

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Amos & Hosea

The Time Is Ripe

In asking "Whatever happened to Israel" we have looked at the narratives of 1 & 2 Kings – at the division of Israel into northern (Israel) and southern (Judah) kingdoms, at the idolatry in Israel brought in by Jeroboam and his golden calves, and Ahab and Jezebel's Baal and Asherah worship. And we have heard "the word of the LORD" from Elijah and Elisha that Israel must return to the true God or face disaster. Now we turn from the historical perspective to first of "the writing prophets," whom the LORD sends to offer Israel one last chance to hear his word and repent.

The date is about 790-740 BC, a 50-year period of relative peace and prosperity that precedes the end of Israel as a nation in 721 BC. The terrible reign of Ahab is over, and despite attacks from Damascus, the greater threat from the Assyrian empire to the north is "on hold." That does not stop king Jehu attempting a foolish alliance: afraid of Damascus, he pays tribute to Assyria. In the picture language the prophets often use, Israel is a sheep, afraid of a wolf, who recruits a lion as a protector! Into this period of peace, prosperity and fear the LORD sends the prophets Amos and his contemporaries Joel and Hosea. Their message is clear: time is short, repent and return before the LORD sets the lion on you! The LORD says through Amos: "The time is ripe for my people Israel. I will spare them no longer." (Am 8:1-2).

1) *The Love of His Life*

But first we need to look at the prophet Hosea. He is called not simply to declare the word to Israel, but to act out a parable for them (Hosea 1-3). The LORD tells Hosea to marry a prostitute. It is one of those timeless human stories that reappears in every culture: a kind, rich man is going to rescue a wayward woman. You know the story, from the Greek myth of *Pygmalion* to George Bernard Shaw's play of that name, to Lerner and Loewe's musical version *My Fair Lady*, to the movie *Pretty Woman*, and so on. A kind and good man lifts a no-good woman from the gutter and makes a lady of her; of course they fall in love, marry and live happily ever after!

So Hosea marries a woman named Gomer. They raise a family; two sons and a daughter. But then something happens that is far worse than any of the comic ups and downs of Eliza Doolittle and Professor Higgins: after many years of marriage, Gomer leaves Hosea and returns to her old ways and becomes not just an adulteress, but a prostitute again. Hosea mourns the loss of his unfaithful wife, and he lets loose a diatribe of charges against her; he tells their children "rebuke your mother; she is no longer my wife... she is chasing after lovers... I will expose her; I will put a stop to her celebrations!" And her life spirals down to living on the streets, and

finally into slavery. It's a tragic twist to the *Pretty Woman* story!

What can be done? What would you do, if you were Hosea? The tale has one more twist. The LORD tells Hosea: "go out and find Gomer; woo her, love her, buy her back from slavery, make her your wife again." Oh, there will be consequences; she will bear her shame; it will be "many days" before she can again become the mistress of the household, but she will be restored if she is willing to return.

What is this all about? What is the meaning of this acted parable? I'm sure you have grasped the point already: the LORD loves his bride Israel with a steadfast love that nothing can break. He brought her from nowhere and nothing to be his bride, but she has deserted him and become unfaithful with many foreign gods. So she will suffer the consequences for a while, but the LORD will redeem her, he will buy her back again from slavery, he will make her his bride once again! This is how the LORD loves Israel, despite all she has done and is still doing. To be sure, her days of suffering are not over – far from it – but her husband loves her deeply and will redeem her and bring her back to him.

2) *The Lion Has Roared*

And so to Amos. He also knows that the LORD loves Israel: "you alone have I chosen from all the families of the earth... can the two of us walk together unless we are agreed?" (Amos 3:2-3). Amos also knows how far Israel has strayed from the LORD. So he gives the detailed anatomy of her unfaithfulness. This is what national "adultery" looks like.

The culture of Israel has been perverted and corrupted. These years of peace have turned out to be a time of prosperity; there is work

to be done, many nations to trade with, there is money – even wealth. In fact the rich are doing very well; they have summer homes and winter homes, their mansions have couches inlaid with ivory, and silk pillows. There is food and especially drink in abundance – drunkenness is a real problem. Among many other troubling things, "father and son use the same girl..." In fact to an outside observer – and Amos is from down in Judah near the Dead Sea – "excess" would be an apt description of Israel's culture in her fateful and final 50 years.

