

SERMON AT TRINITY UMC, WILMETTE, ILLINOIS

“FAMOUS FORGOTTEN HEROES: HOSEA”

July 18, 2010

TEXT: Hosea 11:1-11

BY: Pastor Kirk Reed

Some people say that in the Old Testament God is implacably harsh and stern. But the truth is, the God of Moses is identical to the God of Jesus. God is always gracious and compassionate. How do we know that's true? Hosea is one of our best teachers. Thanks to this famous forgotten hero we have window into the heart of God.

Hosea. He lived in the late 700's B.C., when God's people in the northern kingdom were threatened by the bloodthirsty Assyrians. They were in danger of being devoured by the Assyrian Empire. Meanwhile, Hosea was having a personal crisis. Yes, there was a political and military crisis, but Hosea's struggle was with a woman. His wife was a disaster. She was a lovely person, the mother of his child, the joy of his life. Unfortunately, she began to advertise her loveliness to other men. She was cheating on Hosea. It's all here in the Bible, a grimy story of two pregnancies out of wedlock. And then – can you believe it? – she abandoned all three of her children, so that she could play around full-time with her so-called lovers. Eventually she was dumped by these men who were simply using her. To support herself she sold her body into slavery.

Can you imagine what it was like for Hosea, trying to care for three young children, rejected as a man, humiliated in the eyes of the community? But at that moment of despair Hosea had a spiritual awakening. He caught a glimpse of God's compassion. He saw into the heart of the Eternal and realized to his astonishment that what was happening to him was also happening to God. His wife had run away, just like God's people. They had abandoned the love of God to chase after sex, money, and power. They had broken their covenant with the Holy One of Israel, so that they could play around with other gods. Like Hosea's wife, they were unfaithful, ruined beyond repair.

So what does God do when we degrade ourselves? The answer, Hosea tells us, is that God weeps. God aches for us. God continues to be in love with us, even when we are foolish.

Let's look again at what I believe is the most poignant declaration of love in the entire Hebrew Bible: the 11th chapter of Hosea. You can feel the brokenness in the heart of God. Verse 1: “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called him, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols.” Can't you hear God saying, “I don't get it; I am baffled by your behavior”?

What comes next? In verse 3 God says: “Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk. I took them up in my arms, but they did not know that I healed them.” That's how it is for all of us. God is like a tender parent, teaching us, holding us, feeding us, but we ignore God's kindness. We take it for granted.

So how does God feel when we turn away? How does God feel when we say, “I don’t need you; I’ve got other lovers”? God’s instinctive response is to send us back to Egypt or to let us be crushed by the Assyrians. That’s what God is considering in verse 5. You can hear God’s thought process: “Fine. If you don’t want me, I don’t want you. Ruin your life. See if I care.” God is clearly frustrated. Here are the exact words, beginning in verse 5: “[B]ecause they have refused to return to me, [t]he sword rages in their cities, it consumes [them] . . . My people are bent on turning away from me. To the Most High they call, but he will not raise them up” (vv. 5-7). This is the passion of God, telling us how much it hurts to be rejected. The God we worship is not an iceberg: cold, uncaring, devoid of passion. The God we worship agonizes when we run away from home, like a son or a daughter who wants nothing but self-gratification. The Holy One is devastated when we run away.

We come now to what may be the most heart-wrenching words in all of Scripture. After telling us how painful it is to love us, God cries out in anguish: “How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah [the city I destroyed]? How can I treat you like Zeboiim [obliterated]? My heart recoils within me. My compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger . . . for I am God and [not a] mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath” (vv. 8-9). I am stunned when I hear those words. They reveal the heart of God, aching for us, pleading with us to stop running away.

You may be wondering: what happened to Hosea’s wife? Did she continue to debase herself, or did she come home to Hosea and her three children? We don’t know. But what we do know is this: Hosea went down to the red light district and found her. She was wretched, having sold her integrity along with her body. “Can I purchase her for myself?” he asked. “What? You want *her*?” “Yes,” he replied. “I want her to be my wife again.” To everyone’s amazement Hosea produced 15 shekels of silver, along with some barley and some wine, the price of a slave, and he said to the woman who had abandoned him: “Please. Come home.”

Did she change? Did she become a new person? No one can say. But the real question is this: will *we* change? Will we stop running after the gods of empty pleasure, so that we can return to the One whose love is faithful?

When I think of Jesus, I can see him standing before us, saying: “Do you know how much I love you?” And then he stretches out his arms on the cross and dies. That’s what God is willing to do for the wife of Hosea. And for us. The God we worship is willing to live with a broken heart until we finally come home.