

Hosea: He Felt God's Feelings

Scripture Reading: Hosea 3:1-5, RSV

In the book of Job we see, a man who feels abandoned by God, betrayed by His Creator. In the book of Hosea we see a God who feels abandoned by man, betrayed by His creatures. These two themes of man's faithfulness and unfaithfulness or God's faithfulness and unfaithfulness are woven throughout the Old Testament like a counterpoint, or a Bach fugue.

In the Scriptures Hosea is the outstanding example of a man whose personal tragedy illuminates the larger tragedy of God's relationship to Israel. Hosea was God's last messenger to the northern kingdom of Israel, functioning perhaps between 760 and 750 B.C., not long before the Assyrian armies invaded the nation of Israel and destroyed the city of Samaria. This places Hosea some 100 years after Homer in Greece and perhaps 350 years before Plato. His ministry touched the reigns of Uzziah and Hezekiah in the south and Jeroboam II (and some lesser kings as well) in the north where Hosea was preaching.

Obviously the people of Israel did not listen to Hosea because if they had the city of Samaria would not have been destroyed. In this time of her history Israel was so prosperous, so content with her wealth, so confident of her military power, that she could not even listen to the warnings of this prophet. Her boundaries had been extended as far north as they were in the time of David and Solomon. She was opulent, she was powerful. Reassured by her wealth and military might, Israel could not understand why anybody was screaming about a moral collapse that would lead to a political destruction.

One sign of the moral collapse of the nation can be seen in the number of kings they had during this period, most of whom ascended the throne by assassination. In fact, several kings occupied the throne for no more than a few months. Gradually as the nation drifted into further alliances with heathen nations, the messages of Amos, Hosea and others became more significant. There is no way to avoid concluding that the nation had hit the bottom. Morally Israel had never been worse. Calf worship was rife. Fertility rites of the most sensual nature were practiced. There is even some evidence to suggest that child sacrifice had been adopted by the Jews. Not only did the priests condone these sins, sometimes they even initiated them; the priests did not provide moral leadership.

Because of his own personal tragedy Hosea came to see clearly that this was to be Israel's last rebellion as a people if they did not repent. In a short time God would literally scatter them over the face of the earth. He did this through the Assyrian method of depopulating countries. The Assyrians were among the first in ancient history to take people from conquered nations to discourage the possibilities of revolution. Taking them out of their homeland to another country virtually destroyed the possibility of insurrection. (For example, the Samaritans of Jesus' time represented a kind of inbreeding of these two groups—the Assyrians who came to replace the Hebrews and the Hebrews who had been left behind. The Jews had been scattered over the face of the earth.) Few in the nation fully comprehended what was going on, and almost no one understood God's feelings.

But in the home of Hosea events were transpiring which would teach him the bitterness and anguish of a love which had been betrayed. In that providence that still baffles finite men, God was using this man's own marital problems to illuminate the larger tragedy of the nation. Hosea's wife Gomer was a harlot.

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The Bible says that Hosea was commanded to take a “wife of harlotry.” Scholars disagree as to whether this means she was a harlot when he married her or whether this means there was a spirit of harlotry within her which came out later. The weight of opinion is on the side that Gomer was not a harlot when Hosea married her. For some people it is unthinkable that God would command anyone to marry a prostitute just to teach some lessons. Assuming that she was not a harlot at the time of their marriage, Hosea was probably reflecting later that he had married a harlot.

His call to the prophetic office preceded his call to take Gomer and the events on which this book takes place. Because Hosea was a prophet, attacked the priests, nation and the king for their sins, he was a very well-known Israelite figure. (An analogous situation would be if Billy Graham, or some other well-known individual, had a wife who became a prostitute and it was public information.) I have no doubt that those who despised Hosea for the kind of message he preached were not at all reluctant to make invidious comments about his masculinity, because any man who was a real man wouldn't have a wife wanting to run around with other men.

Hosea endured much shame and humiliation, particularly in his male culture where a woman ordinarily would be destroyed for her adultery. Yet in this situation nothing happened. It doesn't even seem that the priests were particularly disturbed.

Being a fertility cult, Baal worship implied that Baal supplied the oil, wheat, bread and water and gave his worshipers all the blessings. This is what Gomer is saying: ‘They will give me all the things which I desire. But Hosea has a different mind: he wants to discipline and control me. I want to live an uncontrolled life.’

