**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church**

**Watertown, WI**

**“Even as the LORD Loves His People”**

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Ash Wednesday, 2024

“And the LORD said to me, ‘*Go again, Hosea, and love the woman who is loved by another man and is an adulteress, even as the LORD loves the children of Israel, though they turn to other gods”* (Hosea 3:1).

 Do you ever think about how the LORD could get so angry with His people? I’m thinking of the time when the people made golden bulls for themselves at the base of Mt. Sinai and said, “These are our gods who brought us up out of the land of Egypt.” And the LORD said to Moses, “I have seen this people . . . Now leave Me alone, that My consuming wrath may burn hot against them” (Ex. 32:9ff).

 Or how about when the people grumbled against the LORD in the wilderness, and wept bitter tears and said, “Oh that we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing . . . But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing to look at but this manna!” (Nu.11:4). “And the anger of the LORD blazed hotly” at His people (v.10).

 Do you ever wonder if the LORD gets that angry with you and me? And if so, why would He care so much? After all, we’re just one of eight billion on this earth living relatively quiet lives in a quiet town. Wouldn’t His anger be better aimed elsewhere? But our God is not a distant god either geographically or interpersonally. And He cares enough about you to know everything about you. And what He knows about you, and what He knows about me, at times makes Him the outraged partner to a violated covenant. He is not a dispassionate and distant judge. The passion of God in the Bible is that of a heart-broken, jealous and angry husband.

 In Jeremiah 31, the LORD explains it to His people, “I am your husband,” He says. And repeatedly, in the New Testament, the church (God’s people) is the bride of Christ. That’s at the root of His anger. It’s not a business affiliation. It’s not an alliance. It’s not an agreement to shack up together and test the compatibility. No, it’s a marriage . . . a commitment to be faithful come what may. If the relationship becomes difficult or unhappy, He will never pack up His things and move out. No, God will be faithful for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health. He will love and cherish. And He asks no less from us.

 This marriage began when God led the Jewish people out of captivity in Egypt where they were abused and enslaved. He took them by the hand and led them through the waters into freedom. In Jeremiah 2, the LORD looks back at this time, and says, “I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved Me and followed Me through the desert” (Jer. 2:2). But now the honeymoon is over, and the LORD’s people are being promiscuous . . . with other gods. And the LORD says He’s a jealous God (Ex. 20:5) which is good news because it means He loves us. If He didn’t love us, He would never be jealous. That’s the central point in the book of Hosea. As Husband to us, God will not be sharing us.

The first words the LORD says to Hosea are, “‘Go, take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness, because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery by forsaking the LORD.’ So Hosea went and took Gomer as his wife” (Hosea 1:2).

Gomer seems to be a prostitute working with the fertility cult of Baalism. It’s a shocking assignment for Hosea to pledge his faithfulness to her. You just know there’s trouble ahead. However, God isn’t asking Hosea to endure anything that He Himself is not enduring. Hosea’s marriage to promiscuous Gomer is a microcosm of God’s marriage to the promiscuous Israelites.

Now maybe this text seems inappropriate to speak of before all the children, but most of them (unfortunately) have seen and heard much more graphic things than what this text has to say. Moreover, this is part of God’s Word, a very important and on-going theme. Therefore, it is “God-breathed and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16). Martin Luther said the only reason such a shameful and adulterous history comes from the mouth of the Holy Spirit is because it can teach something to God’s people today (Pieper I, p. 280).

Gomer bears children for her new husband, and the LORD gives the children their names. The very names these children bear will be messages to God’s people, as if the children were wearing sandwich boards. The firstborn is named Jezreel, which, long story short, is a promise the LORD will soon punish His people. The second born is named “No Mercy,” “for I will have no mercy on the house of Israel.” The thirdborn is called: “Not My People,” for you are *not* My people, and I am *not* your God.

