

## **What's with Hosea?**

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July 31, 2016

Who is Hosea and why are we reading this? Several people at Wendy's parish were scratching their heads and asking Wendy, why are we reading Hosea last week. They had the same reaction as Betty Kennedy did last week. What in the world is going on with this prophet and why in the world is this part of the lectionary.

Written between 750 and 724 BCE and then revised two or three times until it reached the form that we read today this is a significant book among the prophets. Hosea is from the Northern Kingdom, which in the very near future will be overrun by the Assyrians.

One commentary stated that this book of prophesy was very influential in the writing of Deuteronomy which was several centuries later. His influence helped shape the Torah as we know it and as Jesus would have known it. The reference to "Out of Egypt I will call my son." is cited in the gospel of Matthew at the conclusion of the story of the wise men visiting Jesus and Joseph fleeing with the family to Egypt to escape Herrod.

One issue is the worship of other gods. Worship of other gods was not unheard of and the understanding of monotheism that we have today would have been totally foreign to this nation in 700 BCE. The commandment was you should not have any gods "before" me not that others gods didn't exist. That was the understanding by the time of Jesus, but certainly not the standard in Hosea's time. So if the people felt Baal was more powerful, then there is the problem.

Baal was a storm God and in an arid region rain was a precious commodity. Link that up with fertility cults that were connected to temples where temple prostitutes were responsible for worship to encourage rain and you begin to see the problem. That explains a great deal of the opening verses we heard last week. In short the people had either abandoned YHWH or at least they had added worship of Baal to their religious world.

One must not take this book literally for most of the book is metaphor to make a point. In the opening we heard last week, Hosea represents God and his unfaithful wife Gomer represents Israel and the unfaithful worship of the people of Israel in the northern kingdoms as they worshipped false Gods especially Baal as mentioned above. That theme runs throughout the book.

In that society the husband was expected to control and maintain the honor of his wife or wives. Indiscretions by the wife were a reflection on the honor of the man and his family. Adultery was punishable by death. So Gomar acting as a prostitute would bring shame on Hosea. So again put the metaphor in place and Israel has brought shame on God by the actions in relation to Baal. When you do that bad things are bound to happen.

So how does God react? This is where this week's passage comes into play and the answer may very well surprise you.

I have had many people say, I don't like the God of the Old Testament. He is mean, spiteful, angry and in short, not a nice person. Well this passage shows us something else, something I think if you read carefully will surprise you. This is in fact why I am preaching on this passage this week.

In a rather surprising twist for most of us, our passage today is filled with images of a loving parent who is disappointed in their child, but loves them anyway. Look at the images in this passage. The parent is the one who taught the child to walk. The parent is the one who picks him up, loves him and feeds him. It is also the loving parent the puts the child down and lets them explore, live their life as they choose.

This however does not mean that bad things aren't going to happen. When we put a young child down and let them wander off to explore how often does the exploration end in some sort of fall? This is followed by a return in tears to the parent. The parent does not cause the injury but is there to pick up the pieces at the end.

So God as the parent is bemoaning their child following those things that seem to be what they want and they suffer the consequences. This is how God allows us to learn. There is a big difference in a theology that says God punishes those who sin compared to a theology that says God allows us to go out on our own and fail. Do any of you hear echoes of the Prodigal Son parable of Jesus in this?

Many of us can relate to the images of this parent child relationship. Maybe we have been the child, maybe we have been the parent who sees the disaster coming. In terms of family counseling this is a parent who does not enable their child by rescuing them. This is also as many of you know one of the hardest things about being a parent.

This should not be that surprising for there are many many images of God in the Hebrew Scriptures. Then as today we are continuing to work out our understanding of God. In fact one of the most important things to remember when reading Hebrew Scriptures is that in them we see the working out of the relationship between God and humanity.

The idea of sinful humanity and their relationship with God has a very long history, in fact going back to the earliest stories. However you may not know that theology behind the fall in the Garden of Eden is relatively new and Jewish theologians have a completely different view. We are wrapped up in original sin which is a doctrine created by Augustine. A Jewish rabbi told an EfM group several years ago that in fact Adam and Eve eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge was the completion of our creation. That was when we became human because we had the knowledge of good and evil and therefore gained autonomy. Let that sink in for a minute. It wasn't until that moment that we were ready for the world. This changes the relationship between God and humanity.

What we see in today's passage is in fact the base upon which contemporary theologian Richard Rohr has built his teachings. The concept of falling upward, which is the title of one of the books our Men's Spirituality Group has read, teaches that as humans we will fall, we will make mistakes. It is in making those mistakes that we realize that we are not God and in fact they help us grow in our understanding of God. Hence the words falling upward. By falling we can either fall down and away from God or we can use that falling to fall upward towards God.

This reminds me of a wonderful saying in the Al-Anon book of daily readings. The difference between stepping stones and stumbling blocks is in how you use them. The obstacles we face can make us stronger or we can let them defeat us. This is the difference between why me and God where are you in this mess with me. One leads to despair and hopelessness, the other leads to an ever deepening relationship with God. Is this a challenge you bet! However it is the way to grow into the humans that God desires us to be.

So you see we see what many would consider a very modern New Testament image of God buried deep in the old books of the prophets. So remember the loving image of God is not an invention of the New Testament and Jesus. The God of Love has been around for a long time. It was humanity that has had the problem grasping the concept. So the next time somebody says I don't like the God of the Old Testament you can dazzle them with your biblical knowledge and tell them about old Hosea.