

March 23, 2025

“Return: Come Home to the Lord Your God”

Hosea 14:1-9

Vernon Advent Christian Church

Introduction... This morning, we are finishing up our look into the book of Hosea. As we have made our way through this book, we have seen the mess that Israel has made of their lives and their nation. And, even though judgement is coming because of Israel's continued rejection of God, we have seen God's steadfast love toward them, even as they rejected God again and again.

As a reminder, since it's been a few weeks, Hosea's message focuses on Israel's continued unfaithfulness to the Lord as portrayed in the first three chapters of the book when God asked Hosea to marry Gomer, whom he knows will be unfaithful to him, as a picture of the spiritual adultery that Israel has committed against God. This lack of faithfulness is seen in Israel's worship of other gods encouraged by their religious leaders who are singled out in chs. 4 and 5. Their job was to lead the people in faithfulness, but they actually did the opposite.

The prophet also criticizes the king, and the other political leaders of Israel, for forming covenants with Egypt and Assyria, as well as relying on their prosperity and security, rather than relying on the Lord as we saw a few weeks ago when we looked at ch. 10. And so, yes, judgement is coming because God is just and cannot let their sin go unpunished, but the Lord is also merciful and the book concludes with a message of hope as we come to the last chapter of Hosea. And this is such a turn of events that it once led Charles Spurgeon, the famous English preacher from the late 1800's, to say this about this final chapter:

“This is a wonderful chapter to be at the end of such a book. I had never expected from such a prickly shrub to gather so fair a flower, so sweet a fruit; but so it is: where sin abounded, grace [does] much more abound. No chapter in the Bible can be more rich in mercy than this last of Hosea; and yet no chapter in the Bible might, in the natural order of things, have been more terrible in judgment. Where we looked for the blackness of darkness, behold a noontide of light!”

Israel had sinned greatly against the Lord and deserved his judgment. But just like any good parent who has to discipline a child, God still loves them and calls them to respond to the discipline and come back into his loving arms. And in this final chapter, God gives them clear instructions on how to do just that and the results of what a life of following after God looks like. If you are able, please stand as I read God's word from the Book of Hosea. [Read Passage]

Before we get to the rest of the chapter, let's focus on vs.1 for a moment. The J.B. Phillips translation of the Bible puts it this way in vs. 1, “But come home, Israel, come home to the Lord your God,” and thus the title of this message. In Hosea 11-14, the prophet announced that the Lord would both judge and restore Israel. Hosea emphasized that restoration would come only after the nation was destroyed in the exile. His point is that

restoration could only be enjoyed through repentance and a return to covenant faithfulness.

God is saying to Israel through Hosea, this is what you are to do in order to be restored. “Return, Israel, to the Lord your God. Return. Come back to God. Come home.” This word return, or turn, in Hebrew is “shuv” and has been a major theme in Hosea, but mostly in a bad way. To return to the Lord is the one thing Israel needs to do most, but it is the one thing they cannot seem to manage on their own. And the truth of the matter is, neither can we.

At times in this book, we're told, Israel can't repent or turn back. Hosea 5:4 says, “Their deeds do not permit them to return to their God. A spirit of prostitution is in their heart; they do not acknowledge the Lord.” They can't turn back, their habits and their choices have trapped them. They were so blinded by their own desires and pursuits that unless they gave them all up they couldn't come back to God. Hopefully this doesn't describe you this morning.

Other times they won't return to God. First they can't, then they won't. Hosea 7:10 says, “Israel's arrogance testifies against him, but despite all this he does not return to the Lord his God or search for him.” It is their arrogance, their pride that keeps them from returning to the Lord. When things were going well for them, they felt no need of God. Are we too prideful, too arrogant, that we won't turn to God even though he is the only one who can truly help?