The poor, on the other hand, are getting poorer. They are cheated, exploited, abused. Fraud is widespread. "You sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals... you trample the poor in the dust." "You deny justice to the oppressed... you cheat with bad scales, you skimp the measure... you boost the price." "You can't wait for Sabbaths and holidays to be over so you can get back to business." In the eyes of the LORD, Israel's religious life is as corrupt as her social life: "I hate, I despise, your religious feasts and your assemblies... I will not accept your burnt offerings... Away with your music and songs, I will not listen to them." "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a never-failing stream" says the LORD.

This is what an "adulteress nation" looks like. So "*the time is ripe.*" "I will send you into exile... locusts will strip your land, you will be judged by fire. The plumb-line of truth and righteousness has been applied to the house of Israel, and it is clear that this leaning building is about to fall. "The time is ripe." "The lion has roared, should we not now be afraid?" (Am 3:8).

3) *Hope?*

Is there any hope for Israel? Hosea thought so – the LORD loves her so much that he will

go out and woo her, buy her back, and redeem her from slavery. But that will only happen "after many days." Exile must come first.

Amos also knows the love of the LORD, and in the last five verses of 9 chapters he finally gets there: to "the day" of the LORD. "In that day I will restore David's fallen tent; I will repair its broken places, I will restore its ruins, I will build it as it used to be." "I will bring back my exiled people Israel... I will plant Israel in her own land, never again to be uprooted" (Amos 9:11-15).

The northern kingdom of Israel, and its name, will soon disappear at the hands of the Assyrian empire. The capital city of Samaria will fall to siege in 721 BC. In accord with Assyrian policy, the Israelites will be taken away, dispersed across the Assyrian empire, and peoples from far and wide will be brought in to repopulate the area - it's a fine way to destroy a culture after you have captured the land! So centuries later at the time of Jesus, when this area is known as Samaria, its inhabitants - now called Samaritans - are despised by the Jews of Jerusalem as half-breed foreigners with no rights even to live where they do. So Israel is dispersed; *the Diaspora*, the worldwide dispersal of the Jews, has begun - with consequences that we still feel 2700 years later.

And when the "remnant" Jews of Judah return to the land from their exile in Babylon, a deep sense emerges that the LORD's promises of restoration and rebuilding still await fulfillment. That yearning becomes a major part of the "messianic expectation" that greets Jesus (and others of his generation): "When will the exile be over? When will the LORD replant Israel forever?" "When will you restore the kingdom?"

4) "The Word of the LORD"

Whatever happened to Israel? She became unfaithful, corrupt. She lived in luxury in "the last days." She ignored the prophets - and often tried to silence them. She had no concern with justice, equity, and righteousness. Religion was a joke - a smorgasbord of options, a cafeteria of spiritualities. No wonder the LORD says: "I will not listen; I hate what I hear."

We, like every generation since 750 BC, read these words and wonder if our society is not just as corrupt, just as addicted to wealth and power and pleasure, just as deaf to prophetic voices. It would be easy to become cynical, to say we have learned nothing, that industry and technology and communication have only left us worse off morally and ethically. Even believers face the issue: can the Christian Church be saved? Or is it sliding down into syncretism and folly? Is the time ripe for the Lord to deal with his people? It's understandable that many think so.

But whether or not that is the case, this much we know for sure: the Lord loves his people. He loves with a *steadfast love* - a defining OT word that means *an unshakeable commitment, a covenant of love*. Even if we have to live through a time of exile - personally or communally - the Lord's love for us will never die. Hosea, more than anyone in the OT, shows just how far God will go to bring back his wayward bride. We know even better than that: we know that Jesus came to end the exile and restore and rebuild the people of God - the Church, the *new Israel* - and that he bought redemption at such a price that Paul affirms: "*nothing* - neither not life nor death nor height nor depth nor principalities nor powers nor angels nor demons nor the past nor the future nor anything else in all creation - *can separate us from the love of God that is in Jesus Christ*" (Romans 8:38-39).

That is what holds us up; that is the glue that holds our lives together; that is what reassures us that we can go through *anything* - *in his love!* Whatever happened to Israel? She went astray - as we all do - but she is now reborn, remade, restored, made once again mistress of the house of God; in "the new Israel," the worldwide church of Jesus Christ. We are privileged to be a part of it.

Let us pray...