

Rev. Dr. Anne B. Epling
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Hosea 1: 3-10

**“Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism:
Listening for the Word of God As It comes to Us Today”**

Today I’m concluding my sermon series “Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism”. We’ve looked at many different topics: evolution and science, the role of women, why bad things happen to good people, the book of Revelation, how to witness to our faith in a pluralistic nation, and the different interpretations of Jesus in scripture. Today we’re finishing with an overall look at how to read scripture in a faithful but non-fundamentalist way while affirming the authority of scripture.

But before we do that, a reminder of what the Bible is not. It’s not a science book, as we learned when looking at the story of creation. It’s not a history book either, though it has history in it. Nor is it a book of systematic theology, carefully laying out dogma and doctrine. For example, there’s no explanation of the Trinity in the Bible, or how it is that Jesus is both human and divine.

The Bible is not inerrant or infallible, meaning free from error, as some claim it to be. There are 66 books in the Bible, and there are even more authors since some of the books have multiple authors; and the books were written over the course of hundreds of years. Times change, contexts change, and people change, therefore the stories can change.

People are often surprised when I tell them that the reformers, John Calvin included, were not at all troubled by the fact that the Bible had discrepancies and errors; in fact, the Reformers took it in stride. In Calvin’s opinion, discrepancies and errors were the result of the fact that God had accommodated to human frailty in the process of self-revelation. That’s a fancy way of saying God is revealed to us in the Bible, but because it was written by human hands, there are bound to be errors. The image Calvin used was of God speaking with a lisp or stammer that we can’t always

understand, so in a person's attempt to write down God's word, he (or she) got some of it wrong.

One of the texts I think the writers got wrong was the text you heard Carrie read from the prophet Hosea. To tell you the truth, I can't find many redeeming qualities in it. But Presbyterians, while not believing in the inerrancy of scripture, do believe in the authority of Scripture. This means † we have to take the good with the bad. As Terry always likes to say, "You can't pick and choose." You can't pick and choose what verses you want to believe in and what verses you don't want to believe in. For example, I don't really like passages that state that women should be silent in church, but I have to look at the passage in both its historical and literary context and try to decipher who the audience was, why the author wrote it, and what it means for us today. This is what "exegesis" is. But even with a good exegetical reading of a text, it can still be hard to find redeeming qualities. Such is the case today. So if we can't toss out the text, what do we do with it? We wrestle with it, just like Jesus did in the story we heard from Luke, and we try to gain a clearer understanding of what God is trying to tell us today. So that's what we're going to do with Hosea; read it faithfully, but not fundamentally.

So who was Hosea? Hosea was a prophet during the eighth century BCE. He preached in the Northern Kingdom of Israel during a very tumultuous time. Politically the nation was a wreck. It was plagued by several assassinations of its kings, imprudent political alliances, a war, and incursions into the Israelite territory by Assyria. The Northern Kingdom of Israel would eventually fall to the Assyrians in 721 BCE.

Besides contending with the political instability of the nation, Hosea also struggled with what he saw as perversions in the religion of Israel. Hosea believed the Israelites were worshipping Baal, the Canaanite storm God, and ignoring Yahweh. Baal was responsible for fertility in all facets of life—the cultivation of crops, the breeding of flocks, and the birth of children. Baal was very important in the Canaanite religion, and Hosea was accusing the Israelites of worshipping Baal more than God. For Hosea the important questions were who is the giver of all good things? Who is the Creator God who brings forth fertility from barrenness? In Hosea's mind the absolute answer was God.

I give you all of this background information because you need to know it in order to understand why Hosea was so angry towards the Israelites. They were worshipping other gods, placing those gods above Yahweh, and putting more importance on those gods. According to Hosea, the Israelites were promiscuous and no better than a wife who is a harlot. This is the metaphor that Hosea uses. Israel is cast in the negative female imagery as God's adulterous wife, and God is the husband who has been wronged.

These metaphors reflect the historical situation of ancient Israel where gender relationships were asymmetrical: the man occupied the more privileged position in society, and the woman was subject to him. This isn't new information to you, I'm sure. But where it gets dicey is in the book's theology. Because in the book of Hosea, the theology interprets the divine as male and the female as sinful. But even more disturbing than this is the fact that Hosea takes the imagery of the husband-wife relationship and describes God's legitimate punishment as physical violence against women. The problem arises when we forget the biblical imagery and a husband's abuse against his wife becomes as justified as God's retribution against Israel.

