

3 January 2021

## **The Promised Garden**

Hosea 14:1-8

Twenty-five years ago I wrote my doctoral dissertation on the prophetic book of Hosea. Now if there isn't one already, there *should* be a law against sermons on anything the preacher wrote a dissertation on. You see, dissertations are usually exhaustively researched discussions of topics so narrow that no one else could possibly be interested in them. Now, I happen to believe that my dissertation is different. I think it's actually a subject of broad interest to everyone, and that people *want* me to bring it up at dinner parties, but all the same I've generally tried not to preach from Hosea, as I'm about to do today. So I guess what I'm saying is, be patient with me if I start to wander off into unnecessary complexities. Count to ten before you hit the mute button.

Now most people who know anything at all about this book know just the introductory story of chapter 1. Verse 2: *The Lord said to Hosea, 'Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord.'* It appears that God commanded the prophet Hosea to marry a prostitute and have children by her. Then, in chapter 3, verse 1, we read: *The Lord said to me again, 'Go, love a woman who has a lover and is an adulteress, just as the Lord loves the people of Israel, though they turn to other gods.'* It seems that Hosea's wife – named Gomer – cheated on him, and God sent Hosea to take her back. All this – both the marriage and the adultery – are used in the book to symbolize God's relationship with Israel. God and Israel had a covenant, like a marriage, but while God had been faithful, Israel had strayed and worshiped other gods in violation of the covenant. Israel had cheated on God, but God still wanted to take her back.

A lot of folks are kind of uncomfortable with God's command to Hosea. Much of the commentary on the book sets out to find a way to say that God didn't really do what it says he did. Some people say that Gomer wasn't a *real* prostitute, someone who has sex for money, but just a worshiper of Canaanite gods. I suppose that's possible, and you can do that if it helps, but notice that that argument starts from the assumption that idolatry is better than sexual promiscuity, and I'm not sure that works. I don't think you can argue from the Bible that God takes anything more seriously than idolatry. Others try to make the story more palatable by saying that it isn't to be taken literally; the whole marriage thing is a parable. Again, I guess that could be. I don't see any indication in the text that Gomer and her children are fictional, but I'm just one reader. As far as I'm concerned it *could* be true. As I've said before, the standard by which we Christians must interpret all scripture is Jesus Christ, and Jesus did ask people to do some hard things. He told a rich man to liquidate his fortune, give it away, and then come join him in poverty, for instance. He asked his disciples to leave their families to follow him. But take it as a parable if you like; it may not matter. Today I want to look a little farther, at how this metaphor of covenant unfaithfulness works out in the *rest* of Hosea.

What follows the introduction is a sort of dialogue, unlike anything in other prophetic books. The prophet and God take turns speaking to Israel, laying out their grievances against the unfaithful partner. It's not marked in your text, but it's not hard to figure out who is speaking when. If God is referred to in the third person, "God," then the prophet is speaking. For instance, chapter 4 begins like the beginning of a trial, with the prophet acting as prosecuting attorney.

*Hear the word of the Lord, O people of Israel;  
for the Lord has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land.  
There is no faithfulness or loyalty,  
and no knowledge of God in the land.  
Swearing, lying, and murder,  
and stealing and adultery break out;  
bloodshed follows bloodshed. (4:1-2)*

The prophet basically runs down most of the Ten Commandments here as he reads the charges. Notice which one he saves for the end: adultery. When God speaks, though – which you can tell because it switches to first person “I” – the tone is milder. God expresses frustration with the priests, who were supposed to teach the people better, and when he does describe Israel’s sin, he focuses on their foolish idolatry:

*My people consult a piece of wood,  
and their divining-rod gives them oracles.  
For a spirit of whoredom has led them astray,  
and they have played the whore, forsaking their God.  
They sacrifice on the tops of the mountains,  
and make offerings upon the hills. (4:12-13)*

In fact, as you read through the book, taking care to note whether it’s God or the prophet who is speaking, you notice something. All the harshest, angriest judgments are spoken by the prophet. And every word of hope or promise or forgiveness is spoken by God. Hosea himself, perhaps because he is unable to put aside the pain of his own betrayal, offers no grace. But God, who has known betrayal from the moment that he breathed life into the first man and woman, never gives up on people.

At one point, Israel responds. In the last verse of chapter 5, God begs Israel to return to him, acknowledge their guilt, and seek his face, so that he can forgive them. Then, in chapter 6, Israel replies,

*‘Come, let us return to the Lord;  
for he has torn us, but he will heal us;  
he has struck down, but he will bind us up.  
After two days he will revive us;  
on the third day he will raise us up,  
that we may live before him.  
Let us know, let us press on to know the Lord;  
his appearing is as sure as the dawn;  
he will come to us like the showers,  
like the spring rains that water the earth.’ (6:1-3)*

But God has heard all this before and replies, with the weariness of long experience,

*What am I going to do with you, Ephraim?  
What am I going to do with you, Judah?*

*Your love is like a morning cloud,  
like the dew that goes away early. (6:4)*

Still, God doesn't give up hope. Instead, he tells them how to return to him genuinely.

