

The Old Testament's Prodigal

Some Hosea verses; Luke 15:11-32; Is 53:1-6

Sometimes you run across something you have to share because of the way its put together. So today's sermon is taken from the book, *Less Than Perfect* by Ann Spangler. It's from an article titled, **God Loves Broken People: The Story of Gomer**, from Faith Gate, in 2018. So let's take another look at the prophet Hosea.

She stands outside in the cool, refreshing rain, allowing it to run in rivulets across her cheeks and down her lips. She is like the lily of the valley that spreads its fragrance across the fields or like the lush, abundant grapes that make men glad. Fertility & fruitfulness, wild abandon & celebration: these are the forces that rise and surge within her. Young, beautiful, and bold, she is always smiling, flashing her big, dark eyes, attracting inevitable attention. God knows how easy it would be to entice her admirers into showering her with gifts of silver and gold. Though she is determined to squeeze every ounce of sweetness from life, that's not all she wants. More than anything, she is looking for someone she can adore.

Suddenly she notices a man hurrying toward her. It is not desire that propels him but pain & hurt. She knows this because she is good at reading people & because it is her husband who draws near. "Gomer," he says, "come home!"

And so she does, but reluctantly. Hosea is a good man, but goodness can be tiresome. He talks only of God and of faithfulness to the covenant, dampening her high spirits and making her feel ashamed of her sins. But how can it be wrong to dream of having just a little pleasure in this life?

Hosea was distressed by all he saw. The people offer sacrifices at pagan shrines, praising Baal for every harvest. They have forgotten the faith their fathers professed. But she thinks it matters little how people name their gods - whether Baal or Yahweh or Asherah - as long as they acknowledge god by paying homage for

the rain and the harvest, the bread and the wine. If Yahweh is so upset, why has the rain been so abundant, the crops so lush, and the peace so prolonged? If everyone is worshipping the wrong god, why have so many people been blessed with so much?

But Hosea insists on pointing out the twistedness in everything — the gap between rich and poor, all the deception and lies, the sleeping around, the killings, and the worship of countless idols. He says God's people have become no different than the Canaanites. Instead of whispering his disapproval, he shouts it, as though he is God's chosen mouthpiece, telling everyone — especially the priests — that they are harlots and whores and that God will surely punish them.

She finds it infuriating and embarrassing to be known as the wife of the prophet Hosea, and her eyes begin to cast about for someone she can truly love.

But if Gomer would stop for just one moment and try to read her husband's heart, she would discover that she has broken it more than once. Perhaps she already knows this. But she does not know - not yet - how hard it was for Hosea to marry her when he did. She has no inkling that Yahweh, the God of his ancestors and hers, had instructed him, saying, "Go, marry a promiscuous wife and have children with her, like an adulterous wife this land is guilty of unfaithfulness to the Lord." Nor does she realize that her marriage has become a public parable - a story God is telling to His people.

Already she has borne three children. The first was a boy her husband named Jezreel, meaning "God Scatters." God gave this name because Jezreel was where Jehu assassinated Jezebel, Joram, and Jezebel's remaining sons. This wiped out the line of Ahab.

God was declaring that He would punish Jehu's dynasty for their overzealous brutality and for their continued tolerance and promotion of Baal worship. In the Books of Kings, Jezebel

incited her husband King Ahab to abandon the worship of Yahweh and promote worship of the deities Baal and Asherah on a national scale. In addition, she ordered the prophets of Yahweh to be massacred and personally organized the execution of Naboth, a law-abiding landowner, after Ahab coveted his land. For these transgressions against the God and people of Israel, Jezebel met a gruesome death - thrown out of a window by members of her own court retinue, and the flesh of her corpse eaten by stray dogs.

In the biblical story, Jezebel became associated with false prophets. In some interpretations, her dressing in finery and putting on makeup led to the association of the use of cosmetics with "painted women" or prostitutes.

