

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
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John Crosby
Hosea
Hosea 1**

All through this summer, we have been talking about the prophets. It's a part of the Bible we rarely read and when we do read it, we often don't understand it. And when we do understand it, frankly, it just sounds like they are angry and we are bad people. I don't need to be reminded every week that I'm bad and I don't want you to be angry all the time. Some of us have felt like, not give me a break, but tell me another part of the story. I'd like to do that today.

Today's prophet is Hosea and this will sound like a different kind of story. Actually, it sounds more like a love story. It's odd to think of the prophets telling a love story and even odder to think that I learned about this story at a Presbytery meeting. Meetings of the Presbytery are gatherings of clergy and elders together that are about as dull as you can possibly imagine. The hardest thing in our church is to get an elder to go back to a second Presbytery meeting! But this one was special. It was about 34 years ago. One of the roles of the Presbytery is to examine candidates for ordination and I was being examined to be ordained as a pastor. I remember there were three of us that night. It was out in the foothills of Colorado. I was to go third which made me a little more nervous.

The first person to be examined was a young woman. This was sort of at the cutting edge of the women's movement of ministry and she sailed right through. They were friendly toward her. They said her papers were excellent and that they were sure she would do wonderfully in ministry, so we felt good, the other guy and I.

Then the other guy gets up. He is from Princeton Seminary. He is twice as smart when he sleeps as I am on my best day. He is just a terrific young man and he, too, is doing very well, so I am feeling pretty good about my chances. At the end of the examination, there are questions from the floor. He is just about finished when an old codger, a retired pastor, who is taking care of a very rural Colorado church that is dying out on the plains, wanders over to the microphone. He doesn't really know how to use the microphone very well. Finally says, "I just have one question for you, young man. How do you think the theology of Hosea will affect your ministry?"

At this point, my friend turns white. From the back, I could tell this. He was a dead man walking and he did what every good grad student does. When you don't know the answer to the question, you put down everything you *do* know and hope they won't notice that you didn't answer the question. So he goes, "Hosea! Hosea is, of course, one of the minor prophets. That just means that he spoke short rather than long. He is also one of the middle prophets, that is, he speaks before the Northern Kingdom, Israel. Actually, I think he spoke *to* the Northern Kingdom. Yeah, yeah, that's it. Hosea doesn't mean anything as a name. Hosea is like saying *Joe* so it's not a special name." By this time, this guy has already said three things that I didn't know about Hosea. I'm in the pew going, "Hosea, Micah, uh, uh, Habakkuk. Where is this in the

Bible and please don't ask me." This guy is just great and finally he goes, "Sir, could you give me a hint?" The old preacher says, "You want a hint? Yes, young man, sure. It's about Gomer." Ohhhh, well, that changes everything! But nobody knew who Gomer was. Who is Gomer? After that, the young man looked blank enough that the pastor took mercy on him and said, "Would you like another hint?" The guy said, "Please! Please!" He gave him another hint and they both sat down.

By the grace of God, I passed that night and went home and reread the Book of Hosea. Hosea does mean *Joe*. Hosea was a farmer, probably a part-time consultant to the local kings of Israel. These were good times for Israel which usually means bad times for faith. When everything is going well, you don't feel like you need God. They were chasing the American dream in Israel and they were catching it, but they were letting go of the God who brought them there. Hosea's job was to say to the last king of Israel, who will not listen to him, "If you don't turn around, you're going over the cliff." And they went over the cliff. That's how the story of Hosea starts.

I did know one more thing about Hosea. When I was in seminary, I had an old professor who insisted that we learn one verse from every Book of the Bible. He told us what that verse would be and when he got to Hosea, this is what he chose.

⁷ "They sow the wind
and reap the whirlwind [Hosea 8:7].

You have probably seen that in different places. If you sow the wind, you reap the whirlwind. That's where we get the play *Inherit the Wind*. Remember *Inherit the Wind* about the evolution trial? The Scopes monkey trial? There is a line in it that says, "If you sow the wind of not following God, you will reap the whirlwind." The Book of Hosea begins like this.

¹ The word of the LORD that came to Hosea son of Beeri during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and during the reign of Jeroboam son of Jehoash king of Israel:

² When the LORD began to speak through Hosea, the LORD said to him, "Go, take to yourself an adulterous wife . . .

