

Perhaps you have heard of "Hosea House" in Eugene. It serves at-risk and homeless youth ages 16-24. I've met some of the kids that it serves and even given a group of them a tour of the Kingsford Charcoal plant in Springfield in the past to give them an idea of the potential they can have in a future workforce.

The following is from the Hosea Youth Services website:

She wasn't even a teenager when one of her Mom's boyfriends began abusing her. She was made to feel like it was her fault by the mother who was afraid to be alone and had already had three husbands. It was no surprise when this girl "ran away"; it was the safest way out she could see. She went from couch to couch, from friend to friend, finally finding a family among those on the street. We could see her at the Center coming for dinner, using the laundry and shower, but she kept her distance and often the look - makeup, dress and heels, as she went back out onto the street, made us uneasy. She came and went and kept her distance and then disappeared. We always wonder, hope the best, and fear the worst, as we pray for her and so many others.

This is real life isn't it? You and I know this very well. It may not be as prevalent here in Cottage Grove, but Kathy and I see it all the time in Eugene, just 21 miles away.. But no matter where we are, there are countless cries of heartache all around us – perhaps even in your own life or someone close to you.

Today, I thought we'd spend a few minutes looking at an Old Testament prophet, whose name happens to be Hosea, like the Hosea House. We will review the theme of Hosea by looking at selected passages in the book of Hosea. I'd like to give you a challenge for this afternoon or this week: read the first 3 chapters of Hosea – it will take 5 minutes (39 verses total). Hosea was living about 750-700 BC in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. So, this is about 250 years after the Kingdom was split in two after the reigns of King David and his son King Solomon. (About the same time as it has been since the founding of our own country). The Southern Kingdom, near Jerusalem, was comprised of the two tribes, Judah and Benjamin. The Northern Kingdom was comprised of the other 10 tribes. By the way, the largest of the 10 tribes was called Ephraim (E-from), that is why the Northern Kingdom is sometimes referred to as "Ephraim" and sometimes as "Israel".

This was a tragic time in the history of the Jewish people. The Northern Kingdom adopted worship of the Canaanite god named "Ba-al". It was common to go to a craftsman and have a little god Ba-al image made for your house. There were temples to Ba-al also, which unlike the Holy, a distinction of the temple of God in Jerusalem, the Ba-al temples were nothing more than houses of sin where worshipers engaged in sexual immorality - and by this "demonstration of fertility" they believed their god would provide fertile lands and bountiful harvest.

It was this practice that God directly confronts through His prophet Hosea.

In an amazing and shocking setting to the start of Hosea's ministry, God tells Hosea to (quote) "take a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom" with her. This is to illustrate that "the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD".

There have been several interpretations as to what God meant when he commanded Hosea. Some commentators seek to *protect God's valor* by saying that God was telling Hosea that when he takes a wife she will later become a prostitute, sort of preparing Hosea for what is to come. I don't believe this is the case. If we read exactly what the Bible says, we see an incredible illustration of our God.

We read from Hosea 1:2-3:

2When the Lord first spoke through Hosea, the Lord said to Hosea, "Go, take to yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord." 3 So he went and took Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son.

Here begins an amazing analogy: We see God asking Hosea to take an imperfect, fallen woman, with all her sins, and redeem her as his wife. Imagine ----- this was huge in the young man Hosea's life! He was being asked to do something **unthinkable** to a young Hebrew man considering marriage. This violated all the purity that he would look for in a wife!

But this is like our Holy and pure God as He looked at the future of His creation and saw this, like the Psalmist wrote:

1 They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds;

there is none who does good.
2 The Lord looks down from heaven on the children of man,
to see if there are *any* who understand,
who seek after God.
3 They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt;
there is none who does good,
not even one.
(You can reference this in Ps 14:1-3)

From whom did God have to choose from for His children? Not a single righteous, pure or undefiled person. It was from fallen people that God chose whom He would claim and ransom through the sacrifice of His Son Jesus Christ. They would become His bride, redeemed from impurity. They would wear the righteous robe of Christ.

Eph 1: 3-7

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, 4 even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love 5 he predestined us[b] for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, 6 to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. 7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace.

Hosea obeys God and takes Gomer as his wife. We don't know how many years they had a happy and productive marriage. They had 3 children together, so perhaps, let's say, 10 or so years. When their first son was born, God told Hosea to name him "Jezreel". In Hebrew this means "scattered" as in scattering seed when planting.

And God told Hosea that in just a little while He would scatter the house of Israel when He, the LORD, brings an end to their dwelling in the land and will have them captured and hauled off to Assyria.

Next, they had a little girl and God told Hosea to name her Lo-ruhamah, which in Hebrew means, "No-mercy". Hosea was to proclaim to the people that God would have no mercy when delivering judgement for their sin.

Then they had another little boy, and this time God told Hosea to name him Lo-ammi, which in Hebrew means "not my people"; disowned.