People back then would pick up on the meaning of the name, because they knew their history. If they didn't - it was weird enough that they would ask and learn how wicked Jezebel was. Even today, many people know that the name Jezebel has unwholesome implications.

Then came a girl Hosea named Lo-Ruhama, meaning "Not Loved," and another boy he named Lo-Ammi, which means "Not My People." Though he hasn't said as much, she knows he doubted the last two babies were his.

Yet every time Hosea thundered on about doom and destruction, her prophet-husband can't stop himself from adding a little sliver of hope: "The Israelites will be like the sand on the sea-shore, which cannot be measured or counted. In the place where it was said to them, 'You are not My people,' they will be called 'children of the living God.' The people will come together; they will appoint one leader and will come up out of the land, for great will be the day of Jezreel." (Hosea 1:10-11)

Gomer knows that Jezreel, which is the name of the large, fertile valley north of Samaria, has more than one meaning. Instead of "God scatters," it can also mean "God sows," signifying that after the coming judgment God will

once again provide for His people in this lush and beautiful land.

But she is sick of listening to his dire warnings and so she leaves Hosea and abandons her children. Throwing off every constraint, she begins to lead a life of dissolution. For a while it pleases her. She does what she wants when she wants to do it. Her lovers say nothing disagreeable but only what she longs to hear, that she is the most stunning and exciting woman they have known. She feels enriched by all the gifts they give, silver and gold, wool and linen, wine and oil. She is free - but it is not quite enough. Something still is missing.

That something turns out to be someone - a man she meets whose charms are greater than her own. She loves to lean against his chest and feel his strong, encircling arms. A man of influence and quick wit, her lover knows exactly how to please her. As long as he is near, she feels secure. As long as she reveres him, he is glad to stay.

But things begin to turn. He is away more than she likes, and he is not always as attentive as she thinks he should be. Then she begins to cling, to quiz him about where he's been and who he's been with. The more she asks, the less he tells. The more she pursues, the more he backs away until at last he vanishes.

Left alone, she feels her emptiness. Though she tells herself her lover will soon return, her tears reflect the truth - that he is gone forever. As time passes, she begins to realize that loneliness is not her only problem. The world around her has begun to change. For many years, King Jeroboam II presided over Israel. Now the king is dead, and the country is descending into chaos. Life becomes more difficult as one king is murdered and another is quickly crowned.

Gomer is changing too. She is growing older. Many of the men who seek her services seem rough and coarse. When their business is done, they do not linger. In these uncertain times, she

has no one to cheer her when she becomes depressed or to care for her when she falls ill. Instead of solid rock beneath her, there is only shifting sand.

Applying layers of makeup, she does her best to conceal the worry that etches itself in tiny lines around her eyes. Fatigue creeps over her like a stubborn fog that will not lift.

By now, her stores of silver and gold have shrunk. She spent freely when she was young but now very carefully because only a few coins are between her and the shelterless streets. On the nights when no one visits, she sits alone, remembering the haunting words her husband spoke the day she left. She can still hear the rage in his voice. She sees the angry tears rolling down his face.

“Rebuke your mother, rebuke her, for she is not my wife, and I am not her husband. Let her remove the adulterous look from her face and the unfaithfulness from between her breasts. Otherwise I will strip her naked and make her as bare as on the day she was born; I will make her like a desert, turn her into a parched land, and slay her with thirst.” (Hosea 2:2-3)

According to the letter of the law of the day, Hosea could have had Gomer executed for her unfaithfulness, though punishment was rarely carried to that extreme.

Though spoken a lifetime ago, Hosea’s words have finally found their mark. She knows what he is talking about. To be abandoned, rejected, cast off like you are nothing. Surely there can be no greater agony.

But then his words turn tender for he speaks of transforming the Valley of Achor (meaning Trouble) into a door of hope. But what kind of magic can turn a person’s troubles into hope? This she does not know.

