

Hosea 2:14-20  
Love Me Tender  
Rev. Jonathan Cornell  
5-18-14

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Before I begin this morning, I just want to give you a brief heads up that the material I'm going to cover today leans a little bit on the racy side. Families with young children may want to take them downstairs, and for the rest of us, this is just a friendly warning that what we're going to dive into may be a little eye-opening. And before we do, I would invite you to join me in asking the Holy Spirit to guide and teach us today.

***Father God, as we once again place our lives before your Word, we do so today with even the places of our heart we would rather keep hidden. For God, we too, especially your people, are as prone to wandering after false gods as any other. So may the refining fire and penetrating light of your Holy Word skillfully and precisely remove the dead tissue, and replace it with new and faithful life the Christ our Lord, in whose name we pray, amen.***

Last year, the New York Times ran an article entitled "She Can Play that Game Too." In it, the author describes how on college campuses these days, there is a phenomena happening among both genders that used to be known stereotypically as being male behavior. You see, traditionally it was men on campus who were interested in one night stands, while the women were looking for relationships and commitment. Well, not so much anymore, this author says. The author follows a slim, attractive junior who, when she was done studying for the evening, texts a young man, who was not her boyfriend, but rather the person with whom she is sleeping.

This hook-up culture is becoming a way of life in many places. When asked about why she opted for this, as opposed to a committed monogamous relationship, even one that prolonged sexual activity until after marriage, she replied not with an emotional answer, but with a cost-benefit analysis.

***"I positioned myself in college in such a way that I can't have a meaningful romantic relationship, because I'm always busy and the people that I am interested in are always busy, too," "And I know everyone says, 'Make time, make time,' "But there are so many other things going on in my life that I find so important that I just, like, can't make time, and I don't want to make time."***

Studies are showing that this is no longer just a male dominated behavior, but that where 25% of men bought in, 20% of women also were fully bought into the desire to simply enjoy the benefits of intimacy without actually investing in the relationship that would blossom into deep and long-lasting intimacy. People who are approached about long-term sacrificial, what the Bible calls a covenant relationship, say that it sounds terrible. In short, what so many in our culture want are the benefits without having to invest in the thing that yields the benefits (sex, job, friendship, career, etc).

What we will see today is that, as the author of Ecclesiastes says, truly there is nothing new under the sun. This morning, I am preaching from the Prophets. And this morning is not a message about sex. Rather, what we will hear from Hosea is that Israel has become a hook-up culture in their relationship with God. A people who would rather get all the benefits of what God has to offer without any of the costs of the long-term relationship. That long-term marriage journey, what the Bible calls a covenant relationship, sounded terrible. God's people said, "We don't want to go through all those changes with you, Lord. Let us hook up with some of these small 'g' gods who give us a measure of relief or pleasure, and then let us go on with our lives as normal, without your demands."

And Hosea, speaking for God, is furious with them, and proceeds to rebuke them. And before we get to our text for this morning, let me read a few verses not a part of our reading, but which give you a sense of what God intends to do to Israel for her unfaithfulness. The prophet says: **I will put an end to all her mirth, her feast, her new moons, her Sabbaths, and all her appointed feasts. And I will lay waste her vines and her fig trees of which she said, These are my wages, which my lovers have given me. I will make them a forest, and the beasts of the field shall devour them. And I will punish her for the feast days of the Baals when she burned offerings to them and adorned herself with her ring and jewelry, and went after her lovers and forgot me.**

And then we read what God really intends to do, and here we pick up at verse 14, and so if you would, please stand with me as you are able and read along from Hosea 2.

**Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. And there I will give her her vineyards and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt.**

**"And in that day, declares the Lord, you will call me 'My Husband,' and no longer will you call me 'My Baal.' For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be remembered by name no more. And I will make for them a covenant on that day with the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the creeping things of the ground. And I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land, and I will make you lie down in safety. And I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the Lord.**

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

In the verses leading up to this morning's passage, we're preparing for the worst, God is mad. Punishment, destruction, banishment – these are the things we think Israel has in their future. This is what we talked about last week when I described the religious loop Israel acts, and Hosea the Prophet speaking for God reacts, action, reaction, event, then expert analysis. So why do we read the prophets? After all, doesn't it just keep us in that insidious loop of empty religion?

The main job of the Prophet is to take lives of people who are caught in the downward spiral toward self destruction and to speak the living word into dead places. Prophets like Hosea call us to abandon our culture of hook-up religion, religion that only seeks the benefits of life with God without having to actually invest in the deep and rich relationship with God that brings the fruits. And what the prophets do is call us to abandon this way and invite us back to God.

So here's Hosea in a nutshell: Spurned lover out looking for his wayward wife, who is seduced away from him by her desires, and the God who is determined to entice her right back. Hosea is crying out to God's people at a time when they were on the verge of being swept into exile by the Babylonians and uprooted from their homes and lands.