Yet in verse 6 Yahweh, the true God, the One who really loved His children, the Husband to whom Israel promised herself in the covenant at Sinai, would not allow these blessings to come from Baal. He would not allow the crops to grow. He frustrated and blocked every path so that Israel would eventually, in utter despair, turn away from Baal to Him. He would pay any price to have her back.

Yahweh realized that Israel will not give up easily. She was addicted to her lovers. This life-style had perverted her sensibilities and her imagination. Nevertheless God says in verse 9, “I will take back my grain...and my wine in its season...”

In verses 14 and 15 it says, “I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her.”

The wilderness reference perhaps has two meanings. First, it was in the wilderness that God made the original covenant with His people; that is, my bride and I fell in love and agreed to marry each other in the wilderness. I will take her back to that place. Secondly it may be that the wilderness is a reference to the fact that quietness, meditation, getting Israel (Gomer) away from the distractions of the city will allow the voice of God to be heard. Probably both are implied.

In chapter 3 Hosea heard God's command to “Go again, love a woman who is beloved of a paramour and is an adulteress.” In the Hebrew the suggestion is, “keep on going, keep on seeking her redemption. Don't give up, no matter how many times she betrays you.”

Can we grasp the picture of this great and famous man, whose religious convictions and piety were talked about all over this country? Can we see him walking down dark streets, knocking on doors, looking for his wife in brothels, in the homes of former lovers? What humiliation! What shame!

For some unexplained reason, when he found her he had to buy her back. The total price added up to about 30 shekels. It is significant that this was the same price that had to be paid to a slave owner whose slave had been killed. Because of her evil deeds and life-style, Gomer had probably become enslaved to some man. Hosea had to buy her back, the woman who once freely pledged him her faithfulness.

Hosea said to her, 'Look, you are to reserve yourself to me for a time at least. You have got to calm down. You have got to get yourself together. Your passions have got to be cooled. If you want to function as my wife and keep this freedom I have given you, you are to discipline yourself.' So it was with Israel. All of the lessons came through very clearly to the people. They saw that there had to be a break, at least for a time, so that they could get their bearings.

While our reading of the term harlot strikes us as the physical act of adultery, the real meaning of this term as Hosea used it in his book is a spiritual and moral collapse, a moral adultery. God was pictured by Hosea as being married to His people, as having an intimacy of fellowship that can best be described by the marriage relationship. This idea, which was not new throughout the fertility religions, pictured the human-divine relationship as a kind of marriage. However, the emphasis in these religions was on the physical union of marriage, not on the spiritual union. That is why in the fertility rites the act of worship involved going to the fertility temple and committing sexual intercourse with either a priest or a priestess. That was the religious act of worship!

But God related to His people spiritually. He wasn't interested in that kind of union. His relationship was a marked contrast to what was happening in Baal worship. Hosea presented subtleties which brought this out as he wrote his book. When Hosea began to seek Gomer's redemption, the humiliating task of taking back an unfaithful wife, all Israel understood the significance of what was happening. They realized that Hosea's experience was a window through which they could peer into the heart of God to see what was happening to His people, His bride.

Three children were born to Gomer. The first was named Jezreel, whose name prophesied a coming doom on the nation. The next two children, "not my people" and "not pitied" (the translated names), were described a little differently than the first child. Jezreel was clearly identified as Hosea's. But the second and third children were not identified as his. Again scholars are divided on this but there is considerable weight of opinion that Gomer's second and third children were born in her adulterous relationships and were not Hosea's. Whether or not that is true is not essential to the point of the story, but you can begin to see the mess that this prophet was in as a human being.

The children's names have a message. God would judge Israel, but Hosea indicated the point was not to be vindictive with His people but to wake them up and bring them to an understanding of the kind of mercy that God has. He punished them to redeem them, to save them, not to destroy. In chapter 2:3 Hosea stressed that it is only if God punished Israel that she had any chance of being saved. The strongest possible language was used in this text to describe what God would do to this nation. He said that this nation would be stripped naked, humiliated, slain, "make her as in the day she was born...

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like a wilderness...slay her with thirst.”

