

## **“SINNERS IN THE HANDS OF AN ANGRY GOD”**

**Hosea 1:2-10; Psalm 85**

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I'm always stunned when I hear or read stories about people in distress who, sitting by themselves, pick up a Bible, begin reading, and in that reading, are transformed by the Bible's words, turning their lives over to God. Really, I want to ask. I mean, Really?

This morning's reading from the Hebrew Bible is one of the kinds of stories that I cite as proof-texts for my incredulity. Here we are at the beginning of the book of the prophet Hosea, where Hosea begins his prophet journey with a call from God, saying "Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom, and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord." It certainly gets your attention! But it's a scripture that requires serious interpretation if we do not want it to send us fleeing away not just from the Bible, but from God, as fast as we can. Cold, confusing, filled with anger, bitterness, and rejection alongside an intimacy of tone and image that's just as disconcerting as the coldness. Does that seem a fair summary for you?

Most often, the way we deal with these kinds of biblical passages is to ignore them. I'm as guilty of that as any of the rest of you. We just read the parts of the Bible that we like, that seem easy for us to understand. And then we skip over the rest. But still those passages are there, and sometimes it's best to tackle them head on. So this morning, I'm going to try not just to tackle these particular eight verses from the beginning of the book of Hosea, but put them in context of the book as a whole. It's not a book, I would guess, with which most of you are familiar, and it is, in fact, one of the most powerful books of the Bible, with a stark yet sensual loveliness that, when seen true, can lead us not only to not run away from the text, but instead to give thanks, to know that we are blessed because we are sinners in the hands of *this* particular angry God.

So, a little history to begin. Hosea lived and held the role of prophet in Israel during the second half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE. At this time, Israel was divided into two kingdoms—Israel in the North and Judah in the South. Hosea lived and prophesied primarily in the Northern kingdom, after the reign of Jeroboam II, who, as kings go, was a pretty good king. His reign was a time of quiet, of faithful religious observance, of prosperity for the people, and generally good relationships with other countries. But the 25 years that followed the death of Jeroboam were among the bleakest in Israel's history. Six kings followed in quick succession. The first four were murdered by their successors, the next carried away as a prisoner of war, and only the last managed to pass the throne to his son. The Assyrian empire was on the move, and eventually conquered Israel in 722 BCE, capturing and taking as slaves pretty much all of the ruling elite. Which may not have been such a bad thing, as the time before had been characterized by widespread political and economic corruption in the northern kingdom. The gulf between rich and poor widened, and in this time of violence, greed, and uncertainty, the people compounded their sins by worshipping the Ba'als and other local deities alongside of the God of Israel.

Into this context came the prophet Hosea whose ministry began probably 20 years before the fall of Israel. It was his lot as a prophet to try to call the people back to themselves and to their covenant with their God, a covenant that required of the people that they be just and merciful,

that they take care of the poor, and be honest in their business dealings. God required of the people that they deal faithfully with each other and with God, renouncing the fertility cults of the Ba'als and paying more than lip service to their worship of their God. And when the people did not amend their behavior, when the people did not answer God's loving faithfulness with their own, God got angry.

Now I know that there are some of you here who are troubled by the thought of God angry, that an angry God seems inconsistent with a loving God. But I would argue just the opposite. Why would we worship a God who doesn't get angry at injustice? How could we love a God unmoved by corruption and violence, a God who did not become incensed on behalf of the poor, or the victimized, or the marginalized? Anger, in and of itself, is not a bad thing. The questions that are important about a God, or a person for that matter, is what they get angry about, and how they respond when they are angry. God had good reason to be angry with Israel. Israel had been unfaithful to God in every possible way; hence the images of whoredom and infidelity in the images from this morning's reading.