“I will betroth you to me forever,” he says. “I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. I will betroth you in

faithfulness, and you will acknowledge the Lord.” (Hosea 2:19-20)

As the words sink in, she feels their sting more than their promise. She has lost too much. Thrown it all away. Even though she longs for home, husband and children, she lacks the courage to return. Instead, she spends the last of her treasure & falls into debt. Unable to pay the interest, she sells herself into slavery. The future stretches out in endless wretchedness.

And then one day, a man comes looking for her. Her man comes looking for her. Hosea has cash in hand, all the money he can scrape together. When he finds he doesn’t have enough, he throws some barley into the deal. History tells us that 15 shekels is only half the usual price for a slave, so we think Hosea had to come up with around 12 bushels of barley. Hosea had to use all his cash and find other means to buy his wife. Sounds like it was a sacrificial decision out of obedience to God.

And she is freed.

But what will she do with her freedom?

Later Hosea tells her what happened. “The Lord came to me,” he explains, “and told me to take you as my wife, saying ‘Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another man and is an adulteress. Love her as the Lord loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods and love the sacred raisin cakes.’” It seems silly to mention sacred raisin cakes, but here is another connection, a repudiation of the worship that was going on toward other gods. These raisin cakes were known as one of the offerings to the god Baal.

“So I bought you for fifteen shekels of silver and twelve bushels of barley. You are to live with me many days; you must not be a prostitute or be intimate with any man, and I will live with you.” (3:2)

So Gomer, who has lived a dissolute life, returns home to live with Hosea, a husband she

does not deserve. But what has become of her children? You will be glad to learn that Lo-Ruhamah is now Ruhamah, meaning “Loved,” and Lo-Ammi is called Ammi, meaning “My People.”

But what of Israel? Transfixed by the story of the prophet and the prostitute, God’s people fail to see how it could possibly apply to them. So they continue on their reckless, wayward course. They don’t catch the symbolism of God’s prophet and his wife. They don’t see themselves as prodigals, in need of a savior.

After a short while, God allows a king to rise up in the north. Before long, this mighty, pagan king crushes Israel, carrying its people captive. Separated from their own land, the land God gave to them, his people have become as insubstantial as the morning mist or like a bit of smoke escaping through a window. But God, who wastes nothing, uses their hardships to call them to their senses. In time, they will remember the wonderful story of Gomer and Hosea, and the words of the prophet, who said:

“Come, let us return to the Lord. He has torn us to pieces but He will heal us; He has injured us but He will bind up our wounds. 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.” (Hosea 6:1-3)

Like Gomer, who suffered greatly for betraying the only man who really loved her, God’s people languish in a land that is not their own. But when at last they turn to God, He comes to them just as He said He would - like the winter rains, and like the spring rains that water the earth. He bends down from heaven to bless and provide, betrothing – covenanting Himself to them forever in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. Only then do they discover how deeply they are loved.

Unfortunately, actually, way too often, people act like Gomer – the Prodigal Wife and the Prodigal Son of the New Testament. But God always wants His people to return.

And in the Hosea story we also discover another Old Testament – New Testament connection. We find the theme that Israel and today’s church is the bride of Jesus Christ.

Hosea 2:16 - 20 has God making a powerful declaration: “And in that day, declares the LORD, you will call me ‘My Husband,’ and no longer will you call me ‘My Baal.’ For I will remove the names of the (all the other gods) from her mouth, and they shall be remembered by name no more. And I will make for them a covenant on that day with the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the creeping things of the ground. And I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land, and I will make you lie down in safety. And I will betroth you – marry you to me forever. I will betroth you - wed you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you – say ‘I do’ to you, to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the LORD.”

We find this similar idea when Ephesians 5:22-23 tells us, “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.”

So we find again that the Old Testament prophets are not in the business of only condemnation. They keep pointing to God’s love. They have connections to New Testament themes. Hosea’s and Gomer’s story reminds us of the prodigal son parable. And it reminds that the church is the bride of Christ. So God wants more than just individuals to follow Jesus – he wants whole people groups to catch the meaning of Hosea’s story and run to, return to, Creator Almighty God.