should we do in light of those numbers? How can we bring about relief for those who need it most?

ICAP Global and International Ministries Partners

As you may be aware, our church faithfully supports the work of International Ministries, and we have several individuals and families in places around the globe working to stop the flow of human trafficking. Lauran Bethel, our Global Consultant to alleviate Human Trafficking, brought together workers from around the world and began a conference called the “International Christian Alliance against Prostitution,” or ICAP Global. Two such Global Servants who also serve in this field and whom we support are Annie and Jeff Dieselberg. Annie is the CEO and Founder of NightLight Bangkok and Nightlight International, “an international organization compelled by love to reach out to, rescue, and restore all those who are negatively impacted by sex trafficking and commercial exploitation” (<https://www.nightlightinternational.com/bangkok/>).

Our Missions Team, recognizing the valuable and vital contributions of the Dieselberg’s, chose to support their work last year. The Dieselberg’s are based in Bangkok, Thailand, which at times has been a hub for this kind of exploitation, from where they work internationally. Annie works daily to combat and undo the effects of human trafficking, offering options and hope to people who often feel trapped and guilty with no way of escape. I am very grateful that she took time to share a video with us for today, a video she recorded just this month. You will see tropical foliage, hear birds in the background, and can almost feel the sun shining through the picture. The video is entitled “God’s Loving Kindness,” and in it, Annie reflects on Hosea’s contents and how we can respond to others with compassion and empathy.

<https://vimeo.com/663930918/757d862654> (Full Video: 3:38)

You can hear Annie’s heart for her Gomer “Sozo” and feel God’s love at work in her life, reminding us that we are all caught up in God’s redemptive work of love, all pursued by God’s unconditional love that never ends.

Another organization, which bears the same name as today’s message, is Hosea’s Heart, which works to, “Renew, Rebuild, Restore” lives affected by human trafficking.

From the website:

“Hosea is a prophet in the Old Testament whom God commanded to pursue and marry a prostitute as a reflection of God’s passionate love for His beloved children and pursuit of Israel. This biblical story is brought to life in Francine Rivers’ brilliant novel called Redeeming Love, articulating the heart and mission of a man who pursued a prostitute with great passion, zeal, and resolve. The message of Redeeming Love parallels the foundation of Hosea’s Heart in such a perfectly beautiful way. Built upon Hosea’s unselfish love to pursue an unfaithful wife, Hosea’s Heart embodies this

same love by pursuing the abused and at risk girls in Swaziland, offering them opportunities to seize freedom and a reason to hope.” (<https://hoseasheart.org/about>)

Partners in Providing Relief

Listen to this story written by a young woman after an ambassador trip to visit the girls they serve in Swaziland in person. It is entitled, “Praising after Swazi,” written by McKenzie, a 2017 and 2018 Ambassador, who has beautifully described the work that is being done.

Praising after Swazi

-McKenzie, 2017 and 2018 Ambassador

Each time I was traveling to Swaziland, everyone would say “you are going to change those girls lives!”.... “The work you are doing is so amazing!”.... “WOW, you are such a good person!”. I know the comments all come from a place of love and support but it has become so evident to me why Hosea’s Heart doesn’t just give girls a home but they strive to lead these young women to Christ.

As Americans, we often think that our way is the right way. Our culture and the way we live life is the only way to do it. We think our views and values should be believed by everyone. When we pour money at a situation, we expect it to somehow be solved; or if we give people food, and clothes, their life will be abundant again.

My first trip with Hosea’s Heart was truly life changing. So much so that I had culture shock of my own country when I returned home and struggled to transition back to my version of normalcy. Throughout this trip I learned what it really meant to be thankful and praise God. I looked around at Swaziland and saw the most beautiful country but I also saw prostitutes on every street corner, children without food and clothing, families in one room mud huts, and young girls who are trapped in the cycle of rape and sexual abuse. I looked at them and saw them even in their hardest moments still praising God. Who am I to sit back and enjoy my “perfect” little life and not be giving praise to the one who gave it all to me?

In my second trip there was one moment when God won me over again. After an afternoon spent at the Hope House (respite care), we were singing with a young girl in a wheelchair who had just suffered from a stroke which affected the left side of her body. We were about to leave but a few girls stayed to pray over her and I decided to join. One of the newer girls to the house started the prayer and despite all she has endured, she professed her faith so boldly with the way she prayed. Before those 3 minutes were over, I was standing with my sisters, attempting to catch my breath as tears streamed down my face. In those moments I swore mountains were moved and almost expected the young girl to stand up and walk away without needing her wheelchair. It was the most powerful prayer I have ever witnessed and I again thought, who am I to not be giving praise?

Each day there were small moments with the girls that would remind me what it really means to believe in God and give him praise. In the large continent of Africa, there lies a small house of girls who have some of the heaviest chains I could imagine. Is the haunting of their past completely gone? No. They still struggle with self-love, knowing their worth, and accepting love from God but when I look at them and see them using their voices for praise, I understand what it means to really believe. When they smile and know they are loved and that God has broken their chains... that is a miracle.

Although I am so appreciative of my family and friends support, I love Hosea’s Heart because they know grace and healing comes from God so they praise him for that! American values aren’t going to

change Swaziland, they have their own culture. Our money isn't going to save someone's life; that's Jesus job. I am not a great person and I am not changing lives; they are changing mine.

