

HOSEA 14:1-4, 8-9

Second Sunday after Pentecost, June 1-12, 2023

Smith

¹ Return, Israel, to the LORD your God. Your sins have been your downfall! ² Take words with you and return to the LORD. Say to him: “Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously, that we may offer the fruit of our lips. ³ Assyria cannot save us; we will not mount warhorses. We will never again say ‘Our gods’ to what our own hands have made, for in you the fatherless find compassion.” ⁴ “I will heal their waywardness and love them freely, for my anger has turned away from them.

⁸ Ephraim, what more have I to do with idols? I will answer him and care for him. I am like a flourishing juniper; your fruitfulness comes from me.” ⁹ Who is wise? Let them realize these things. Who is discerning? Let them understand. The ways of the LORD are right; the righteous walk in them, but the rebellious stumble in them.

We don't learn anything about the prophet Hosea apart from what is in his book. But we know that he was married; he had a wife and children, and we even learn their names in the book. He is the only one of the writing prophets whose message is exclusively for the northern kingdom before they were conquered and carried into exile by the Assyrians-- therefore Hosea lived at about the same time as Isaiah. Because of the kings he mentions, we know that he was at work as a prophet for almost forty years. That's more than we know about some of the pastors who served here at St. Paul's in the early years!

Hosea is not terribly concerned about social issues. He does not argue with kings and governors about their policies. He talks only about one thing: sin. And the solution to sin, which is only thing: God's forgiveness.

“Take” is a word that the Israelites were used to listening for whenever they listened to the Law of Moses. Throughout the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers, “Take!” occurs hundreds of times. It's the word that always precedes the required offering for any moment when they would enter the temple. Take a lamb for Passover (Exodus 12:3). Take a bull for an ordination (Exodus 29:1). Take a goat for a sin offering (Leviticus 9:3). Take a ram for a burnt offering (Leviticus 9:2). Take a bird for cleansing (Leviticus 14:1). Abraham was even told on one occasion, “Take your son, your only son, Isaac...” (Genesis 22:2).

Now, when the people are called to repentance, God says, “Take...,” and a true Israelite would hold his breath. This is the condition! This is what we can do to come back to the Lord! This is the offering we can make to satisfy God's anger with us! What will it be? A goat to pay for sin? A ram to pay for guilt? A lamb so that the Lord's angel of death would pass over Israel? Something more? All of these? Anything would be worth the price to return

to the Lord. He could have said: “Take a ship, the largest ship in Israel, and go out into the Great Sea and hunt for a whale. Bring back a whale that is at least as large as the ship you sail and offer it as a sacrifice for you sins...

But the Lord doesn't ask for an animal. When he says, “Take...,” he finishes by saying “Take words...” Words! What God wants is for people to stop going through the motions, to show mercy to each other, and to ask for mercy from God himself.

What words do you think he might mean? “You should respect my choices, Lord.” “You should accept me for who I am, Lord.” Or the one I heard a lot during Covid from some pretty surprising places: “It's my body, my choice.” How very like the Northern Kingdom of Israel for people in our culture to adopt the language from across the aisle and use it as if it's correct just because I'm using it instead of that person over there.

Back to the words Hosea would have us take with us: “I am sorry, Lord.” “I was wrong, Lord.” “I don't deserve your forgiveness, Lord.” These words, words of repentance, are the fruit of our lips. But the fruit of our repentance is not identical to the fruit of our lips.

The fruit of repentance means taking the sin we have been committing and turning from it. This will look different from one Christian to the next. Look at the two sins the prophet uncovers in verse 3. The main one is having other gods, the sin against the First Commandment. The other is the Third, since the people have rejected God's word. First Commandment sins are not only holding little statues in the hand and calling to them in prayer. First Commandment sins also involve witchcraft, magic (whether it's called black magic or white magic), superstitions like astrology, divining rods, love charms, and calls anything at all bad luck.

But other First Commandment sins include being arrogant because of one's piety, or honoring God just to get some reward, doubting the Creed, doubting God's mercy. And we also sin when we know someone is struggling with unbelief or despair and we don't do anything to help them.

So the fruit of repentance in First Commandment sins might mean that a person gives God full credit for all his gifts, but maybe this one man still has a habit of using a divining rod, or that woman still peeks at her horoscope sometimes. They are on their way; they have repented, but they still slip and stumble from time to time.

But their fruits of repentance-- all our fruits of repentance-- come from God. This is what he means when he says, “Your fruitfulness comes from me.” Whether that fruitfulness is a talent

we have, or the way someone has turned away from his sin, or success in business, or a pregnancy-- whatever fruitfulness there is, it is a gift from God.

God showed his grace to Israel. He wanted them to give up those other things, but he saw the direction their life had taken, and he loved them just as he loves us all. He wants to show us his grace in every part of our lives by uncovering his hidden work in every corner of our lives. Behold! He says. I am here, too!

The people Hosea was preaching to did not last in their repentance. They turned for a little while, a little bit, and only a little part of the nation, but for the most part their country, which was $\frac{3}{4}$ of all the Israelites, was conquered. They were taken away to cities that we recognize today as being in northern Iraq, Iran, and western Siberia. They did not come home again, but God worked through some of them to share their faith when they realized the seriousness of their sins.

In fact, did Hosea himself get forced to march north and east into captivity? His book ends just as the Assyrians were laying siege to the capital city of the northern kingdom.¹ Whether Hosea ended up in Siberia or not, God was with him. Sometimes we will suffer and be made to carry crosses on account of the sins of other people in the world, and often these are the people closest to us, the people we love.

Just how you and I bear those crosses may help our loved ones to continue to see Jesus and the cross he carried, the only one that saves, the cross upon which he bled and died to atone for our sins. He loved us, and come to save us that way, so that we would be his people in heaven, and in the mean time, share his message of grace and love with people both close to us and far away.

Through Jesus, we have forgiveness, the promise of the resurrection and of heaven, and we have the promise from God that he is watching over us and blessing us right now. We, who were described as “Not my people,” have become the “People of God” through Jesus our Lord. This is the theme of Hosea’s whole book, and it is no different from any other book in the Bible apart from the details of how that beautifully recurring message is presented to us.

Stew: *We give thee but thine own, whate'er the gift may be.
All that we have is thine alone. A trust, O Lord, from thee.*

¹ Hezekiah (Hos. 1:1) became King of Judah in the third year of the reign of Israel’s last king, (2 Kings 18:1).