What is the significance of this? We know from Canaanite archaeological sources that it was a common practice when a woman was caught in a sin such as harlotry, to strip her naked in front of the people and send her away from the community. It may be that even the Jews followed this custom. Certainly it indicates how shamed, angry and upset God was. Verse 5 says, “For their mother has played the harlot, she that conceived them has acted shamefully. For she said, ‘I will go after my lovers, who give me my bread and my water, my wool and my flax, my oil and my drink.’”

Words cannot describe the sins of Israel—slaughter, blood, lying, murder and adultery. It is very probable that adultery, via the Baal worship, had become rampant in the nation of Israel by the time Hosea began his work. Adultery was committed simply for the physical indulgence and had no significance to most Jews in terms of their religious beliefs. To say the country was “wild” is not an overstatement.

But God kept saying to them, “I knew you in the wilderness. You shall not know your lovers.” In the Hebrew the word, “to know,” (for the people to know God and for Him to know them) is the same for sexual love. Israel was called a harlot because she did not “know” God. She “knew” Baal!

Then God promised not to punish the daughters of harlotry. In chapter 4:14, He said, “I will not punish the daughters of harlotry when they play the harlot, nor your brides when they commit adultery; for the men themselves go aside with harlots, and sacrifice with cult prostitutes.”

The atmosphere had become so corrupt that the children being raised in this country were not even being held responsible for their behavior. They were not really to blame; the adults and priests who had allowed this to happen were at fault. In verse 18 it says, “they love shame more than their glory.”

In chapter 5 God started with His severe warnings. His love was not sentimental. God would not indulge people who were on a path of self-destruction. He warned them of coming judgment and said:

I am the Lord your God from the land of Egypt; you know no God but me, and besides me there is no savior. It was I who knew you in the wilderness, in the land of drought; but when they had fed to the full, they were filled, and their heart was lifted up; therefore they forget me. So I will be to them like a lion, like a leopard I will lurk beside the way. I will fall upon them like a bear robbed of her cubs, I will tear open their breast, and there I will devour them like a lion, As a wild beast would rend them (Hosea 13:4-8, RSV).

In this text we can discover the hurt, the anguish, the anger and the pain of a God who is crying out because He does not know what to do with this people. How could language portray God's pain more forcefully? God has been broken, wounded and trampled because of our unfaithfulness.

With all of the talk about the unfaithfulness of Gomer and Israel, it is not man's unfaithfulness that is the dominant theme of the book of Hosea. Hosea himself as a symbol is the dominant figure and theme—Hosea, holding the hands of Gomer and his children (some of whom may have been the children of another man), carrying these children on his shoulders through all Samaria, unafraid to face the jeering crowds—Hosea, inquiring from house to house for his prostitute wife—Hosea, who felt

as God felt, who understood the mind and heart of God as few had ever understood it. What does the name Hosea mean? It means, Yahweh has saved! He will not give up on His people.

I will heal their faithlessness; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them.
I will be as the dew to Israel; he shall blossom as the lily, he shall strike root as the poplar;
his shoots shall spread out; his beauty shall be like the olive, and his fragrance like Lebanon.
They shall return and dwell beneath my shadow, they shall flourish as a garden; they shall
blossom as the vine, their fragrance shall be like the wine of Lebanon (Hosea 14:4-7, RSV).

It is God's forgiveness, His faithfulness and steadfast love—that is the dominant theme of this book. Man's unfaithfulness serves only to make God's faithfulness greater. Gomer's prostitution only serves to highlight the power and the beauty of Hosea's love. The same word, used all through the book of Ruth to describe her kindness to Boaz and Naomi's kindness to Ruth, is used to describe God's love. His love is stronger than any sin man can commit—that is the message of Hosea.

How many, reading this sermon, are still unable to believe this message? They can't believe that God's kindness is greater than their sordid lives. Nothing can be done that God cannot forgive. You can't humiliate God to the point where He doesn't want to forgive you any more.

You name the place, no matter how filthy or vile, and God looks for you there—just like Hosea. You name the crime, no matter how horrible, and God treats you as if it had never happened—just like Hosea. You name the guilt and—just like Hosea—the Father will encircle you in His everlasting arms. God is not afraid; He will dirty His hands if He stoops to pick us up out of the gutter—just like Hosea.

I can't explain it. That's just the way love is.