

“The Healing Love of God:”
August 7, 2022

Hosea 14:1-9
Matthew 9:9-13

In the weeks ahead, as summer moves into fall, I will be preaching primarily from the Minor Prophets, those 12 books at the end of the Hebrew Scriptures. They are called “Minor” Prophets only because these books are shorter—*much* shorter—than those of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.

But these Minor Prophets have major concerns—concerns that we share as well: the judgment of God, the mercy of God, justice in the world and right relationships in our lives, and, as we hear this morning, the healing love of God.

I should say before I begin, that for many years now, I have used the late summer and early fall as an opportunity to preach extensively from one book of the Bible—or from a few of Paul’s letters. This always comes with some surprises and challenges. When I chose to preach from Paul’s letters to the Galatians and the Colossians a few years ago, I discovered that I deeply loved the letter to the Galatians—and I deeply *disliked* Colossians. That made preaching much more of a problem than I expected.

Sometimes members of the congregation have problems with what they are hearing and reading as well. When I was preaching from the Gospel of Matthew and bringing up some of the troubling words and actions of Jesus, Claire Ashman came up to me before worship one Sunday and in her gentle but firm way said: “You have a lot that you need to explain.”

And when I announced one August that I would be preaching from Jeremiah for several weeks, our friend, the late Jerry Walker, said to me almost in disbelief over what I was proposing: “We’ll see how that goes!” He wasn’t too optimistic.

Surprises await, then, in the weeks ahead. So, I invite you to join with me as we look at these minor prophets with major concerns. As I said, the books are generally brief, so you might want to read through one of them each week in preparation for worship on Sunday. You can start this coming week with the book of Joel, which I’ll be preaching from a week from today. Only three chapters! *Minor* indeed!

For today, however, I begin with Hosea.

We go to the final chapter—and, actually, the final verse.

Hosea speaks to the people of the Northern Kingdom of Israel at a time when they were at war with the Assyrians. It wasn’t going well and the kingdom was approaching anarchy. Hosea spoke of the faithlessness of the people and of the faithfulness of God.

This final verse might have been a later editorial addition.

It tells us: “Those who are wise understand these things; those who are discerning know them. For the ways of the Lord are right and the upright walk in them, but transgressors stumble in them.”

The wise—and we all like to think that we are wise and discerning—the wise understand the point of this book, which is a call to turn once more to the God who is faithful, an invitation to walk with God.

Walking with God, of course, brings with it the possibility of stumbling—or I should say the *reality* of stumbling. The wrong that we do, the good that we fail to do, the unintended negative consequences of the good that we do manage to accomplish—we know all of these, don't we. They are our companions in the life of faith.

We all stumble. That's the message that we heard at the beginning of this chapter. "You have stumbled because of your iniquity." Now, I know, that sounds kind of harsh. But one gets accustomed to hearing harsh truths when spending time among the prophets.

Hosea, of course, had something specific in mind. He was addressing the nation of Israel—his nation and God's people.

They had stumbled. They trusted in other nations—in the horses of Egypt, in their own military power. But all of that left them helpless against the onslaught of the mighty Assyrians.

And they had trusted in other gods, the work of their hands. As Jerry Walker might have said: "We'll see how that goes!"

It didn't go very well.

In short, their politics and their religion were both faulty and flawed. Lying, murder, and stealing were endemic. Their nation, once well-off and powerful was at the point of collapse. The judgment of God weighed heavily on the people.

Hosea was addressing the nation of Israel, but he could have been talking to me or you.

We, too, keep stumbling as individuals and as a nation.

Now, when I say this, I want to be clear that the United States is not a "Christian nation." That idea was given birth in the 1930's and ever since it keeps coming back and keeps gaining strength. In recent years that perversion of faith called "Christian Nationalism" has surfaced and the church must speak clearly about the false doctrine that it is.

We are not a "Christian nation." Even so, might we not in some way sense the judgment of God upon us when we deny food to the hungry and welcome to the stranger, when we look to take away right from people, and when we treat so many in ways that disregard the basic human dignity inherent in each person?

We have stumbled.

Hosea's response?

Return. Return to the Lord your God.

Set your priorities straight. Turn in a new direction.

And, listen! The prophet not only calls the nation—calls us—to return, he gives us the words to speak: "Take words with you and return to the Lord; say to God, 'Take away all guilt, accept that which is good.'"

God, it would seem, makes repentance easy—calling us and even helping us know what to say. It's that simple. It's that simple because God loves freely and, in that love, seeks to heal our brokenness.

That's good news for all of us so in need of healing and wholeness.

And, of course, there is plenty of brokenness in the life of each one of us as well as in the world. Reflecting on this, the Old Testament scholar, James Limburg, says that words of Hosea “are not for those who have it all together but for those for whom it is all coming apart. We are invited to see things—to see our world and our lives as they are—that we are at the end of our rope, that we have not been able to find help from others or with our own resources.”

That's pretty much where I find myself as often as not. My guess is that you find yourself in such situations as well. That's why we keep seeking to follow in the way of Jesus Christ, who speaks to our hearts when he says: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.” And what a relief to listen as he concludes: “I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

You and me. This nation, this world. That's who God calls out to through the prophet. All of us who have stumbled in our iniquity.

From the time of Hosea on, the human hope has been not in our political agility nor in our religious ability, not in our inherent goodness or righteousness, but in the healing love of God.

Hosea describes this love as refreshing dew on parched ground, as the fragrance of cedar, as the shade of a tree, that allows us to blossom and flourish.

Even those who have stumbled—even you and me—can live in that love.

And we'll stumble again. We will.

We don't get it right.

But still—even today—we hear that gentle call: “Return.”

Even today, let us walk in the ways of God.