**Hosea 5:15-6:6** June 21, 2020

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*Hosea 4:1Hear the word of the Lord, you Israelites: 5:15“I will go back to my place until they admit their guilt. And they will seek my face; in their misery they will earnestly seek me.”*

*[Israel replied,] 6:1“Come, let us return to the Lord. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds. 2After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence. 3Let us acknowledge the Lord; let us press on to acknowledge him. As surely as the sun rises, he will appear; he will come to us like the winter rains, like the spring rains that water the earth.”*

*[But the Lord said,] “What can I do with you, Ephraim? What can I do with you, Judah? Your love is like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears. 5Therefore I cut you in pieces with my prophets, I killed you with the words of my mouth; my judgments flashed like lightning upon you. 6For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

There he was on the porch, again—her porch, their porch. She could see him through the door’s security lens. She had changed the locks, which explained why he was on the outside. The changed locks also spoke to why she was weighing whether to let him in or not. Such a flood of emotions and memories washed over her that she couldn’t move.

A few years ago, the first time she had gone through this ritual, after being who knows where for a few days, he had reappeared with a bouquet in his hands. That day she had flung the door open and all the resentment and questions were put aside at least for a while. She had been glad her husband was there and apologizing. But how many times had it been now? Six? Seven? Eight?—counting hurt too much to know for sure. She could still say that she loved him. She could *not* say that she still had hope. Hope had died. She didn’t like what he had become, but she loved him. He was not as young as he once was, and his bad habits were taking a toll on his body. Yet she in her heart of hearts wished it could be what it once was; for them to be what they once promised to be. In the quiet of a still morning just before sunrise, she couldn’t work out if she should open the door or not. [Break.]

I apologize if I have dredged up bad memories for anyone that are going to ruin your day. I really do. That is not my intention. It is my intention to connect God’s Word spoken nearly 3,000 years ago with today.

Sometimes we get so used to God’s Word as something the pastor (or lector) reads at church, as something you have to dress up to go hear, that we forget that God’s Word speaks to every moment of our lives. In every circumstance it boldly proclaims, “Thus saith the Lord!” While we human beings would like to imagine that we are way more enlightened and virtuous than those who lived three thousand years ago, we are not. And because of that, God’s ancient word still endures and speaks to us.

This woman standing at the door watching her estranged husband is a mirror image of our reading from the fifth and sixth chapters of Hosea. That couple on opposite sides of the front door is the Lord God with his estranged wife, Israel. Should God open the door to let Israel in? Or not?

**Repentance—From God’s Perspective**

**I.** One thing you need to know about the prophecies of Hosea is the picture language it is all based on. Many passages of the Bible compare the relationship between God and his people to marriage. You find the analogy throughout Old and New Testaments. But in Hosea, the entire book is built on that metaphor. God isn’t *like* a wronged husband; he *is* a wronged husband. Israel isn’t *like* an unfaithful wife; they *are* God’s unfaithful wife.

What is going on in our reading is a conversation between these two parties, husband and wife. For the two chapters before our reading, the Lord God lamented his unfaithful people Israel. He gave a long grocery list of their willful spiritual unfaithfulness to him. The last sentence of that lament is the first verse of our reading. ***“I will go back to my place until they admit their guilt.”***God has searched out and found his wife. He tried to be reconciled, but she, Israel, will not listen. What else can he do? ***“I will go back to my place until they admit their guilt.”***

Is that a good picture of God? Not just a husband, but an exasperated, cheated-on husband? Can we picture God as a spouse frustrated by the unfaithful ways of his partner—almost the victim? Can God, so to speak, wish something to happen that does not happen? Can Infinite Wisdom be at a loss what to do? (Matthew Henry)

These are big and difficult questions. If God is both the irresistible force and the immovable object, then how is it possible that our reading describes all these emotions churned around in God’s heart? This is one of those big questions that just doesn’t fit into the neat little—very, very little—boxes that our human minds think in.

How much the emotive language of our reading is a reflection of how God is, and how much is condescension to speak to children in a way that children can understand, I cannot say. But when God speaks to us in his word, he speaks so we can understand. Overwhelmingly the almighty, eternal, unchanging God speaks in the dynamic language of deep human relationships. Think of Jesus mourning over Jerusalem who had rejected him (Lk 19:41). Hear God plead through one of his fiercest prophets, Ezekiel, *“Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die?”* (33:11) And here in Hosea, listen to God talk like a heart-broken husband.

Have you ever thought of your sins as doing that to God?

But while God expresses his sorrow over a broken relationship with these Israelites, God’s love and hope for them does not die. While God does ***“go back to [his] place,”*** he says that in spite of their countless sins, he will welcome them back at a moment’s notice. God is only waiting for repentance. That’s all. Then his anger over their sin will melt away.

