



St. Luke's East Hampton

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Benjamin Shambaugh

July 27, 2025; Proper 12C: [Hosea 1:2-10](#); [Colossians 2:6-15, \(16-19\)](#); [Luke 11:1-13](#)

Picture in your mind a map of the Middle East. On the right, you have the empires of Babylon, Assyria, and Mesopotamia which grew up around the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. On the left, you have the empire of Egypt, centered around the Nile. In between, you have the land along the shore of the Mediterranean, the home of Israel and Palestine. When those empires were in decline or transition, Israel was able to thrive. When those empires grew, the land of Israel was subsumed. Located on the road between the civilization, in a land that had been (and in many ways still is) occupied by people with a diversity of religious expression, Israel was a natural place for pluralism to develop... and the Jewish law and prophets did everything they could to make sure that didn't happen either on personal and national levels. The biggest sin in the Hebrew scriptures was following foreign gods. Hosea's audience would have been well aware that many foreign deities were women and that cult prostitution was a common practice in pagan religions. While Hosea's marrying and having children by a prostitute might seem extreme to modern eyes, people in his own day would have immediately understood the metaphor. This wasn't about the world's oldest profession, it was about professing a foreign faith. Hosea was using his life to show how the nation of Israel was following other gods. His hearers would have gotten the message and hung on to the hope in the last paragraph that it was not too late and they - and their nation - could still return to God.

Concern about the worship of other gods in our reading from Paul's letter to the Colossians. The city of Colossae was at a thriving crossroads in Asia Minor. It was a place where many Jewish people had settled after the exile in Babylon, and the members of the Colossian church worked hard on maintaining the traditions of Jewish festivals and liturgical observances. Paul was afraid that the Christianity of the Colossian Church would be too highly influenced by its cosmopolitan context. In today's second reading, he cautioned the members of that church not to get pulled away by foreign gods or otherwise separate their Christianity from Christ. In these days of political machinations, his warning to "not be taken captive through philosophy and empty deceit" is particularly poignant. Our culture is filled with other idols -- gods of sex, money, and power, of military might, financial success, and material possessions and of many other people and things that I am sure you can name. And, before we throw stones in glass houses, we who put a huge effort on Holy Days and who use a lunar calendar to mark Easter, Lent and other occasions, should heed his warning about those who focus too much on the observing of things like festivals, new moons and Sabbaths. Imagine what would happen if we took Hosea's metaphor and Paul's words to heart. Imagine what would happen if we stopped worshiping idols and simply started following Jesus—and acting like we believe in him – instead.

Belief, of course, is a tricky thing. In the musical the Book of Mormon, Elder Price sang “You cannot just believe part-way. You have to believe in it all. My problem was doubting the Lord’s will instead of standing tall. I can’t allow myself to have any doubt. It’s time to set my worries free. Time to show the world what Elder Price is about and share the power inside of me. I am a Mormon and, dang it, a Mormon just believes.” This song starts off nicely. Very quickly, however, it becomes a stinging rebuke to those who believe all kinds of things that make no sense without questioning anything. The good thing both for elder Price and for you and me is that what he is singing about isn’t what belief in the Bible actually means. The Greek word used for belief in the New Testament is *pisteou*, which means trust or have confidence in. Saying “I believe” isn’t about blindly affirming absurd ideas. Saying, “I believe” isn’t even about asserting scientific fact. It’s about affirming a relationship. Think about it this way. When I say “I believe in you” I am not saying whether or not you exist. I am saying I know you can do it. I trust in you. If we say we believe in God, we are saying we trust in him – just the way he trusts and believes in us. Notice, by the way, that “we believe” is plural. It’s not about us as individuals. Unlike Elder Price in that song, we don’t have to believe - or believe in - everything ourselves. We do that as a group. The musical ends on a high note when the missionaries and the local people are successful together. That’s what happens when we act together as a body, when we live as a church. Belief is about trusting in God. It’s about trusting in one another as well.

This is the message of the gospel we just heard. The Lord’s Prayer, and all of those rather strange examples that follow, are about trusting that God will provide. Did you notice the plural in “give us our daily bread”? Like the feeding of the five thousand and the giving of bread in the Eucharist, giving us our daily bread is not just about meeting our personal needs. The feeding of the five thousand, the Eucharist, and our daily bread are what Paul calls a shadow of things to come. They are a foretaste of the great banquet in the Kingdom of God. More than just a prayer, the Lord’s Prayer is a promise that we will help make that Kingdom come right here on earth by doing things like forgiving others as we have been forgiven and feeding others as we have been fed. The Lord’s Prayer is a promise that we will help that kingdom come today.

This is a promise we struggle to keep. I don’t know about you, but it is hard for me to say the Lord’s Prayer while children are starving in Gaza and my tax dollars are mostly being used not for bread but for bombs, with fighting finally paused last night only after intense pressure from the people other than ourselves. Our currency proclaims that “in God we trust” but if our leaders allow 500 tons of food aid already in to the Middle East to pass its expiration date and be destroyed rather than distributed and if they can stand up and say that things like supporting education, science and culture around the globe and helping kids learn to read right here at home are not in our national interest, you have to wonder what god our dollars are actually talking about.

Hosea’s metaphor sounds harsh but his message is clear. Like the people of ancient Israel and the Roman city of Colossae, we live in a world where choices abound. One quick look at the headlines shows that the consequences of our decisions are real. What or who do you believe in? Where or in whom do you put your trust? Is your focus on “me” or “we”? The Lord’s Prayer is a prayer. It is also a promise. It raises a question: Are you building God’s kingdom or your own?