Hosea is the story of a sordid love affair gone wrong. The kind that none of us wants to find ourselves in, but unfortunately all too often, in one way or another, do. It's the story of a husband Hosea who falls for this woman. Now Hosea is not flashy, but he's not a sucker either. Hosea says to himself, "I know what's going to happen. You'll be comfortable and well cared for with me, your first love. But pretty soon things are going to begin to seem routine, and then it's just going to seem stifling. We'll hit lean patches when connection between the two of us is just not there, and one day walking down the street there he'll be, Mr. Benefits with no cost. He'll promise all the benefits, all the excitement you had with me, and he'll tell you you're free to go anytime, but you cannot stop thinking about him. It will feel free, when in fact you will be inextricably caught in his web.

"Then even when I find out, even when you realize that the gifts he's given are even stolen from me, you're not going to want to stop. I'll remind you of the promises, I'll try and bring you back to your senses, I'll block your access to him but you won't care. I will throw you out and you'll just be down on the street corner looking for your next quick fix. Your lust will know no limits. Then I'll call you into the courtroom, I will expose you to your children and even the facing the loss of your life, your dignity, your reputation, your past, and your future. YOU will call me hateful, spiteful, demanding, and possessive. At which point, I'm going to have no other choice...I'm going to entice you.

"I'm going to allure you and woo you like you've never been pursued and wooed before. I'm going to go after you with a passion that makes all those other lovers look like choirboys."

I bet you didn't see that one coming did you?

As we read along, we think that Hosea is going to discard his wife and start over with someone else, someone who will appreciate him, love him, and be pure. Instead, God says, "You know what? I'm coming after even more intently. I will romance you until you feel like you're going to break out in song. I will entice you with greater passion and care than any lover until the only name you call out is my name. I will make you mine with integrity and justice, but what I will never tolerate is the slightest bit of manipulation

or abuse. With firmness and compassion I will make you mine in a way that never lets you go.”

That’s God’s message to the prophet Hosea. Pretty eye opening, right? Pulse a little quicker? It pretty descriptive language, right? But why does Hosea use such passionate and emotive words when there are nice religious ones that say the same thing? Why does Hosea use the word “whoring,” when there’s a perfectly acceptable word “disobedient” available, or why does he say “entice,” when “command” is right there. Why talk of romance when everyone knows that real no-nonsense religion is from the neck up? Because maybe it’s here that Israel’s life and their faith has become detached from their body and their desires. In the everyday experiences of relationship, they have wandered away from God and religious jargon just doesn’t speak to the kind of disconnect they now face.

Maybe it’s because our lives have become so disconnected from God in the everyday experiences that the only place for God to woo us back is to start right there with our bodies and our experiences. Start with the places where we prefer to hook up for the short term rather than dig into relationship for the long haul. Maybe it’s because the people wanted to benefits of the life on earth, but were not willing commit even one of those days to the Lord in Sabbath. They wanted the benefits of wealth without the cost of giving ten percent back to God for the care of the poor and the outcast. They wanted the benefit of a huge and abundant harvest without the cost of opening up the edges of their fields for the gleaning by those who didn’t have enough. They wanted the benefit of a solid and a safe home without the cost of having to deal with strangers and aliens. They wanted the benefit of power without the cost of standing up to injustice. They wanted the benefit of abundance without the cost of service.

When they pursued these benefits, these gifts, without the giver, these are the idols, the other lovers that the Lord talks about through Hosea. This is hook-up religion in a nutshell: *God, I want all the benefits of a relationship with you without the cost of actually having to go out of my way, or to do it your way, which is often not the easy way. I want the benefits of what God has to give without yielding our lives to the demand for holiness, faithfulness, justice or mercy.*

And what God says to Israel as their lives have become self consumed, their communities fragmented by injustice, their courtrooms become a mockery, their care and compassion for the weak and outcast gone... what God thunders through the prophets is God’s wrath toward these wrongful, cynical, self-absorbed people. And just when you think that God is going to shut the door, turn out the lights, and wash his hands of Israel, you know what God does? God doubles, triples, quadruples his loving pursuit of us: “I’m not going to give you up to these lesser lovers that easily.” Just when we think God is going to leave Israel out to dry, God doubles down on faithfulness. Just when you think you’ve gone too far from God, or God’s gone too far from you.

God’s grace doesn’t begin in the New Testament. Look at verses 13-14. Right when you think God is through with her, God says, “I will allure you and pursue you.” And this is

the grace and the love that we read in these prophets. Even though there are a lot of harsh words of judgment, of God's wrath toward wrong behavior, there is an underlying promise that God will always be faithful. And that promise, that pursuit of God's beloved, comes to fullness in the person of Jesus who entices us out of our deserts, and welcomes you and me back with open arms into new life and new hope.

This is the hope of the prophets. This is where we read the gospel, the good news of the prophets. So that if you find yourself in a time where you're far from God and you feel like God's judgment is over you, I promise you it does not last forever, and that God IS at work bringing you back into his arms of grace and mercy and love.