The writer of Hosea uses the image of marriage as an extended metaphor throughout his narrative: not marriage in general, but the particular marriage between Hosea the prophet and Gomer, the prostitute Hosea takes to wife. Throughout the book, this troubled marriage becomes the figure for the relationship between God and Israel. Hosea marries Gomer, and is faithful to her, has children with her, acknowledges and raises those children even though he is not sure they are biologically his. Which goes a ways in explaining why the children are given the terrible names assigned to them. In anger, at one point, Hosea, fed up with Gomer's constant infidelity, divorces Gomer, but then he goes out searching for her. Even though he finds her installed in the home of another man, even though that man demands a huge ransom to return Gomer to Hosea, Hosea pays the ransom, welcomes Gomer home, and continues faithful to her for the rest of his life. And he does all this because he loves her, because even though he is hurt and angered by her infidelity, he longs for her, because he is a man bound to his covenant partner not just by the cold strictures of law and duty, but by passion and intimacy, and deeply personal love.

So goes the story of Hosea and Gomer. So, would say the writer of Hosea, goes the story of God and Israel. So goes the story of God and us. Now, I have to tell you that through 2500 years of commentary on this book, commentators—Christian and Jewish—have had all manner of difficulty with this Hosea-Gomer, God and God's people metaphor. From Catholic celibates squeamish at the sexual tone of a metaphor for God to feminists reacting to the image of woman as whore and everything in between, it's easy to get lost in questions or concerns about this text that have nothing to do with the intent of the original writer. But if you put aside those questions and try to stick with the author's intent, something interesting, potentially transforming happens in this book. Though marriage in general is used commonly in both Old and New Testaments as an image for the relationship between God and God's people, the writer of Hosea has brought the marriage image down to one particular marriage, and a difficult marriage at that. There's nothing theoretical here. We are given to see up close the very real love and very real pain of Hosea's mix of longing and anger. It makes for some of the most beautiful poetry in all the Bible: what Hosea wants in the relationship between himself and his wife, and how her infidelity hurts him, new again with every turning away. But then there comes the moment when you realize that what the writer of Hosea is saying is that God is like that with us: that we have the power to

wound God that deeply; that we have the power to break God's heart. That, in fact, every time we hurt ourselves, or another person, God feels pain. Every time our greed overcomes our compassion, or our aspirations win out over our principles, God is wounded. Not in some distant theological kind of way, but in a deeply personal way. Every time we hurt the earth or do violence to any of God's beloved ones, God gets angry at us personally on their behalf. Always. Every time. Over and over again. Because the awful wonder of God's love is that for each and every one of God's people, it is personal and it runs deep, so deep and so true, that despite whatever anger and pain we cause, God will never be unfaithful. God will never turn away no matter what we do, no matter how our action provokes pain or anger.

In the church, we talk about God's love all the time. But somehow too often we make it dilute, banal, powerless, even uninteresting. The love spoken about in the book of the prophet Hosea is none of those things: it is immediate, it is deeply real; it is a palpable presence. We are less excited in the church to talk about sin, but when we do, we try to make it as uninteresting and powerless as we have made the concept of God's love. I don't think we often make a connection between our misdeeds and God's experience of real pain or anger kept leashed only by the sternest control. Would it matter if we made those connections? Would we think differently, act differently in the world if we knew that power we have in God's relationship with us?

Our scripture this morning—eight verses from the beginning of the book of Hosea—shows us a God angry, wounded, wanting to strike out at those who had broken faith. And God does react in the naming of the “fruits” of unfaithful relationship—remembrance of past misdeeds, a loss of trust, and finally, denial of relationship. “You are not mine and I am not yours.” But as angry as God is at the people, the minute those words—“you are not mine”—are spoken, God steps back. God will not go there, and instead calls Israel “children of the living God.” And that's why we should be glad. That's why we should know that we are blessed to be sinners in the hands of this angry God: because no matter what we have done to deserve God's anger—from Adam to Israel in Hosea's time, to Jesus hung on the cross—no matter how we have hurt God, God's answering word to us is always finally “yes.” What is our word in return? Thanks be to God. Amen.