And have children with her and show that she is unfaithful

because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the LORD." ³ So he married Gomer

That's where Gomer comes from.

daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son. ⁴ Then the LORD said to Hosea, "Call him Jezreel, because I will soon punish the house of Jehu for the massacre at Jezreel,

That's a real historical event. The Israelites were unfaithful.

and I will put an end to the kingdom of Israel. ⁵ In that day I will break Israel's bow in the Valley of Jezreel."

Naming a boy Jezreel in that day is like naming a boy *Ferguson* today or naming a kid *9/11* or naming a kid *Auschwitz*. "Here comes Auschwitz." It's not what you want to say. You don't say this when you're proud of the boy.

⁶ Gomer conceived again and gave birth to a daughter. Then the LORD said to Hosea, "Call her Lo-Ruhamah,

Lo in Hebrew means *no* or *not*. Ruhumah is *loved*. *Not loved*. Call the baby *Unloved*.

for I will no longer show love to the house of Israel, that I should at all forgive them. ⁷Yet I will show love to the house of Judah; and I will save them—not by bow, sword or battle, or by horses and horsemen, but by the LORD their God."

⁸ After she had weaned Lo-Ruhamah, Gomer had another son. ⁹ Then the LORD said, "Call him Lo-Ammi,

Lo, *not*, Ammi, *mine*. Call the baby *Not mine*.

for you are not my people, and I am not your God.

Prophets were called not only to speak the hard words, they were called to live them out. God commanded Hosea to marry Gomer and intimated that it would not turn out well but to do it anyway. Now I've got to tell you, I have stood up here and done weddings where you cross your fingers. I don't do them anymore but you know that part of the wedding where it says, "Does anyone have an objection to this wedding? Please? Does anybody else have a problem with this?" I wouldn't say that, of course, but often the kids would be headed for disaster.

That's what happened here. Life is hard enough, we are fragile enough, without going into a marriage thinking it will fail. You see, Gomer wanted the good life. Hosea had a good reputation so Gomer marries Hosea, but she finds out that he does not have the good life so she starts having affairs. The last two kids are probably illegitimate, *Unloved* and *Not mine*. It says that Gomer ends up moving out. We don't know if the kids went with her. It sounds like the marriage is headed for divorce court, just like today, right? What changes Hosea is what happens next. In chapter 3, the Lord talks again.

3 The LORD said to me,

Hosea, that is,

"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."

² So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and about a homer and a lethek of barley.

³ Then I told her, "You are to live with me many days; you must not be a prostitute or be intimate with any man, and I will behave the same way toward you."

So the story of Hosea is that Joe, Hosea, goes into the Red Light District, pursuing his wife who has run away and become a prostitute. Literally, he has to pay her pimp to get her back and mortgage half of his property. And standing in front of this broken-down, beautiful old woman,

Hosea says, "No more running around. It's you and me." And I bet the best words that Gomer ever heard were "Let's go home. Let's go home and start over." And he doesn't stop there. He says, "Look at the kids. You know that kid that we called we called *Unloved*? Let's call her *Grace*. And you know that kid we called *Not mine*? Let's call him *Faith* because we're faithful." It's the story of God's grace. That's why Hosea is an unusual prophet. It's a love story.

We don't have the rest of the story so I don't know if it turned out happily ever after. I do know that it shows that God is not just angry at sin; His heart is broken. But God won't stop there. God will do just about anything to get us back. Wouldn't you love to be loved like that? Wouldn't you love to think there is nothing you can do, nothing you can say, nothing you can think, that would keep you from being loved, no matter what? That's the story of Hosea and it's the story of God's love for us.

One of the things that stories do is, they sweep us into the story. As you listened to the story today you thought of yourself as being in that story. Are you more like early Gomer, beautiful woman, gifted, the world in front of her? She's not bad. She wants to love Hosea, but she wants the good life. She wants it all, and when she can't have it all, she gives up the hard part and finds herself far away from where she was at the beginning. At the end, Gomer is broken, ashamed and hiding. When she hears the voice saying, "Let's try it again," it just seems too easy. Some of you are like Gomer. You have messed up big time.

Some of you are like Hosea. You're the good guy. You're trying to be faithful. You obey the religious rules. You listen to God and you keep getting hurt. Somehow God is saying to you, "Okay, don't get even. Don't get mad. Forgive again and forgive again."