Thank you, Hosea's Heart, for creating a safe space for these young, beautiful, and God-fearing women to call home. Thank you for allowing ambassador trips to be present and giving us the chance to praise God for all he has done. Thank you, God, for blessing me with 16 sisters.

(<https://hoseasheart.org/from-the-mission-field/2020-ambassador-trip-applications-open/>)

What a powerful testimony! God loves it when we give and support generously, cheerfully, to change lives. How much more so when we give with hearts of love set on seeing lives changed for God's glory? McKenzie is doing small gestures which make a great deal of difference. Hosea's life and this little book inspired an organization that is still changing lives today. And you, even by power of little prayers, can change the world as we know it in big ways.

Gomer Finds God's Grace; the Good News of God's Redeeming Love

Through the course of our conversation, Annie Dieselberg shared with me that the movie "Redeeming Love" is coming to theatres this coming Friday, January 21. "Francine Rivers' novel, a beautiful Hosea and Gomer story," is being made into a movie by Universal Studios. Although it isn't coming out in Thailand, Annie hopes we will be impacted by its message. The same group that produced "I Can Only Imagine" is doing the film, and the author is donating all profits to anti-trafficking organizations. NightLight just received a small grant from them in December for their shelter. Never has it been easier to make a difference; we can pray, we can labor, we can even go see a movie. In the simple act of watching a movie, one that reflects the darkness as well as the hope of Hosea and Gomer's story, we have the chance to participate in and support life-giving work.

Annie shares another video interview in which she discusses "God's Mercy for the Guilty," which is what Hosea's Heart, both in terms of the organization and today's message, is all about. She shares that she asked Jesus to please come, step in, and bring his truth into the life of a 'Gomer' with whom she was working.

The woman began to see a light, describing a glowing brightness. Her face uplifted, her eyes closed, she began to speak and sing in her own dialect, becoming more and more radiant. Annie shares the story in her own words.

"After a period of time, she opened her eyes and described how she saw Jesus come to her, singing a song, and her singing back to him, and he put a crown on her head. She asked the question [mirroring the Gomer in our text], 'Jesus, how could I do this thing to this man I loved?' Jesus told her that she wasn't guilty. She was radiant."

Annie was amazed to see the transformation. She went home and spoke with the Lord,

"God, that's so amazing, but I have a question. Jesus, why did you say that she's not guilty...And then it really hit me. Jesus didn't just come to forgive our sins; he became our sin, in our place. He took that on himself, and he could look at her in the eyes and he could say, 'Daughter, you are not guilty,' and put a crown on her head, and give her dignity, and let her know who she really was in Christ.

We see God showing up like this for these women, in their brokenness; his mercy that he pours out for them is so amazing, and it's taught me so much."

Through the prophet Hosea, through Hosea's Heart, through the Dieselberg's, and in the lives of so many workers for good, we see God's heart of mercy, forgiveness, love, grace, compassion, and care, and we are challenged and reminded to love others in such a lavish way.

Friends, do we dare to be a part of what God is doing in the lives of people all around the world, setting the captives and the prisoners free, releasing the oppressed from their bonds, restoring the broken and destitute to their full human worth and dignity?

Here's some good news. Hosea represents determined trust in God's faithfulness. In the end, his children's names were changed, transformed: Jezreel became, "God will plant," or "God will sow," Lo Ruhammah, "Not my loved one," became "Ruhammah," my loved one; and Lo Ammi, "Not my people," was renamed "Ammi," 'my people.' Past, present, and future, lives are changed as the focus shifts to God's *future deliverance*, *trusting God in the present*, based on God's *continued faithfulness from times past*. Difficult times may come, but God has plans for restoration, redemption, and renewal. Thanks be to God for giving us hearts of courage to make a difference, *hearts like Hosea's Heart!* May it ever be so.

Prayer

Let us pray. Lord, thank you that you have loved us to the full. We are unworthy of your loving care, and yet you care for us daily, extravagantly, completely. We praise you for the gift of new life, of deliverance from bondage to forces within and beyond our own control. Help us to change what we can to make your kingdom know. Help us to live as your people, forgiven, beloved, redeemed. Rain down your mercy and love, we pray in Jesus mighty name. Amen.

Musical Meditation

8:30am Worship – Redeemed, Sherley-Ann Belleus and Marvin Dolinger

10am Worship – Rain Down, BBC Praise Team

Questions for Further Reflection, "Hosea's Heart":

Who is someone in your life who "speaks as though speaking the very words of God" (1 Peter 4:11)?
When have their words been particularly meaningful for you?

When speaking from the heart, what words would you use to describe your closest relationships?

A false confidence is believing in someone or something unworthy of our trust or where evidence is either lacking or invalid (including ourselves). In what false confidences are we tempted to put our trust (when compared with Psalm 20:7; 33:17; Leviticus 26:1; Jeremiah 14:22; Zechariah 4:6)?

Hosea's life was an example, and his message was directed at the economic, political, and religious heart of Israel. He spoke into a context of social injustice, political disorder, and moral decay, which precipitated the words and actions the Lord spoke through him. Where is the heart of your community, and how would you describe it in terms of health?

How can you help put a stop to an unjust practice or system in your community (Amos 5:14-15, 24)? Together or individually, how can we appropriately express ethical concerns for community, geography, religion, economy, or ecology in a way that honors the Lord and leads to change?

What word from the Lord is God speaking to you or placing on your heart today?

Theologian Frederick Buechner said, "Our calling is where our greatest passion meets the world's greatest need." What word from God does the world need to hear through you?