In the very next verse it sounds like Israel has reached that point. They say, ***“1Come, let us return to the Lord. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds… 3Let us acknowledge the Lord; let us press on to acknowledge him. As surely as the sun rises, he will appear; he will come to us like the winter rains, like the spring rains that water the earth.”*** The Lord has abandoned Israel and gone to his place. Israel sees her sorry situation and says, “Let’s go back to him!” God’s bride speaks such beautiful words. She knows God is patient and merciful. She thinks of him as the winter and spring rains that water the land of Israel giving it both a spring and fall harvest. Like those rains, they know God is good, they know he is dependable, they know he is merciful.

*Yet* God replies, ***“What can I do with you?”*** He doesn’t buy it. Isn’t this what God wants? Is God being vindictive like a jealous husband? “I’ll forgive you, but not just yet. Not until you grovel.”

To help explain… Most of you know that for the first thirteen years of my ministry, I was immersed in the African culture of the Tonga people. One of the most fascinating things in that culture is their proverbs. They had proverbs for every event in life. God’s exasperated reply to the Israelites reminded me of one of those proverbs. Here’s the proverb: “Hello, Mr. Snail, it must be raining!” Quite a proverb, right? In Africa snails only come out when it is raining, otherwise the hot, direct African sun will dry them up and kill them with a nasty death. The first time I heard this proverb was when the church chairman greeted a member saying, “Hello, Mr. Snail, it must be raining!” Oh, the shame! He said it to a member of the church, who never helped out, never gave to God, never came to worship, until this day when there was something being handed out at church. It was not the most evangelical approach, but the chairman’s confrontation landed true. It was an indictment of someone who was only interested in the church when there was something in it for him. That’s what God saw in Israel.

Remember that woman looking at her husband on the other side of the door, trying to guess what was in her estranged husband’s heart. God doesn’t ever wonder, he knows. He knows your heart; he knew Israel’s heart. He knew (and this would come out if we could read a larger section of Hosea), he knew that the only reason Israel was standing on his porch was because they were suffering. Their 8th century BC political and military enemies were pressing hard. The kingdom of Israel was disintegrating and would be wiped from the face of the earth within a generation. Like a snail, Israel had no interest in a relationship with God. They showed up on his doorstep because of the stuff they wanted and were worried about in life. They were willing to say, “God is great. God can do anything. God will deliver us.” But Israel did not come to God with a sorrow for their sins against a faithful spouse. Like George Bailey’s prayer in *It’s a Wonderful Life*—remember that part when he is in the bar and he can’t pay the loan and in desperation admits that he is “not much of a praying man,” but he asks God to help—he was praying just like the Israelites who came, not out of a sorrow over sin, but because they found themselves in a pickle and wanted out. There was no acknowledgment of guilt. Israel refused to say, “I am sorry. You have been so forgiving and I have only been unfaithful! Lord, have mercy!” Like a manipulative spouse, they want God’s blessing on their terms.

God knew their hearts and simply could not let it be. He and Israel have been through this more times than anyone could count. And every time, ***“Your love is like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears.”***

What is the nature of your relationship with God? Is it a marriage of convenience? Do you show up in prayer when times are tough, but otherwise figure that if things are going okay in life, then things must be okay with God? Does all of my life reflect the fact that Christ has not only forgiven me, but also redeemed me to live a new and holy life?

Our relationship with God is not merely a transactional relationship, like going to Wal-Mart, checking out with a cart full of forgiveness, then walking out the door to go on with life as usual. How seriously do I take forgiveness?

As I wrote this sermon, I found it fairly easy at the start—speaking of repentance. And as I got closer and closer to the end, it was more and more difficult to write. I put it to the side, figuring I’d pick it up in the morning, and in the night I realized the problem. Israel never repented. There was no happy ending, no reconciliation. But I am preaching to people who have repented. And so while this reading does not really have a good ending for Israel, to hear the ending God’s wants us, standing on his doorstep for the *right* reason, we need to skip to the other readings for this day.

Think of Matthew, the tax collector, in the Gospel reading. Think of him sitting there at his dining room table with Jesus, so awed that Jesus not only announces God’s forgiveness, but even enters his house and shares a meal with his questionable friends. Remember Saint Paul from the second reading. He marveled that Christ not only forgave him, but also called him to service even though he had been a blasphemer, persecutor and violent man. Repentance worked by the Holy Spirit reconciled them to God through faith in Christ Jesus. God wanted it to be so with the Israelites, but their repentance was not repentance: no sorrow over sin, just checking in to see what goodies they could take away.

Willingness to admit wrongs is what keeps every relationship strong. Frequent repentance keeps our relationship with God strong. And so it is that the liturgy of nearly every worship service of ours (except maybe Christmas and Easter which are so wrapped in awe-filled joy as we look at the most wonderful of things that God has done) our liturgy begins with confession and absolution of sins. Sincerely spoken, that’s repentance. Then, we are ready for all the other good things in our worship service: the Word of God, beautiful songs, the sacrament of Communion, and the closing blessing.

May God grant us repentant hearts, hearts ever eager to return to God, acknowledging our guilt, and trusting our loving Savior. Amen.