

1.7.07 **A Time to Return to the Lord** Hosea 6:1-4, 6; 10:12-13; 11:1-8

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We are in the final section of the Old Testament sometimes known as the Minor Prophets. They are called “minor” because they’re much shorter in length than the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. However, the words God spoke through them are still powerful and important for our lives. Hosea’s name means, **salvation or deliverance and he is the only native of the northern kingdom of Israel among the prophets**. Hosea invited people to re-engage with God, to renew their relationship with the Lord, saying, *“Come, let us return to the Lord...”*

Hosea 6:1-4, 6:

“Come, let us return to the Lord;

for it is he who has torn, and he will heal us;

he has struck down, and he will bind us up.

After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up,

that we may live before him.

Let us know, let us press on to know the Lord;

his appearing is as sure as the dawn; he will come to us like the showers,

like the spring rains that water the earth.”

What shall I do with you, O Ephraim?

What shall I do with you, O Judah?

Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes away early.

For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,

the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

Happy New Year everyone. I am amazed that it is the year 2007. It seems like yesterday alarmists were scaring everyone with talk about “Y2K” and how all the computers were going to crash when we went from 1999 to 2000. Time passes so quickly. As Jon Freshwater shared so insightfully in his sermon last week, the beginning of a New Year is often a time when people make resolutions, decisions, and commitments about changes they wish to make in their lives. While some of these resolutions are trivial, other can be life changing. In worship for the first quarter of 2007, we will be hearing from the prophets who continually were challenging God’s people to get serious about resolving to know the Lord, to repent of their sin and to return to a life-shaping relationship with God; to make decisions and commitments that reflected God’s

priorities of love, justice, and concern for the poor and needy, the widow and the orphan, and strangers and homeless in their midst.

In Hosea 11, we are given a striking picture of God who is portrayed as a parent whose superhuman love is greater than divine anger. God is like a parent who is running after a disobedient, ungrateful child who refuses to return, refuses to admit having done wrong or to acknowledge the parent's love. Listen for the contrast between what God did and what the people did in these words from **Hosea 11:1-8**

“When Israel was a child, **I loved him**, and out of Egypt **I called my son**.

The more **I called them**, the more *they went from me*;

they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols.

Yet it was **I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms**;

but *they did not know* that **I healed them**.

I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love.

I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks.

I bent down to them and fed them.

They shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king,

because they have refused to return to me.

The sword rages in their cities, it consumes their oracle-priests, and devours because of their schemes.

My people are bent on turning away from me.

To the Most High they call, but he does not raise them up at all.

How can I give you up, Ephraim?

How can I hand you over, O Israel?

How can I make you like Admah?

How can I treat you like Zeboiim?

My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.”

There was a time when I was young when there used to be pictures of missing children on the sides of half-gallon milk cartons. It was so sad, there would be a brief description of the child, what he or she looked like, where they were last seen, and a phone number to call. As a parent I cannot imagine the heartache of having a missing child whose picture was on one of those cartons – the fears, the sleepless nights. Having met people whose worst fears have been realized in this regard, there are simply no words one can say. Any parent who has felt a rising sense of anxiety or panic at the

beach, a store or mall or theme park because he or she couldn't locate a child knows both the fear and the relief when the child is found.

As bad as it is to have a missing child, it is also heart rending to have a child who has left and refuses to come home. Hosea is telling us that God is the parent of many, many missing children and these are children who refuse to come home. Through Hosea, we hear God describing all that the Lord did – God loved, called persistently, taught the people to walk, held them and healed them, led them with kindness and love, tenderly nurtured, even bending down to feed them.

What kind of response did all God's love, care, and attention get? Rejection and disobedience, God's love was not returned. The people turned their back on God and went away making sacrifices and giving offerings to other gods.

This is an ancient story that is replayed in every generation.

God leads us, we don't realize it. God teaches us, we don't get it. God calls us, we run away. Refusing to wait for God, we run off on our own.

God pursues us in love. Like a parent with a missing child, God can't give us up.

The longing of God echoes throughout Hosea as God begs with us over and over, "**Return to your God**" (see 6:1, 11:5, 12:6, 14:1). Returning to God means there are certain things the Lord wants us to stop and other things we need to do. At the heart of Hosea's message is God saying: "**Your love** is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes away early. **For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings (6:4, 6)."**

In Hosea, the love of the people is compared to four things that vanish quickly: mist in early morning, dew, chaff in the wind, and smoke.

God's love and mercy (the Hebrew word 'hesed' is translated as both) are steadfast and for keeps and like any lover God wants to be loved in return.

In *Hosea 6* we learn God isn't interested in people just going through the motions making sacrifices, giving offerings, while their hearts are somewhere else. God wants to be known truly, personally, deeply.

In *Hosea 11*, the sin of the people is even worse, they are no longer half-heartedly offering sacrifices to God, they are offering them to idols!

Hosea describes God's anger at Israel's sins, which include ethical misbehavior (4:2; 10:13), over reliance on both outward religious activity (8:13) and trusting in military might (10:13). The time has come for change, 10:12-13, "*Sow for yourselves*

righteousness; reap steadfast love; break up the fallow ground; it is time to seek the Lord, that he may come and rain righteousness upon you. You have plowed wickedness, you have reaped injustice, you have eaten the fruit of lies. Because you have trusted in your power and in the multitude of your warriors.”

