

## **November 12th: Forgive**

This Fall we return to the Narrative Lectionary—a year long collection of readings that take us from the origins of God’s people to the first century world. These readings are chosen on purpose, because they help us trace a particular theme throughout our scripture texts—and this year our theme is “Love in Action.” Over the course of the year, we’ll read a wide variety of passages, from Old Testament stories, wisdom literature, prophetic teachings, scenes from the life of Jesus, and instructions for the early church—but in each, there’s a compelling action that is embedded into the narrative. Last year’s theme was “A Family Story,” and we focused on the identity and purpose of God’s beloved children—but this time around, we’ll be taking a closer look at the movement behind that belonging—the verbs that form the foundation of our faith and life together. Of course, love is the most important verb of all, so we’ll also be tracing how God’s love was shown to our spiritual ancestors and discover how God’s love is still being shown to us today.

As we study together, the goal isn’t simply to increase our knowledge of God—the goal is to increase in love towards God and towards each other. So as we read, and as we reflect, I want to challenge all of us to respond to these stories with action—with real, tangible ways that we can each show love to our hurting world. I want us to take these words of wisdom from our text and transform them into positive change in our community—so that our neighborhood, our city, our country, can be a place where God’s love is seen and felt by everyone.

Before we look at our text more closely, I invite you to pray with me.

*Merciful God, you have continued to love your people despite our faithlessness to you. You have continued to be faithful, even when we have turned away or when we have lacked trust in your plans for us. And yet, you still come searching for us. And yet, you are still reaching out to us. Like a parent, you call us home, and are waiting with open arms. Forgive us for our foolishness, and help us to forgive ourselves for the ways that we have fallen short. Lead us into a restored*

*relationship, where love and compassion overflow, so that we might be your people once more. Amen.*

Today we turn to a new section of the Bible—we've previously been studying what are called the "historical books," but this morning, we'll be looking at texts that fall into the category of "the prophets." These Old Testament prophets are not a monolith however—some are encouraging, some are enraged, some are powerful, and some are humble. Some live in caves in the countryside and some inhabit the courts of kings. Some wrote long texts, or had long careers, while some others wrote relatively little or served for only a short time.

In some ways, our biblical text categorizes Hosea as a "minor prophet," and in the Hebrew version of the Old Testament Hosea is grouped with eleven other less important characters in what is named the Book of the Twelve. Despite this, I think Hosea's writings are anything but minor—I think Hosea is rather unique in both his content and his commitment to his role. Hosea's ministry consumes his whole life—and as we'll see, his personal problems often run parallel to the issues that he's speaking about in his context. The challenges that he's facing in his personal life often mirror the overall dysfunction that is happening in his community. And I think that gives him a perspective that we don't always hear from in scripture—he speaks as someone who is confronting not only issues on a large, corporate scale, but also on an intimate, individual scale as well. He deals with both complex, societal problems, and problems within his own household.

But before we talk more specifically about Hosea's writings in this passage, I do want to share some helpful background information so that we can set the stage. Hosea was a prophet in the 8th century BCE, which is a few generations after the split that happened after King Solomon's death. Hosea is living in a time when these two nations were often at odds with each other, with both Kings claiming divine power and protection, and both people feeling like they were the true inheritors of God's promises. Although some trade and contact was occurring between these two nations, Hosea was a native resident of the

northern kingdom of Israel, and his words are directed at Israel's actions specifically. He was speaking to his fellow tribesmen—his neighbors—but as you can imagine, his proximity to these issues wasn't always received well. Hosea gets a fair amount of pushback about his message, and as a result of this, he has a little bit of a reputation of being kind of an angry prophet—righteous anger, of course.

As we think about our biblical timeline, most scholars and historians argue that Hosea was active as prophet under the reigns of multiple kings, including Jeroboam II, who ruled for 41 years and was alive at the time that the prophet Jonah was sent to Nineveh. Hosea always witnessed a tumultuous political climate, as a total of four Kings of Israel were killed by their adversaries—both King Zechariah and King Shallum were assassinated while on the throne for only a few months, King Pekah murdered his predecessor, and King Hoshea murdered King Pekah. It got really messy there for a while, with all kinds of plots and spies, and King Hoshea only ruled for nine years before the Assyrian army swept in and conquered the whole territory in 722 BCE.

And like this royal mess, Hosea is no stranger to rivals and deception during his sixty years of ministry. In the beginning of Hosea's story, he is instructed by God to marry a woman named Gomer who had a reputation for promiscuity. Some translations name her a prostitute, but others simply say that she was known for her many relations in the community. And this marriage quickly sours—Gomer bears Hosea three children, but they are not one big happy family.

Although biblical scholars try to dress up Hosea's narrative, the reality is that this text is more like a transcript of an episode of Jerry Springer than a record of marital and familial bliss. We hear this most bluntly when Hosea announces the name of his third child, a boy named "Lo-Ammi." In English, that might not sound like anything to be worried about, but in Hebrew, the name literally means "not my child," a very strong indication that the paternity of this child has been called into question. Gomer has clearly been unfaithful, and Hosea

now must deal with her infidelity and the ways that her behavior has fractured their relationship.