And when things started to go wrong, they did return to God, but only for a little while. If you remember in Hosea 6:1, a verse we have quoted several times throughout this series, “Come, let us return to the Lord. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds.” Israel had started to return to God, but it was more because they wanted something from God more than they wanted God Himself. They wanted their circumstances to change, they wanted the pain to stop, but they did not want God. There's a difference. A lot of times we say we're sorry because we want our circumstances to change. But we are unwilling to change the behaviors that led to those circumstances. Israel did not want to return home and live under God's law. The people of Israel would rather return to Egypt and go back into slavery, than return to God. And where did that get them?

Well, this final passage of Hosea comes from the very last days of the northern kingdom, the last days of Israel, at the time of its fall to Assyria in 722 BC. Instead of turning to God in their times of need, they turned to Egypt and Assyria. As the end of v.1 says, it was their iniquity, their sins, that had been their downfall. It is not just that they didn't trust God to protect them, it was their misuse of everything God gave them, their love of violence, their spiritual pride and their ungodly leadership. Their downfall was their fault. But, in the middle of it all, God says it is not too late. I am still the Lord your God. Return to me. Come home.

And then the rest of the passage reads like a script for what a return home to God looks like. Here at the end of Hosea, God was clear, saying “If you want to live, if you are ready to live the life that I intended for you to live, this is what you should do.” And what he says next was a beautiful gift for Israel, and still is for us, on our way home to God if we have ears to hear and the wisdom to understand what God is saying to us.

How is Israel to come home? Step one, they must come to God with a genuine heart of confession. [read vs. 2] If you were to come around our house at all, chances are you would hear this phrase at least once, “Anna, use your words.” And that’s because, if we let her get away with it, Anna would simply repeat the same word over and over again until she gets what she wants. This is the same instructions that God is giving us here. The first step in having a genuine heart of confession is to use your words, literally “Take with you words and return to the LORD.”

But we have already seen in Hosea, and you know from your own life, that words can be empty. Talk is cheap as they say. But God is saying more than just use empty words. This is the language of vows. God is saying I would rather you come into my presence and use your words and make authentic vows to me instead of going through the motions of bringing meaningless animal sacrifices that mean nothing to you. Literally the verse reads, “we will bring you the bulls of our lips.” This verse reminds us that God values sincere repentance. It’s not about grand gestures, like the animal sacrifices, but honest words that acknowledge our need for forgiveness. We are encouraged to approach God with humility and confidence, knowing that he is gracious and willing to forgive. So, the first part of having a genuine heart of confession is to use your words.

And it’s not just confession in a vague sense, but the next step in vs. 3 gets very specific. [Read vs. 3] So, when confessing sin, get specific. Not only did the people of Israel sin, but they sinned specifically by putting their trust in Assyria who could not save them. And Hosea is not saying that riding horses is a sin and that they should no longer ride horses, much to the delight of any horse enthusiast we have here today, but specifically, he is talking about war horses and trusting in their own military might, or the might of others. We sometimes sing a worship song that quotes scripture from the book of Exodus after Israel crossed the Red Sea that says, “Some may trust in horses, some may trust in chariots, but we will trust in the name of our God.” Israel had failed in that they no longer were trusting in God, but in their own strength and it had gotten them nowhere.

They had also made idols with their hands and worship them as God and found out the gods that they made certainly could not save them. God knows about their broken plans and all the decisions that got them to this point. He can name their sins and he invites them to do the same.

This leads us to the second step in coming home to God. The first is to have a genuine heart of confession and then, God says, Israel needs to repent and turn back to God. For Israel’s repentance to be real, for them to actually return to God then they have to commit to a different way of life. The end of verse 3, says, in essence, “we will no longer do these things.” They had lived their lives apart from God and now they are saying we were wrong and we will rearrange our lives, our calendars, our relationship, our budgets, our parenting, our marriages, our work, everything we do around you God. We will not seek the help Assyria anymore. We will not anxiously gather horses for war. We won’t make wood and stone into idols and we will not turn to the things we have made as if they were really God. Repentance means I was going one way, and now I am turning around and going the opposite direction.