Scattered, No-mercy, Disowned -

... Perhaps this was not a happy marriage after all. Perhaps it was more one of deep sadness as even their children's names reminded Hosea and Gomer of the pending judgement. Scattered, No mercy, Disowned. Where is the faithfulness of God here? Ah, we need to glance down to verse 10 to see what will be in store. God does give Hosea a glimpse of the eventual return of His people to their land (no longer scattered). That mercy will again fall on His people and that they will no longer be disowned but will be known as "children of the living God".

But what happens to Hosea and Gomer as their marriage begins to live-out what the children of Israel are doing in their perverted worship of themselves through their false-god Baal? Most of the book of Hosea describes this apostasy of God's people. For example,

Hosea 6:4 What shall I do with you, O Ephraim?

What shall I do with you, O Judah?
Your love is like a morning cloud,
like the dew that goes early away.

Hosea 7:4 They are all adulterers;
they are like a heated oven
whose baker ceases to stir the fire,
from the kneading of the dough
until it is leavened.

Hosea 11:2 The more they were called,
the more they went away;
they kept sacrificing to the Baals
and burning offerings to idols.

And Hosea's marriage echoes this tragedy of the nation. Gomer leaves her children and Hosea. She evidently takes up with another man, and then another. You can picture this scene - First, she takes up with a man who lavishes praise and material things on her. When he tires of her, she moves on to someone who may not be as well to do, and he gives

her some form of security. And so on. At one point we may even see Hosea hearing of her disgrace and taking food and clothing to the man's house she is currently living with. Imagine the man opening the door and recognizing Hosea! You can see him suspiciously asking Hosea what he wants. And think of the pain in Hosea's heart as he hands an armload of clothing and baskets of food and oil and spices to the man -- and only asks that the man take care of Gomer. Next, we see that the man then goes to Gomer and claims that these gifts are from him. *Gomer does not even know that she is cared for by Hosea, the one who loves her.*

Now we don't see in the text that Hosea specifically does this, visits the house of her lover, but we see the Lord God describe Himself doing this in chapter 2 as he cares for his people even as they turn and worship their false god.

Back to our narrative of Hosea –

Eventually the woman is passed-on until she has no one to provide for her. She eventually gets to the point where the world considers her worthless.

In the ancient world of Israel, what would become of a woman like this? One outcome was the eventual slave market where she would be auctioned off to the highest bidder. This is exactly where we can envision Gomer in chapter 2, standing naked and unwashed in the slave market, waiting for someone to buy her. Why naked? That is the way that slaves were sold so that the buyer could see exactly what they were going to get. Imagine the shame! Imagine standing worthless and naked before a jeering crowd waiting to be sold into a life of further despair!

And then God intervenes again in Gomer's life. He told Hosea to go and buy his wife back. Yes, to redeem his bride after all the filth and betrayal that has transpired.

And Hosea does this. He goes and buys her – we're told the amount: for 15 shekels of silver and 9 bushels of barley. Imagine the scene in the market as Gomer is "auctioned-off". Can you envision the stunned silence as the crowd sees and then realizes who has purchased Gomer? We see Hosea make his way forward to Gomer, standing naked in her shame. And then we see him remove his robe and cover his very own wife. He has redeemed his wife, and he leads her home.

We talked about what the names of Hosea's children meant in Hebrew. We didn't talk about what the name "Hosea" means in Hebrew – it means "Salvation".

Can we picture, can we fathom the wonder of this with Isaiah when he said:

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness. Is 61:10

We see the tender, merciful heart of our God in all of this:

How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?
How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zebaiim?
My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.
I will not execute my burning anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim;
for I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath. They shall go after the Lord;
he will roar like a lion; when he roars, his children shall come trembling from the west; they shall come trembling like birds from Egypt, and like doves from the land of Assyria, and I will return them to their homes, declares the Lord.
Hos 11:8-11

Oh friends, how great and faithful is the God who redeems. If you are here today and know that you are men and women who have been redeemed, covered and clothed in righteousness by the Redeemer Himself through the blood of Christ – rejoice with me as we watch this worship song "Clothed in Righteousness" – feel free to join in the rejoicing with the choir on the screen.

If you are here and do not know this great Redeemer, here is what you must do as you see yourself standing unwashed and alone in the slave market, look out, beyond the crowds of this seething and jeering world and find and recognize the face of your redeemer. Call to him with your heart. Your great redeemer will come and clothe you with His righteous robe.

I'm going to ask us all to stand at this time for this hymn. Following the hymn I will close us in prayer and we will be dismissed.

I am indebted to Dr. James Boyce for his portrayal of the atonement of Christ in the book of Hosea and his dramatic use of Hosea's relationship with Gomer. From Chapter 6, "The Language of the Marketplace", as found in the book, Atonement, edited by G. Fluhrer.