As I mentioned, this reality of infidelity is also something that Hosea sees playing out in his spiritual community. He sees that the once faithful people of God have been unfaithful in their worship and their administration of justice—and God is clearly displeased by this fractured relationship. God is angry that his children have broken their promises. God is frustrated that any attempts at correction have fallen on deaf ears. God is desperate for the people of Israel to return to the covenant that was made between their ancestors and the God that they served. God is trying to reconnect with his beloved nation, but they are too preoccupied with prideful wars, hedonistic indulgences, and idols of wealth.

When we reach chapter 11, God is ready to pour out God's heart about this situation—so this chapter is a passionate song or poem from God's point of view. I think that makes this passage pretty special! Although our whole biblical text is about God, and God does speak at certain points, a lot of our narrative is human centered or focused on what human beings are saying and doing to each other. So when we come to a piece of the story that records God speaking directly, I think that should make us stop and appreciate the importance of this passage.

God's poem begins, "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. But the more they were called, the more they went away from me. They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images. God continues, "It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realize it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love. To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek, and I bent down to feed them."

This is very vivid imagery—don't you think? This is what divine parenthood looks like—we can imagine this, a gentle parent who leans down to provide nourishment. We can picture it, a child pressed to a cheek. We can see it, a

toddler learning to walk by holding a parent's hand. We can maybe even smell it, or hear it, or taste it, or remember it from our own life experiences. We can share this moment with God, we can feel it alongside God. This is what God and Hosea want to communicate, that this relationship between God and God's people is deep, and rich, and personal.

By verse 5, I think we really start to hear God's grief about how this tender and loving relationship has been cast aside. We even hear God communicate in a bit of an angry tone about Israel's behavior—God says, “Will they not return to Egypt and will not Assyria rule over them because they refuse to repent? A sword will flash in their cities; it will devour their false prophets and put an end to their plans. My people are determined to turn from me. Even though they call me God Most High, I will by no means exalt them.”

In these statements, we hear that God has plans to humble the Israelites if they are not willing to repent. God grieves that his care and tenderness has been repaid with violence, rebellion, and betrayal, and so like a parent, he comes up with a punishment that is proportionate to the misbehavior.

But by verse 8, it becomes clear that God's anger has been replaced by compassion and mercy. Even though God's children have gone astray, God's heart has softened, and we hear that God is moved to reconsider his previous expressions of frustration. Our passage for today ends with this promise from God: “How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I treat you like Admah? How can I make you like Zeboyim? My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I devastate Ephraim again. For I am God, and not a man—the Holy One among you. I will not come against their cities.”

These last two lines stand out to me—through Hosea, God tells his people that he is not like them and their human character. God says that God will act differently, unlike the infidelity of God's people. The Holy One will not be like human beings, but set apart by a separate, divine standard of behavior. And for

this reason, God has decided to forgive the Israelites. God chooses mercy instead of destruction. God chooses forgiveness instead of revenge.

And so our verb for today is: to forgive.

I know that for some of us, forgiveness is a difficult task. Some of us have been through difficult circumstances or situations that have caused us great harm, and we hold onto those resentments, those grudges, those wounds. Sometimes that feels easier than dealing with the very real pain that lies underneath. Sometimes it feels easier to block it out of our memory, or pretend those experiences didn't happen, or bury those emotions inside of us rather than bring them up to surface and deal with them in a way that brings about healing or restoration.

It's something I'm working on too. There are people in my life or people I've removed from my life who I'm still struggling to forgive. I'm still wrestling with what it would mean for me to forgive the people who treated me unfairly, or the person who emotionally abused me, or the individuals who created a toxic system that wounded me deeply. There are some days when I can make progress, but others when I feel like I'm back at square one. It's hard work. And it's difficult work—emotionally, spiritually, mentally. So I'm not saying that we have to have it all figured out today. I'm not saying that any of us need to walk out of this sanctuary with no remaining wounds or no lingering resentments. I don't think that's realistic. But I do hope that we can hear God's words and his passionate love for Israel, and use that as inspiration for our own struggles.

And as I think about this passage, I'm reminded of a very familiar text from our New Testament that I think could be a good companion to this story—because it gives us another picture of what this tender, divine love can look like. 1 Corinthians 13 is often read at weddings, as a way to remind couples of what a loving marriage can look like, but Paul didn't write his letter to the church in Corinth with advice only for newlyweds. In fact, this passage is supposed to tell these new disciples how they should act towards each other and how they

should treat their neighbors. It sets the standard for all kinds of community behavior and all kinds of love.

Perhaps Paul was inspired by God's poem from Hosea, because he writes, "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails."

This is the love that God has for ancient Israel. This is the love that God has for you, and me, and all of our communities today. This is the enduring love that God wants all of his beloved creation to experience. This is the everlasting love that God is desperately trying to communicate to each and every one of us regardless of our past, or our issues, or our wounds.

So if this is the forgiveness that has been shown to us, if this is the love that has been lavished on us as God's beloved children—then it might help us to remember that the same applies for the people that we are struggling to forgive. They are also recipients of God's compassion. They are also beloved. They are also loved with a love that never fails.

We may be human and forgiveness may be difficult, but there's a reason to have hope. Because God's spirit lives inside of us, we also contain a spark of this divine care. And so I hope that we use that tiny piece of enduring love this week to share compassion and tenderness with others. I hope we use that tiny piece of mercy to work on true forgiveness and reconciliation. I hope all of us can use that tiny piece of perseverance to work towards wholeness and peace.

Amen.