

This week and next week we have OT readings from the prophet Hosea. Hosea can seem rather obscure and difficult. Yet the messages we'll hear this week and next week tell us much about God's love for us. They are powerful and worth the effort of deciphering. Hosea ch1 (bulletins).

Hosea ch1, v2, we hear one of the strangest commands God has ever given anyone in the Bible. God tells Hosea, "Go marry a prostitute."

Now it's unclear whether the word means a professional prostitute or just an amateur. We don't know if she's doing it for money, or just for fun. But either way, the word indicates an actively promiscuous woman. And apparently, she is going to continue sleeping around after marriage to Hosea, because God indicates that some of Hosea's future children will be fathered by other men. This is a heck of a thing to ask Hosea to do. How many of y'all would like to sign up for a task like that?

Yet Hosea does it. v3 Hosea marries a prostitute named Gomer. I always think of Jim Neighbors every time I hear that name, Gomer. But in Hosea, Gomer is a woman's name.

Hosea marries Gomer the prostitute. Why does God ask this? In essence, God is asking Hosea, Gomer, and their children to become walking, talking, sermon illustrations. They're living audio-visual aids. And what is the lesson?

The breakdown is this. Hosea, the faithful husband represents God. Gomer, the unfaithful wife represents the people of Israel, who over and over again forsake the worship of God for the worship of Baal.

Earlier in the summer we ran into Baal worship with Elijah. This fall, we'll run into it with the prophet Jeremiah. Baal worship was a perennial, centuries-long problem for the Jewish people.

Last month I talked a bit about how seductive that worship of Baal was. Baal was the god of rain and fertility. He was typically worshipped by consuming large amounts of wine and then engaging in ritual sex. If you did these things in the name of Baal, then you would insure that your land would be fertile and the rains would come.

And, after all, they thought, the God of Abraham was the God of the Desert. He was good in battle. But what did a Desert God know about crops and fertility? They sort of looked on the Lord God, YHWH, as a good general practitioner. But Baal was a fertility specialist.

So the people of Israel often had divided loyalties. They worshipped the Lord God when it was convenient. And they worshipped Baal when it was convenient. And sometimes they would kind of blend the two together. They'd take a little bit of God mixed with a little bit of Baal. This kind of unfaithfulness is compared to Gomer, sometimes sleeping with her husband Hosea, sometimes sleeping around with other men.

And her children represent the consequences of that kind of unfaithfulness. The children are born into Hosea's family. But because of Gomer's behavior, there's no way of knowing who the father is.

First a boy is born. v4 God tells Hosea to name him Jezreel. Jezreel is a beautiful and fertile plain in Israel. In fact, it's the only major flat place in the country. It's good farming country. But it also has a bloody history. Since it's the only flat place in the country, many battles have been fought at Jezreel. Over the years, everything from ancient Egyptian chariots to French knights in armor to British tanks have fought on the plains of Jezreel. In the book of Revelation, the final battle is set at Jezreel, using it's other name: Armageddon. So telling Hosea to name his kid Jezreel, or Armageddon, has a rather negative ring to it. It might be like us naming a kid Nagasaki or Hiroshima; or maybe Auschwitz or Buchenwald. "Name the child Jezreel," God says, v4, "for I am going to destroy the kings of Israel for the blood shed at Jezreel, and I am going to break the bow, I'm going to put an end to Israel's independence."

Then, a second child is born. God says, v6, "Name her Loruhamah." Ruhamah means mercy or pity. Loruhamah means No Mercy, or No Pity. God says, "Name her Loruhamah, for I will no longer have pity on the house of Israel, or forgive them."

Then a third child is born. God says, v9, "Name him Loammi." Ammi means My People. Loammi means Not My People. God says, "Name him Loammi, for you are not my people, and I am not your God."

The Israelites have turned their backs on the true God of Israel and instead turn towards the false god Baal. So God says that he will forsake his people, that they may fully experience what life without him is really like. And it's a bleak picture indeed. They will experience drought and famine. And they will experience political destruction.

Notice the three things God is telling his people. 'Because of your behavior, because you have forsaken me and turned to other gods, these are the consequences. I'm going to allow you to be destroyed politically. I'm not going to be merciful to you. And you are no longer going to be my people.' This is harsh punishment indeed.

And we would be wise to always pay attention to these warnings. We may not worship the god Baal so that he will supply our needs. But we often look everywhere other than God for our sustenance. We put our trust in many things other than the Living God.

We also have that same disturbing tendency to try to blend God with whatever other philosophies are out there, with New Age and Pagan religions. We often choose cafeteria style. I'll take a little bit of this religion and a little bit of that spirituality. Instead of conforming ourselves and our lives to the call of the Living God, we instead try to twist and re-shape God to fit our agendas. As someone once said, "In the beginning, God created human beings in his image. Ever since then, we've been trying to return the favor." We want to create God in OUR image.

So God will turn his back on his people, Hosea tells us. Yet, in spite of forsaking his people for a time, God eventually will show his true nature. He is the God of Love and Faithfulness.

This will become apparent later in Hosea. In ch2, God says to his wayward people, God says to his unfaithful wife, "I will allure her, I will woo her, I will win her back."¹

The Israelites forsake God. God withdraws his blessings from them for a time. But then God seeks them out to win them back.

God speaks of his wayward wife Israel, "I will win her back once again. I will lead her out into the desert and speak tenderly to her there."

¹ Hosea 2:14 and following

The desert is the place where the people of Israel first got to know God, after being led out of slavery in Egypt. God is saying, in essence, 'I will take Israel back to the beginning.' After all, in the desert there were no distractions. The people realized that they had to rely upon God totally for their very survival. They weren't under the illusion that they could do things for themselves. In the desert, the stars shine most brightly because there are no other lights.

So God will take his wayward people, his wayward wife back to the desert. "And there," God says, "she will give herself to me, as she did long ago when I freed her from Egypt." "And there," God says, "she won't call me 'master,' she won't call me 'Baal,' but she will call me 'my husband.'" She will acknowledge the tender and intimate relationship that she shares with God. God says, "You will forget about Baal, and you shall know me... I will make you my wife forever."

That's incredible love. The most syrupy love songs, the most romantic chick flicks can't even begin to compare with that incredible statement of love from God.

And God promises to restore the blessings he had to withhold for a time. He promises to make the land fertile again, so that the people may know who the real God of fertility is.

God will bring forth such abundance that the people will call out "Jezreel," which means "God plants." The word Jezreel will become a blessing, not a curse. And God promises to plant a new crop of Israelites, a crop which he will raise to know and love him.

And to those who are called Loruhamah, No Pity, God promises to show mercy and pity. And to those who are called Loammi, Not My People, God promises to say, "You are my people." And they will reply, "You are our God."

What incredible love. How wonderfully romantic. Richard Gere carrying Debra Winger out of the factory in "An Officer and a Gentleman" can't even begin to compare. Patrick Swayze sweeping Jennifer Grey off her feet at the end of "Dirty Dancing" can't even begin to compare.

We may turn our backs on God. But God promises to seek us out. We may ignore God. But God is still there for us. We may be unfaithful to God. But God is faithful to us.

The invitation is there for us. God tells us, 'Come out into the desert with me. Get away from all of the distractions in your life. I want you to know that I love you. I want to have an intimate relationship with you forever. Not a one night stand, but a permanent marriage. I want you to hear the words, "You are my people." And I want you to say the words, "You are my God."'