

This week and next week we have Old Testament 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. So, this morning I want to spend some time with our reading today from the first chapter of Hosea.

But before I can dive into that text, I need to say a few words about marriage in the context of Hosea's culture. Because if we read Hosea with our 21<sup>st</sup> century lenses and definitions of marriage, we are going to miss the message entirely. For us, marriage is about love, and mutuality, and supporting one another in times of prosperity and adversity.

For Hosea, we need to bracket all of that off and leave it in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and try to understand marriage in his culture.

We need to go back more than 2,700 years to a very different world, an ancient Middle Eastern context. It was a very patriarchal society at that time. And marriage was all about the needs of the man. Marriage in Israel in the 700's BC was mainly about the procreation of children, and more specifically, legitimate children. Doesn't sound very romantic, and it's not. But since there were no DNA tests, marriage was mainly about ensuring that a man's children were biologically his.

So, the commands in Hosea 1 are strange enough given our understandings of marriage today. But these commands are even stranger given Middle Eastern understandings of marriage 2,700 years ago.

In our opening verse in our OT lesson, we hear one of the strangest commands God has ever given anyone in the Bible. God says to the prophet Hosea, "Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom."<sup>1</sup>

Now the word "whoredom" could imply a prostitute. Or it could mean someone who is unfaithful. And different translations span that gamut.

One says, "Go and marry a prostitute, so that some of her children will be conceived in prostitution."<sup>2</sup>

Another says, "Go, take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness."<sup>3</sup>

Now I could spend some time on a tangential discussion of what the best translation here is—and there is considerable debate in the scholarly world. But that's something of a red herring. Because whether the best translation is "prostitute" or "promiscuous woman" or "adulterous wife," the bottom line is the same.

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<sup>1</sup> Hosea 1:2 NRSV

<sup>2</sup> Hosea 1:2 NLT, and close to CEB as well

<sup>3</sup> Hosea 1:2 NIV

Any way you slice it, if Hosea marries such a woman, then the paternity of their children will be in serious doubt.

And since the primary purpose of marriage in their culture is to ensure the legitimacy of a man's children, this is incredibly shocking in Hosea's world.

Yet Hosea does as God asks. Hosea marries a prostitute, or a promiscuous woman named Gomer.

Yes, for those of you of a certain age, I know that Gomer brings to mind a TV marine from the 1960's played by Jim Nabors. Try to bracket that off. In Hosea, Gomer is a woman's name.

God tells Hosea to marry Gomer, a woman who won't be faithful to Hosea. Why does God ask this? In essence, God is asking Hosea, Gomer, and their children to become walking, talking, sermon illustrations. They're going to 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 the God of Israel for the worship of Baal. Baal worship was a perennial, centuries-long problem for the Jewish people.

And Baal worship was incredibly seductive to the Israelites.

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, they thought, then you would ensure that your land would be fertile, and the rains would come.

And, after all, the Israelites knew that the God of Abraham was the God of the Desert. He was good at defending them against their enemies, and organizing them as a nation. But what would a desert God know about things like crops and fertility?

So the Israelites often looked on the Lord God, YHWH, as a good general practitioner. But they regarded Baal as a fertility specialist. And as they transitioned from raising sheep in the desert to raising crops by farming, Baal worship became more and more attractive.

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 with other men.

And Gomer's 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. God tells Hosea to name him Jezreel.<sup>4</sup> 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 very bloody history. Since it's the only large flat place in the country, many battles have been fought at Jezreel. Over the centuries, everything from ancient Egyptian chariots to medieval French knights in shining armor to 20<sup>th</sup> century British tanks have fought battles on the plains of Jezreel. In the book of Revelation, the final battle is also set at Jezreel, using its 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, "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, "Name her Loruhamah."<sup>5</sup> Ruhamah means 'mercy' or 'pity'. Loruhamah means 'No Mercy,' or 'No Pity.' God is saying, '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, "Name him Loammi."<sup>6</sup> Ammi means 'My People.' Loammi means 'Not My People.' God is saying, 'Name him Loammi, for you are not my people, and I am not your God.'

The Israelites have turned their backs on the one 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.

So God will turn his back on his people, Hosea tells us. The people will experience the logical consequences of life without God. It's a tough message.

But there is also a message of hope. God promises restoration. After all, it's in his nature. He is the God of Love and Faithfulness.

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<sup>4</sup> Hosea 1:4

<sup>5</sup> Hosea 1:6

<sup>6</sup> Hosea 1:9

And the very last line in our lesson points to that restoration. The people will again be called, "Children of the Living God."

This will become more apparent later in Hosea. In ch2, God seeks to restore his relationship with his people.

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

God seeks out his people to restore them to relationship with 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."<sup>7</sup>

What incredible love.

And that same kind of love is there for us today.

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.

Let us live into that amazing love. Let us seek to love God with our whole heart and mind and strength.

Let us live up to and live into that wonderful title, "Children of the living God."

For the living God is a loving God, indeed.

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<sup>7</sup> Hosea 2:23