

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, 7/24/2022, Hosea 1:2-10 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

So last week I didn't preach on the passage from Amos in which God said, "I will turn your feasts into mourning, and all your songs into lamentation; I will bring sackcloth on all loins, and baldness on every head." Mary and Martha seemed like the better option. This week, I got to pick between the Lord's Prayer and Hosea's "wife of whoredom," and after realizing that the last time these passages came up three years ago, I went with the Lord's Prayer, I reluctantly chose Hosea. This is our summer of the prophets, after all, and we only get two Sundays of Hosea.

We will get much more from Jeremiah later this summer and into fall, that prophet of Judah who warned them of their doom, to no avail, before the Babylonian exile. Jeremiah apparently counts as a major prophet, perhaps because his book is so long, whereas Hosea only is a minor prophet. Hosea was a prophet of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, which fell to Assyria more than a century before Judah fell to Babylon. While we may be less familiar with Hosea than with Jeremiah, Hosea functioned in much the same way in the northern kingdom as Jeremiah did in the south.

Both prophets used metaphors that thousands of years later are extremely offensive, particularly to women, and particularly marginalized women. I may joke about this being "Wife of Whoredom Sunday," but I joke to try to take some of the sexist sting out of the metaphor. I laugh about it because it makes me angry. Hosea sounds *horrible* in this passage: sexist and abusive. His metaphors about an adulterous wife are dreadful. And I say Hosea here instead of God because I can't stand the thought of God making up such a metaphor, but what does that say about me?

The book of Hosea is choked with metaphors, and not only ones about marriage and family, but also farm life and wild animals. My favorite metaphor appears during a particularly angry passage, but when you listen to it by itself it's lovely: "Like grapes in the wilderness, I found Israel. Like the first fruit on the fig tree, in its first season, I saw your ancestors." Grapes in the wilderness: I love the image of Israel as something refreshing for God to encounter on a hike: a sweet fruit in the midst of the wilderness. I love the image of God as a hiker.

God as a furious husband, not so much. And that image of God as a hiker encountering wild grapes comes in between verses saying that God will punish Israel and that Israel will become detestable.

The Hebrew in the book of Hosea is notoriously hard to figure out and translate, and I'd love to just blame the offensive parts of that, but I can't. I also want to blame all of these metaphors on Hosea instead of God. Hosea writes that he heard this message directly from God. I have a hard time finding good news in this passage. Finding beauty in this passage.

If I were Thomas Jefferson, I would probably leave most or all of Hosea on the cutting-room floor. Jefferson, you may have heard (especially since we live in Virginia) created his

own version of the Bible—*The Life and Morals of Jesus Christ*—containing only the New Testament and excluding the parts that Jefferson didn't find believable. Like the miracles and the resurrection.

If I were creating my own Bible, I would not leave out the miracles and the resurrection, but I would leave out lots of the violence in Numbers and Joshua. And probably that part from Amos last week and the end of Psalm 137 and certainly today's reading—except: except I sure love that last line, about children of the living God. We worship a living God, not a dead God. We worship a living God, and we are God's children.

As the professor Abraham Heschel pointed out, Hosea, through his imperfect and often offensive metaphors, shows us how God *felt* as opposed to only pointing out the sins of God's people. We worship a living God, and God, according to the Bible, has opinions about how we act. About us acting badly.

This metaphor of an unfaithful spouse worked for this prophet and his mostly male audience. Hosea went out to the men who most needed to hear this message. To an unfriendly audience. In our day, we tend to surround ourselves with people who believe as we do.

If I threw out this whole book, then we would not hear the prophet's message that God was deeply distressed by the faithlessness of the people of the northern kingdom, not only because they turned away to other gods, but because of how badly the rich treated the poor.

If I decide that Hosea as a biblical book has nothing to teach me because its marriage metaphors are offensive, then I will lose much of its social justice message.

The prophets were uncivilized and offensive. If they were around today, they would wear sandwich boards on corners shouting strange things into a megaphone, and we would probably dismiss them as unworthy of our attention. I'm sure I would walk right by them without making eye contact or acknowledging their existence.

If we create our own Bibles with difficult parts excised, we lose so much, we children of the living God.

Hosea mixes comfort and promise in with warnings and threats and horrible statements about his poor wife and children. Next week we will get another extended metaphor from Hosea, this time comparing Israel to a son instead of an adulterous wife, then on to Isaiah and Jeremiah. We'll be in Jeremiah for a while until we are all thoroughly sick of him. Jeremiah uses plenty of sexist and offensive metaphors as well, but I don't think we will hear most of those in church.

For these next couple of weeks while we're still in Hosea, I encourage you to read the passages we don't hear on Sundays during the week. You will find distasteful metaphors and passages that will make you wonder about Hosea's fitness for ministry. I encourage you to also seek sacred nuggets in the book. What would we lose if we canceled Hosea?

If you create your own Bible, like the Jefferson Bible, what will be lost? How does the Bible challenge your perception of our loving, living Lord? How can you wrestle with the hard parts instead of creating a God exclusively from your own imagination?