Because of the sins of the people, Hosea says, God will punish the nation, bringing destruction to the land (10:7-8) and removing its inhabitants (9:3). God says in Hosea 3:1-3 that the consequences of human sin are devastating and far reaching. *“There is no faithfulness or loyalty; there is no knowledge of God in the land. Swearing, lying, and murder, and stealing and adultery break out; bloodshed follows bloodshed. Therefore the land mourns, and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing.”* Sadly this is as true today as it was in Hosea’s time. These are tough but true words that people didn’t want to hear so they dismissed Hosea as nuts. They said (Hosea 9:7), *“The prophet is a fool, the man of the spirit is mad!”*

In today’s Peanut’s comic Lucy comes to her younger brother Linus with a piece of paper in her hands and says, *“Here, Linus...Look what I’ve done for you. I’ve made up a list of New Year’s resolutions that I feel you need desperately to make. Actually these are reforms which will help you become a better person.”* Linus replies, *“Well, how nice! This was very thoughtful of you Lucy...I shall try earnestly to improve myself in all these areas (Lucy is smiling). I’ll make good use of this list...I’ll try very hard to improve ..I really will! In fact, I’m getting better already! Look at me...I’m improving!!”* Linus then laughs and laughs and walks away leaving the piece of paper with the resolutions on the floor. Lucy laments to Charlie Brown, *“Reformers have a hard life!”* That’s the truth.

Hosea’s purpose in sharing the seriousness of Israel’s sin was to try and inspire people to return to an active, living faith in God who was still pursuing the people regardless of their failures.

Jesus quoted several times from Hosea reflecting that he was influenced by and knew the words of the prophets. In Matthew 9, Jesus was walking along, much like God is portrayed in Hosea 11, and Jesus sees a child of God who has been wandering from the Lord and he says to Matthew, *“Follow me.”* Matthew turns around and invites a group of his wandering friends to a party at his house with Jesus and his disciples. Many of us perhaps were at New Year’s Eve parties last weekend that were like the party at Matthew’s. Jesus willingly ate good food with bad people, sinful people, fun people - all kinds of people and invited and loved them into the kingdom of God. After

the party Jesus was criticized by the Pharisees for associating with people like Matthew and his friends. Jesus did not isolate himself away from people who didn't share his relationship with God or the values of the kingdom, rather he talked to them, ate with them, answered questions, and showed the steadfast love and mercy of the Lord to people in such an attractive and appealing way that they wanted to share in it also.

Jesus quotes God's word to Hosea after the party at Matthew's, (Matthew 9:13), *"Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."* Jesus is doing what God does – pursuing people who are far from God, sharing with people who don't know God, steadfastly loving people whose love is not yet steadfast. Jesus says, *"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick."* Repentance and faith are part of healing and returning to a right relationship with God. Unfortunately the people of Hosea's time, the Pharisees of Jesus' time, and many in our own time don't express true repentance and faith. Their religious acts are insincere, their love as fleeting as the morning dew. The Pharisees who deplore Jesus' eating and talking with social outcasts do not perceive their own hypocrisy and need for God. Rituals without genuine repentance and faith are empty and meaningless.

Later in Matthew 12:7, after Jesus and the disciples went through the grain fields on the Sabbath the disciples were hungry and began to pluck heads of grain and eat them. The Pharisees who seemingly never had anything better to do than to follow Jesus around to find fault with him, objected to this violation of the Sabbath. Jesus responded by saying twice, *"Have you not read..."* meaning do you really not know the heartbeat of the scriptures? And then, *"But if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."* The Pharisees who were so devoted to studying the Law and the prophets, do not seem to understand them. If they did, rather than criticizing Jesus for reaching out to people who had not come to faith, perhaps they would have joined Jesus in trying to reach them for God as well.

Let's face it, there are a lot of lives that need to be and can be strengthened and healed by returning to a relationship with the Lord. Jesus invites every child of God who has been wandering away or lost to come home.

There are many lives in need of Jesus' presence, direction and guidance and one of the great joys in life is we can join Jesus in trying to reach people with God's love.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote,

“Jesus asks nothing of us without giving us the strength to perform it.

His commands never seek to destroy life, but to foster, strengthen and heal it.”¹

Before anyone decides to answer the call of Christ to return to a relationship with the Lord, we may think about what it will cost us and what we have to give up because repentance means we need to change. But think what it will cost us and what we will miss if we refuse Jesus’ invitation to follow him, if we insist on continuing to run away from God? Dallas Willard writes,

*“Nondiscipleship costs abiding **peace**, a life penetrated throughout by **love**, **faith** that sees everything in the light of God’s overriding governance for good **hopefulness** that stands firm in the most discouraging of circumstances, **power** to do what is right and withstand the forces of evil.*

*In short, it costs exactly the **abundance of life** Jesus said he came to bring.”*

For most of my life, Jack Williams on Channel 4 has been running a feature called Wednesday’s child in which he profiles a child who is hoping to be adopted by a loving family. Each episode tugs at your heart and makes you wish you could bring the child into your family. According to Hosea, God is in the position of being a parent looking to give love to a child. A number of families in our church have adopted children in recent years and while the parents are thrilled, for the children it is the greatest experience of their lives. When we return to God, when we allow God to call us, love, heal us, hold us, feed us, and nurture us, that is such a significant event, Jesus says it is like having another birth.

Prayer:

the pain and heartache of missing children. We can hardly imagine God’s heartache to have millions of lost children who refuse to come home.

The heartache of people in our congregation whose children or grandchildren don’t share their faith.

Pray for people whose children are far from God.

Pray for anyone present who feels that they are far from God, are tired of running and are ready to come home.

Blessing: Hosea 12:6

“But as for you, return to your God, hold fast to love and justice, and wait continually for your God.”

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 40.