That was the harshest condemnation of them all. “My people” was the most beloved title God used for them. It was an intimate and honorable title. He could say all sorts of nasty things about them so long as He still called them, “My people.” But now, even this is undone. There is a growing breach between God and Israel. The covenant can be restored through the people’s repentance and God’s forgiveness, but it’s not looking good, because the people are in no mood to repent. They have hardened their hearts.

 Gomer, Hosea’s adulterous wife, exemplifies the people of God. And what does she do? She decks herself with a nose ring and other jewelry and goes after her former lovers (2:13). She returns to prostitution. But now it’s worse. She gives herself away. Again, Gomer is just a microcosm of God’s people Israel. Gomer’s prostitution in the cult of Baal is the same sin as Israel’s apostasy. In Hosea 2, the LORD says, “[Israel] adorned herself with her ring and jewelry, and went after her lovers, *but me she forgot*” (v. 14).

Can you hear the anger and hurt and jealousy of a forsaken husband as God’s people (in the language of King James) “went awhoring” after other gods. Ezekiel writes, “Even the Philistines were shocked by your lewd conduct. You engaged in prostitution with the Assyrians too, because you were insatiable . . . Then you increased your promiscuity to include Babylonia . . . You adulterous wife! You prefer strangers to your own husband. Men give gifts to all prostitutes, but *you* gave *your* gifts to all your lovers, bribing *them* to come to *you*!” (Ezek. 16:27ff).

 “Even the Philistines were shocked by your lewd conduct.” It makes me think of how we Americans must appear to Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and others when they glimpse our entertainment industry and sample our culture. The indictment against Gomer and ancient Israel is nothing less than an indictment against you and me. We give ourselves away to sin and idolatry, lapsing into behaviors and lifestyles offensive to the LORD. We decorate ourselves to impress and intrigue others but make little effort to please the LORD. Him we ignore. We may even be ashamed of our relationship with Him, as evidenced by how we hide our lights under a bushel even when He tees up perfect opportunities for us to give witness to Him. Chasing after idols we must look to the LORD just like Gomer chasing after her former lovers. And know this: God is still fully capable of white-hot rage because the passion of God is not of a distant, indifferent judge, but of a heart-broken husband.

 When you read Hosea, you expect to read how the LORD finally unleashes His wrath. What you do not expect to read is what the LORD tells Hosea to do in chapter three. They are among the most beautiful words in all Scripture. He says to Hosea, “Go love the woman who is beloved of another and an adulteress, just as I the LORD love the Israelites . . .” Forgive her Hosea, just as I forgive My people. Have mercy on her Hosea, just as I have mercy on My people. Be husband to her, Hosea, just as I remain husband to My people.

 The God who speaks these words to Hosea is your God. This love of God in Hosea is the same love He has for you. It is not reasonable or sensible or measured. It is a reckless, foolish, tenacious, and holy love. This is the love of God for you and the forgiveness of God for you. It does not mean He overlooks your sin or pretends it doesn’t matter. It means He will not let what you have done ruin or sever the relationship. His love for you is stronger than your sin. It’s as if God says to you: “If you want, we can start over again. I still love you. Nothing you’ve done has changed that.” This perfect and unreasonable love sits in stark contrast to the perverse, self-seeking love of the idolater and adulterer.

 God still gets angry, but with you and me, His anger is always measured. Controlled. Kept within limits. With Jesus on the cross, it’s different because He bore the sins of Gomer, (and ours too) as if He Himself had committed them. So, the Father’s anger blazed hotly against His Son. He gives full vent to it with a consuming wrath. Therefore, having this plan in place already in the days of Hosea, God can say to Hosea, “*Go again, and love the woman who is loved by another man and is an adulteress, even as the LORD loves the children of Israel, though they turn to other gods*.” That same love and forgiveness is offered to you today on this altar where the LORD gives you His body and blood for your forgiveness. Here, in essence, the LORD says, “My love for you is greater than your sin.”

 In the Book of Hosea, God’s Law is savage and consuming, but the Gospel is tender and compassionate. “Go love the woman who is beloved of another and an adulteress, just as Yahweh loves the Israelites. . .” that is, despite everything. Thanks be to God! Amen.