I decided that day in Colorado at the Presbytery exams that someday I was going to preach on Hosea and if I ever did, I was going to say that Hosea the prophet teaches us that sin is not a small thing to God. Sin isn't like breaking someone's toys. For God, our sinfulness is like watching the person you love the most kiss somebody else when they don't know that you're watching. It is betrayal. That's what's happened with Gomer. She has betrayed Hosea. The consequence is not just heartache. It is not just hardness of heart. It is not bad people. It's that when you try to grab everything and you let go of the hard to grab the fun, you move away from where you were. And it is very difficult to get back. Gomer can't get back by herself. That's the truth about many of us. We feel like we have messed up so bad. We are in a bad place.

I am who I am because I have had some great mentors. One of them, Gordon MacDonald, taught some of my classes in seminary. He was a famous preacher in the eighties and nineties, the head of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. He had been in this big church and had just taken the presidency of InterVarsity when a chapter out of his past came back to haunt him. He had had an affair years before. He had said it was wrong and broke off the affair, but the woman said, "Unless you come back to me, I'm going to tell everybody." And he didn't and she did. He lost his job and he lost his church. His wife Gail stood by him, but it was a powerful and dark chapter of their lives.

Laura and I found out about this when we were with another young, hotshot ministry couple in downtown Chicago having a great time. My friend leans across the table and says, "Hey, did you hear about Gordon MacDonald? Screwed up sexually, man!" This was 25 or 30 years ago. My wife and my friend's wife turned to each other and they both started to cry, like we'd done something wrong. Then Laura turned to me and said, "Honey, if it could happen to Gordon

MacDonald, it could happen to you. What are we going to do to make sure it doesn't happen to you?"

Hosea teaches that moving away from God is not a small thing, but then Hosea, unlike the other prophets, also teaches that that's not the end of the story. We are bought back by God. In the story of Hosea, the prophet spends half of his wealth and more to buy back this faithless person. In the New Testament, the purchase price includes a cross. Somebody will literally die for you. God will die to bring you back. That's how much you are loved. Hosea not only goes after people who are broken, he not only ransoms them and brings them back, he then gives new names. A new name back then was a new start. *Unloved* turns into *Grace*. *Not mine* turns into *Faith*. Some of you need more than a fresh start. You need to see yourself the way that God sees you because in the end, the prophet Hosea is about what real love looks like.

I talk about love all the time. I love all kinds of things. I love chocolate; chocolate loves me. It's a wonderful relationship. I love French fries; French fries love me. I love the Vikings; I'm not too bright. We say we love a lot of stuff. We say we love another person. We say we love God. Hosea shows what God's love looks like. Hosea is the Old Testament answer to the most famous story in the Bible. The most famous story in the Bible is the story that Jesus tells of the Prodigal Son, who does the same thing. He sells all the good stuff in his life and goes off and has a great time and finds himself far from home, unable to get back. These are the very best verses in the Bible for me.

¹⁷ "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' ²⁰ So he got up and went to his father.

Just like Hosea and Gomer, the Prodigal Son goes back and it says in the story,

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him [Luke 15:17-20].

The Old Testament is even better, isn't it? Hosea doesn't wait for me to turn around. It says, "God is coming after you. 'I am sending someone to forgive you and He is already on the way. I am sending someone to love you.'" Hosea says God goes out searching for Gomer. God goes out searching for anybody who has messed up.

I told you that I didn't know anything about Hosea, just like a lot of you. I don't want to say *truth time*, but how many of you have actually read the Book of Hosea? Anybody? Four of you, three of you are pastors. Okay. Hosea is here because of that old country pastor and the hint that he gives. He says that it is a love story and it's about Gomer. And he gave one more hint. I asked my friends Rich Larson and Matt Potter if they would share with you what that hint was. It is a song. It's not a song we sing here in church. It's more of an old, small-church-in-Colorado country song that talks about the way that God loves. The pastor said, "Do you want a hint? Son, when you preach on Hosea, close the service with this song."

O Love that wilt not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee;

I give thee back the life I owe,
That in thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.

O Love that wilt not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee;
I give thee back the life I owe,
That in thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.

O Love that wilt not let me go.

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