



Oc tober 19, 2014

Larry DeLong

The Covenant of Witness - Hosea (focus: 11:1-9)

The prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures were generally unpopular during their lives. They often said very hard things, often to important people. Many of them were considered traitors or worse, since they often counseled surrender to invading forces, or spoke of exile to those who felt that God was on their side.

Now, it's not surprising that the people of Israel would feel that God was on their side: that's how they understood the covenant, the agreement, that God had made with them. And we can find evidence of plenty of prophets who were happy to say nothing but comforting, consoling words to the ears that wanted to hear them.

But the remarkable thing about the prophets whose words remain in our Bible is that they met the most important criteria of a prophet: they spoke the truth. Their words, inspired by God, came to pass, while those "prophecies" upholding "things as they are" went by the wayside.

Another thing about prophets is that they engaged in what are called prophetic acts. We might also call them object lessons: they acted out, metaphorically, the lessons that God gave them to pass on. So they

did lots of what look like odd things to demonstrate God's truth - things that would easily get a person locked up these days!

Hosea is one of those prophets called to perform prophetic acts. First, God directs him to marry a prostitute, named Gomer, to act out a living lesson that God's covenant partner, Israel, is unfaithful. Then, they have three children together. Each of these children is given a name that proclaims a prophetic message for the people: Jezreel, Lo-Ruhamah (No Compassion), and Lo-Ami (Not My People).

Jezreel's name, God says, signifies that God will destroy Israel's power in the Jezreel Valley. No Compassion's name tells everyone who meets her that God will no longer have compassion on the people, or forgive them. Not My People, because, God says, "You are not my people, and I am not your God." (1:9) This family is embodying a message which could be said in a few sentences over the course of their lives: just think how long this sermon might be if we did that here!

Three things: first, this seems a terrible thing to do to these children, doesn't it? We'll come back to this. Second, these words certainly sound like God is pulling out of his covenant, his contract with his people, doesn't it? Remember: a valid contract not only has at least two parties, it has mutual obligations. God keeps his end; Israel does not.

Rounding out our set of three points: God, through Hosea and his family, will demonstrate his faithfulness right before the very people

who've refused to respect his covenant, who have not held up their end of the bargain.

How does this relate to us? Well, it certainly demonstrates the covenant of witness, of testimony to God's faithfulness and love for us, and it begs the question how we witness through our own lives. Hosea and Gomer and Jezreel and No Compassion and Not My People lived right next to other people, who couldn't miss their living message every time they encountered them. That God would go to such lengths to demonstrate a simple point through living beings is pretty amazing – though it pales in comparison to the saving act he worked in Jesus Christ. But it also shows that – and one way how - witness is a part of our obligation under God's covenant with you and me.

You see, after Gomer and Hosea have produced these offspring, whose names must grate on everyone around, God speaks again to Hosea: Jezreel will become not the end of Israel, but a day of joy as God sows Jezreel as seed to grow a great nation. Hosea is told to say to No Compassion, I, God, will have compassion on No Compassion, and Not My People will be God's people.

Scripture.

So, this horrific act of naming children for catastrophe actually is God's way of telling his unfaithful people that they are so precious he cannot help but forgive them, and welcome them back to himself.

That God uses little children in such powerful ways, and that Hosea is called to use them so powerfully to witness to God's goodness is a model for our own practice of witness.

How ought we, heirs to this great covenant of God, show God's faithfulness in our own faithfulness and work? We have so many opportunities! By caring for God's children, these millions who suffer, who are turned into refugees, who are persecuted, abused, sold and bartered and trafficked as human cattle.

These children, who have so much to witness to us about God's love, because there is no love like that of an infant for those who care for it, are our charge too. We should show such love to God by demonstrating it to and with others, in our own prophetic acts. Only this time, we are not just proclaiming the old covenant, but the new one, sealed in the blood and body of Christ, which brings the broken back together. Remember, Christ's broken body brings us all together. We are reaching out not just to our own, but to all: all people and nations.

This is the first time in my career that my sermon has been hijacked by the Nobel Prize committee. You probably have heard this over and over already, but the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded this year to Malala Yousafzai, a Pakistani Muslim girl, who was hauled off her school bus by the Taliban and shot in the head for the simple act of seeking an education. A child, who in any other time, in the place where this happened, would have been forgotten, most certainly would have

died, and her voice and witness on behalf of women and girls who seek education would have been silenced. As she says, “What are extremists afraid of? A girl with a book.”

But thanks to modern medicine, her own fierce spirit, and our ability to know about the smallest things in the most remote places, we can and have heard her voice, her voice on behalf of those who cannot be heard. Her life is an act of prophecy – of witnessing God’s love for children and women.

She was in biology class in England when she heard the news, but within hours (after she’d finished classes), she’d contacted her co-winner, Kailash Satyarthi, who has rescued 82,000 children from slavery - but a citizen of India, the sworn enemy of Pakistan, and a Hindu - and between the two of them, set to putting together a meeting between the leaders of their two countries. Both of them living lives of witness.

Scripture tells us that our God uses those who don’t follow him or acknowledge him to do his work: here are a Muslim and a Hindu, both working and witnessing to the peace and justice that our God wants for the world.

So, here we are. We have heard some of the most beautiful, most passionate words of Scripture; heard the story of how God’s covenant is worked out by us and by God in witness and service, not just to believers, but to all humanity, and we have heard how two modern

human beings who don't even follow our Lord have nonetheless been doing God's work of peace, of witness, of reconciliation at the very real risk of their lives.

What witness lies in you? How can you demonstrate to a child the love of God in Jesus Christ? How will you serve those who do not know or understand why we think it's important to be faithful in response to God's faithfulness to us?

Once we've been "outed" as church goers, perhaps even as Christians, what will we do to witness to God's sacrificial covenant with us? Shall we let ourselves be embarrassed? Shall we just uncomfortably walk past?

Or shall we respond to the God who calls us his children by serving those children who need our help, right now? Show the world what God is like through *our* lives?

God's covenant promises are in us: we can honor our covenant promise in who and what we are and do.