In Hosea we read that God commands Hosea, "Go, take for yourself a promiscuous wife and bear children of promiscuity, for the land has been promiscuous away from Yahweh." Hosea then marries Gomer and has 3 children by her. Each child represents the deteriorating state of Israel. Hosea's marriage to a promiscuous woman becomes an act symbolizing that the land has been promiscuous; in other words, the Israelites have been worshipping the god Baal.

The two stories become one. Sometimes we don't know where Hosea is speaking about the Israel/God relationship, and where he is speaking about his relationship with his wife, Gomer. And the marriage metaphor is a powerful one because it articulates so well the covenantal relationship between God and Israel.

And the marriage metaphor remains powerful to us today because marriage is something we take seriously. I've probably officiated at a couple hundred weddings, and no matter how many times I recite the

marriage vows, they carry a deep meaning. I can't say them without thinking about my own marriage and how those vows have evolved and carry greater meaning the longer I'm married.

So listening to Hosea describe his marriage, it's something that many of us can relate to – whether it's reflecting upon our own marriages or the marriages of our parents or siblings or close friends. The metaphor is so close to us, and that's what makes it even scarier when we hear of the physical violence that takes place in the story. Hosea's metaphor of the marriage between God and Israel gives us an entrance into understanding the divine-human relationship as no other metaphor can. But, it makes its theological point at the expense of real women who were and still are victims of physical, mental, and sexual violence.

Do you know how often violence is committed against women? According to the World Health Organization, 1 in 3 women – 30% -- have been subjected to either physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime. And most of this violence is committed by someone they know. Worldwide, almost one third (27%) of women aged 15-49 years who have been in a relationship report that they have been subjected to some form of physical and/or sexual violence by their intimate partner. Globally, as many as 38% of all murders of women are committed by intimate partners.

This has been exasperated during the pandemic. Social and economic impacts have increased the exposure of women to abusive partners while limiting their access to services. Plenty of women were in lockdown with their abusers. This is referred to as the Shadow Pandemic. And as COVID-19 cases continue to strain the health care system, essential services such as domestic violence shelters and helplines have reached their capacity.

Friends, when we exploit women, we violate the image of God.

So, given the immense difficulties there are with the marriage/partnership metaphor, is it an appropriate one when describing the divine-human relationship? I would obviously say no, I don't think it is appropriate and certainly not appropriate as it is presented in Hosea.

But how can we determine what is appropriate criteria for a metaphor to describe God and God's relationship with us? We can begin by asking a number of questions. First, to whose experience does the metaphor speak, and whose experience does the metaphor exclude? Whose experience does the metaphor describe positively, and whose experience does it describe negatively? Is the metaphor fair and just in its representations? Certainly, the male violence embedded in the text of Hosea should make all readers wary of an uncritical acceptance of its marriage metaphor.

So how, then, do we interpret this scripture? How do we decide what doesn't apply anymore without falling prey to picking and choosing the verses we agree with or that support our views?

Well, we wrestle with the text. We ask hard questions. And we're not being unfaithful to God when we do. Asking questions of scripture that seem inconsistent with modern scientific knowledge or geography or history or sociology is a very faithful thing to do. Friends, we're not judging God by asking questions; we're judging and asking questions of the Bible's human authors – and sometimes they got it wrong. The Spirit may have prompted them, but the Spirit didn't dictate to them. The Spirit may have whispered to them, but they didn't always hear correctly. And just like the Spirit works in our lives, this does not make us inerrant or infallible. So we wrestle with the Bible, and reflect on its meaning in light of the church's teaching and history and our own intellect and experience. And, we interpret it in light of other Biblical passages – like Jesus does in our Gospel reading. And when we do that, it's pretty hard to justify passages of scripture that are used to exclude, hurt, and oppress. It just is. Because in the Bible we hear the powerful words of the Hebrew prophets calling all persons to repent of violence and turn to God. The Psalms express the hope of protection and a longing for justice in the midst of violence. Jesus calls us to be good Samaritans and aid the victims of violence and take persons to safe places. Jesus sends the disciples to heal the sick, to bind up the wounded, and to preach the good news of liberation from oppression to all people.

See, the thing is with the Bible-anyone can take a verse and twist it and distort it, but they can't take away its overall message of a God who loves the world and everything in it and hopes we will, too.

And this is why I can say I believe in the authority of Scripture while not being a fundamentalist; because wherever there is a “bad” verse, there are ten more that speak of turning to God and that express hope and protection for all of God’s people.

Amen.