So Israel must have a genuine heart of confession and a repentance that leads them to turn back to God. And step three, Israel was to remember that God is their heavenly

father and that he will welcome them home. Israel is to remember their father's covenant love. The end of vs. 3, "in you the orphan, the fatherless, finds mercy." This word for mercy is the same word for compassion. And for those of you who remember way back to Hosea 1 and the names of Hosea's children, well "Without mercy" can in fact experience mercy from God the Father. Israel chose to live as if they were fatherless, going after other "fathers" who led them astray, but that did not change the fact that they have a compassionate, merciful father waiting for them to come home.

This was God's invitation to Israel, and if they took these steps and returned home to God, this is what they will find, [Read vs. 4] They find God waiting to heal them. Who else can heal their broken and wayward heart? No one. Israel has given their bodies, their minds, their souls over to violence and materialism, to pride and going their own way. But coming back, they will not find an angry God, but a God who freely loves them. Loves them in a way they could never earn and never repay. God loves them not for what they can do for him and not because of their righteous choices, but because he chooses to. God loves. It is who he is and what he does.

And this brings us full circle from the beginning of the book. In the same way that God commanded Hosea to marry Gomer, a wife who was continually unfaithful to him, God entered into a covenant relationship with Israel who would be unfaithful to him. Things would get so bad that Gomer would actually enslave herself to one of her lovers. Israel was enslaved to their sin. Hosea continued to love his wife, even paying the redemption price to purchase his wife back. God would pay the full price of redemption by sending his own son to pay the penalty for sin. And God did it all, not because we deserve it, but because he loves us and has made a way possible for us to come home.

And it keeps getting better. Not only will the people be healed and loved, they will also flourish in the abundant life that is found in having a relationship with God. In the vs. 5-7, God uses beautiful descriptive language to describe the kind of life that is available when people choose to live with God. Under God's care and provision, Israel will flourish like a flower. They will be deeply rooted and stable. They will run to God and he will keep them safe.

The language in these verses are extravagant, but God is trying to communicate the reality of the abundant life in God. Jesus said it more simply in John 10:10 when he said, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." Life with God is not a boring life, it is full and fresh. This isn't to say that following God will be an easy life full of everything that we ever wanted. Just talk to some of the older saints in this room who have been walking with God a long time. But it does mean that God will take care of you and that no matter the circumstances, a life rooted in God is always found to be joyous and happy.

God goes on with his final plea for Israel in vs. 8-9. [Read vs. 8] God is not like idols that cannot answer you, heal you or care for you. God can watch over and protect Israel. And God can take care of you and heal your brokenness. God can provide for you what you look for in other people and places. And again, He is the source of an abundant life.

And then these closing words, [Read vs. 9] The wise person will see the message throughout the Book of Hosea. He will understand that in His mercy, God offers a wonderful opportunity for repentance and restoration, and it is dangerous and foolish to neglect that invitation.

This last chapter of Hosea tell us there is a way home for Israel. God says they are to have a genuine heart of confession, use their words to confess their specific sins, repenting and turning back to God and a different way of life, and remembering God is their loving father. And when they return home they will find a God who can heal their broken, wayward hearts, who is not angry, but loving, and who offers a life far more joyful and free than they could dream up for themselves.

There is a way home for us as well. If you have been living apart from God, you come home. You can talk to God because he is listening. You can confess your specific sins and your brokenness before him. The things you are afraid to tell anybody else, he already knows. And, by the way, he won't be angry at you when you confess. In Jesus, we have been forgiven if we come to God trusting in Jesus' work on the cross and we can know that God loves us freely. We can commit to learning from Jesus' teachings and living a different way of life and then remind ourselves over and over and over again that God is our Father and that he welcomes us home into his family.

And this kind of rhythm, these steps, are not just a one time thing. It is a way to do our whole life. It's part of what it means to return to a true heart of worship and realign with God. Let us pray.

Benediction: The God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will Himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To Him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.