*For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,  
the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings. (6:6)*

Fun fact: Jesus once quoted that verse to the religious authorities of his day and said, "Why don't you go figure out what that means?"

As the book continues, the prophet continues his tirade, raging at unfaithful Israel. The nation of Assyria is coming, and Israel will be crushed. But then, in chapter 11, God's heart breaks.

*When Israel was a child, I loved him,  
and out of Egypt I called my son.  
The more I called them,  
the more they went from me;  
they kept sacrificing to the Baals,  
and offering incense to idols.  
Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk,  
I took them up in my arms;  
but they did not realize that I was the one who healed them. (11:1-3)*

The prophet calls for merciless retribution, but God is torn between punishing his wayward people, divorcing them forever, or forgiving them again. The smart call, it feels, is to cut your losses and move on, but here's what God says:

*How can I give you up, Ephraim?  
How can I hand you over, O Israel?  
How can I make you like [Sodom]?  
How can I treat you like [Gomorrah]?  
My heart recoils within me;  
my compassion grows warm and tender.  
I will not execute my fierce anger;  
I will not again destroy Ephraim;  
for I am God, not Man,  
the Holy One in your midst,  
and I will not come in wrath. (11:8-9)*

The book concludes in chapter 14 with one more speech from Israel, followed by the response of the God who is determined to love and to hope. I want to read the whole passage: Hosea 14, verses 1-8.

*14 Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God,  
for you have stumbled because of your iniquity.  
<sup>2</sup> Take words with you and return to the Lord;  
say to him, 'Take away all guilt;*

*accept that which is good,  
and we will offer the fruit of our lips.*

<sup>3</sup> *Assyria shall not save us;  
we will not ride upon horses;  
we will say no more, "Our God",  
to the work of our hands.  
In you the orphan finds mercy.'*

<sup>4</sup> *I will heal their disloyalty;  
I will love them freely,  
for my anger has turned from them.*

<sup>5</sup> *I will be like the dew to Israel;  
he shall blossom like the lily,  
he shall strike root like the forests of Lebanon.*

<sup>6</sup> *His shoots shall spread out;  
his beauty shall be like the olive tree,  
and his fragrance like that of Lebanon.*

<sup>7</sup> *They shall again live beneath my shadow,  
they shall flourish as a garden;  
they shall blossom like the vine,  
their fragrance shall be like the wine of Lebanon.*

<sup>8</sup> *O Ephraim, what have I to do with idols?  
It is I who answer and look after you.  
I am like an evergreen cypress;  
your faithfulness comes from me.*

We have just dipped our toes into the waters of a new year. This is always a time of hope, perhaps of resolutions and goals, of trying to start fresh. Good. God's all about that – starting fresh. For us, as followers of God, a new start is always to some extent a return to the beginning, for we are a people in covenant relationship with our maker, a covenant that was cut for us long ago in the body of Jesus Christ. God has sworn eternal love, and our part of the covenant is to become vessels of that love to others. Yes, there's more to it than that – integrity, morality, not worshiping idols – but in the end, love is the cheat code, the shortcut. If we grow in love to others, we cannot help growing in all those ways, too. That's how love works. We seek – in the words of John Wesley – “to grow perfect in love.”

And we fail. Over and over and over. So we start over, and over and over, secure in God's promise that he will not give us up, will not surrender us, because God's not like us. He is God, not Man, and he will not come in anger. Did you notice all that lush imagery in God's final promise – lilies and flowers and the fragrance of Lebanon and all that? There's only one other place in scripture that sounds like that: the Song of Solomon, which is a wedding song. The story of the people's unfaithfulness to God ends with a wedding. God is always willing to start over. So this year, *'Come, let us return to the Lord; for he has torn us, but he will heal us; he has struck down, but he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him.'*

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At the beginning of a year John Wesley liked to hold a “covenant renewal” service, and for that service he wrote this prayer – Wesley’s Covenant Prayer. Let us pray.

I am no longer my own, but thine.  
Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.  
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.  
Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee,  
exalted for thee or brought low for thee.  
Let me be full, let me be empty.  
Let me have all things, let me have nothing.  
I freely and heartily yield all things  
to thy pleasure and disposal.  
And now, O glorious and blessed God,  
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,  
thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it.  
And the covenant which I have made on earth,  
let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.