

“The Story of a Passionate Lover”
Hosea 1:2-10 and Psalm 85:1-7

Hosea is a difficult book for modern readers. In this book God is angry...*really* angry! I suppose when we are searching for a heart-warming, uplifting, passage of scripture to brighten a dark day, most likely you and I skip right over Hosea! The theological word is “Duh!” At first glance, Hosea simply does not seem to be the best choice for family devotions just before bedtime!

Hosea is a difficult book. Reading from our passage this morning, it seems as if God is ready to give up on Israel. And why would God command his one and only faithful prophet of the day to marry a woman of harlotry? And why in the world would the prophet Hosea actually marry a prostitute named Gomer, knowing that the chances of her faithfulness were, indeed, small to nonexistent?

Perhaps you and I need some background on this ancient text before it can truly speak its prophetic word to us as we look back on this story 2700 years later. This story is difficult and it is old; but when understood, it may well be among the most powerfully relevant stories we have heard in a long time.

In Hosea’s time, Israel was very active in the worship of fertility gods. These gods were known as the baals of Canaan. It is in this context that God told Hosea to take as his wife a woman who had served as a so-called sacred prostitute at the worship site of Baal.

In baalistic religion, it was believed that various baal-gods “impregnated” the land, the mother goddess, with rain...causing it to bring forth produce. The baal gods were understood to be the source of fertility in humans. So here is what worshippers did. They would go to the cult site and have sexual relations with male and female temple prostitutes. By doing this, they were symbolically married to Baal who would, in turn, magically bring forth fertility in both humans and land. In short, Baal was believed to be the source of life, and worshipping him assure the people what we would call “the good life.”

Friends, do not be fooled. Although our human understanding of God has changed throughout history, especially with the advent of Jesus Christ, Yahweh of the Old Testament is the very same God we find in the New Testament; and this is the same God who has a claim on our lives and our souls this morning. Nothing...nothing in all of biblical history has made God angrier than this: than when those who are called the “children of God” put their practical, everyday, trust in other gods—in other idols—in other primary sources of security.

The ancient scripture before us is a love story. This is a story about a passionate lover called God. But the love in this story has little to do with sweet, sappy sentimentality. It is about real, heart-breaking, heart-mending love. Namely, Hosea is a story about how God loves you and me.

Said in story form...God is faithful even when we have broken God's heart, time and time again, into uncountable pieces. God is faithful, even when God's anger burns hot. Our God is a personal God. The God of our salvation as revealed in Jesus Christ, is not just one god among many...God is more than a warm feeling that emanates from nature and relationships around us. God is not some impersonal collective unconsciousness indirectly related to all of the world's religions and cults to be found throughout the ages. God is personal and expects a personal relationship. No wonder God has passionate feelings about us.

A true story. Channing Pollack used to tell a devastating tale of something that happened to him as a young boy. His parents took him along to a party at a magnificent house on a grand estate. The people who live there and hosted the party had a young daughter about his age, so the two of them played together. When they ran out of ideas for games, young Channing said, "Let's hide behind this curtain and maybe no one will know we're here!" The girl never hesitated in her forlorn answer. She said, "Maybe no one will care!"

Can you imagine that? A young, wealthy, child says about her own parents, "Maybe no one will care! Maybe no one will come to check on us! Maybe they will all forget about us, and we'll stand there, alone—terribly alone, till we die!"

John Wurster, a Presbyterian pastor in Texas has this to say. "Oh for a god who didn't care, a god who didn't get involved, a god who would just leave us alone. Oh for a god always above and beyond, out there, up there—a god who would just give the universe a spin and then go and do something else."

What my colleague is saying mirrors what he and I have both heard as clergy from many younger people in a post-modern culture. I have heard said, "Well, no; I don't consider my self a Christian anymore...that old label just seems too restrictive...but I *am* very spiritual."

Oh for a god who wouldn't seek a relationship with us, a god unconcerned by what we do and how we do it, a god to whom it did not matter what we worshiped as long as we worshiped something, or whom we followed as long as we were sincere and open in our following, or what we gave ourselves as long as we were authentic and true to our humanity. Now that would be an easy god to live with!

I wonder if, in the midst of his hardships, Hosea wished for a god who didn't care. It would have been so much easier. It would have made so much sense. Maybe you've wished for such a god. Out there. Disinterested. Unmoved.

That may be the god of our wishes—when it comes right down to it in terms of our day-to-day priorities and decisions. But that is not the God of the Bible. Ours is a God who has sought us out...a God yearning for a relationship with us.

Hosea may be an unwelcome reminder that it is common for us to try to lock God in the broom closet, far away from the rooms where we live. We'll take God out when we need something, whether it's a warm feeling on Christmas Eve or a good luck charm when we go under the surgeon's scalpel. We want God to play on our terms and that usually means out of sight, out of mind. We want God to do what we want, when we want it.

But the locked-up god, the god at our beck and call, the god formed in our image, simply does not exist.

Ours is a time and a place very different from ancient Israel, eighth century B.C. We are a people very different from those people. Yet we are the same in that God would be entirely justified in giving up on us, faithless as we sometimes are, disloyal as we can sometimes be. Who among us could stand before God's judgment? All of us have sinned and all of us fall short of the glory of God. Truly, God could say of us, "You are not my people and I am not your God." But by grace alone, that is not what God says...at least, not this morning.

In spite of who we are and what we have done, God loves us and God takes a chance on us. God knows us thoroughly and knows the chances of our infidelity are great indeed. Yet, as Hosea did not give up on unfaithful Gomer, God has not given up on you or me, at least not this morning.

Max Lucado tells the story of a ship called the *Pelicano*. In 1986 it was the world's most unwanted ship. The *Pelicano* wandered the seas, but could find no port to admit her. There was nothing wrong with the ship, or with its legal paperwork, or with its crew. The problem was its cargo. It was trash: 15,000 tons of it. The trash came from a Philadelphia sanitation worker's strike. A contractor purchased the stuff, loaded it on the ship, and figured he could find a place to dump it. It was a poor decision. There were no takers. The *Pelicano* was left to wander the high seas like the legendary Flying Dutchman.

Sin, says Lucado, is like that. Sometimes we have this garbage we've picked up somewhere, and we have no place to dump it. So we cruise around aimlessly. Friends here the point. We can live with the garbage of our past or we can dump it at the foot of the cross and start anew. Jesus likened himself to a physician. He came not for the healthy but for the sick, for those sick of the garbage of their past, for those ready to experience the health of forgiveness and live garbage-free."

The story of a passionate lover. God has already written you into the story. It took ancient Israel hundreds of years to respond and to accept such a wonderful grace. You can do it today. Thanks be to God! Amen.