

9th Sunday After Pentecost – July 29, 2007 - Hosea 1:2-10; Psalm 85; Colossians 2:6-15

Hearing the Prophetic Voice

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Barbara Brown Taylor, in her writing said that to find the prophet you must ask: who has spoken the truth to you in such a way that you wanted to kill them?

Being a prophet or having a prophetic voice is not something that many of us would choose for ourselves. As I was preparing for this sermon I thought I need to find my prophetic voice for today ... but after reading Barbara Brown Taylor's quote about the prophet or the prophetic voice, I thought that's not exactly the response that I would like you to have following my service. I don't really want you to want to kill me ... but that was very much the feeling around prophets. They were not liked for their message.

Sometimes when we think of prophets we think of someone foretelling the future but that's not really the truth either. Prophets spoke God's message about what was happening then and there. They were speaking out on God's behalf and calling people back to God's way. In fact, sometimes when you read the prophets it is difficult to pick out when God is speaking and when it is the prophet speaking.

In Hosea, as we read this morning, there is a very close connection between Hosea's marriage to an unfaithful wife and God's covenant with an unfaithful Israel.

From the time that the Israelites entered into the Promised Land, they were surrounded by many other gods in the faith of the Canaanite people. Baal was known as "Rider of the Clouds" and was acclaimed to be the lord of the storms, the god who brought the fertilizing rains and produced abundant harvests, flocks and herds and fruitful human wombs. This new Promised Land flowing with milk and honey was believed to be the blessing of Baal. You can see how the Israelite farmers were so quickly persuaded to hedge their bets and ensure to favor of the deities who controlled fertility and all this prosperity alongside their own faith in Yahweh.

The image of Hosea being married to an unfaithful wife is such a powerful image compared to Israel being unfaithful to the covenant with God.

I invite you to take a moment and consider the human relationship and what happens when one person is unfaithful. Perhaps there are people here today who have gone through that very experience. You know very well what it feels like ... or perhaps you are the person who was unfaithful and you know what that feels like. What happens to the relationship or the trust or the love when someone is unfaithful? Is it possible to build on a relationship that has been broken?

Now apply the same principles to our relationship with God. When we are unfaithful, when we try to hedge our bets, when we follow other paths away from God, what does that do to our relationship with God?

Hosea's message for the Israelites and for us is that if he, who was not perfect, could forgive his wife and maintain a home with her, how much more would a perfect God be able to forgive imperfect people and

continue to love them. In fact, as we read further on in Hosea God's love is assured and the book ends with a further plea for repentance and an assurance of forgiveness.

We cannot read Hosea without looking at our own culture, at the things that surround us, and ask ourselves what are the things that get in the way of our relationship with God. What are our idols and what are our gods?

For those of you who sit at a computer and share stories through email, how many of you have received email with a touching story and then it ends with something like you need pass this on in 24 hours and you will receive a blessing. What is that? Isn't that a prime example of hedging your bets? Or maybe there is the promise of financial wealth? So where is this blessing coming from? What is it based on? Is it the fact that you hit the forward button to a number of your friends?

When Paul writes to the church in Colossians, he warns them against being captivated by "the empty lure of a philosophy of the kind that human beings hand on, based on the principles of this world and not on Christ. Paul was speaking against false teaching to the Colossian Christians that their destiny was determined by astral deities and that the whole of life must be spent placating these gods by observing a long list of taboos. So the fullness of life, and salvation was being promised to the Colossians only through superstitious and puritanical cult rules. And Paul says, "If you Colossians go along with that garbage, you're being ripped off, plundered, victimized, kidnapped from Christ and the one saving faith."

I'm afraid that the Colossian heresy is very much still with us. Think about the people who religiously check their horoscope each day or month in the newspaper. There are people who still believe that their destiny is fixed and sealed by constellations and astral bodies, or by black cats, broken mirrors, leaning ladders, or how things are positioned in a room. Then there are those who come to church each week thinking that God will be bound to reward them with a good week if they faithfully endure through the service again. It's the old Colossian heresy in a new form. Fullness of life is found in a faithful observance of religious rituals. Use the magic of Sunday church-going to get God on your side for the coming week.

At my place of work, which I'm sure is not unlike your place of work or wherever you gather with your friends, when I gather with my co-workers at lunchtime I am amazed at how discussion so often falls on this type of heresy. People are involved with getting readings done for their future or getting an assessment of their homes to make sure it is in harmony with their spirit. At first, I just sat there quietly in wonder but more and more I am discovering my prophetic voice like Hosea and Paul. When we have faith in the living Christ who meets all our needs, why would we fall prey to these heresies?

Paul reminds the Colossians and us that there is one in whom we are fully fulfilled, one who by his Good Friday death and Easter rending of the grave has liberated us. The full free life is found in Christ alone. In Christ we have been rooted. By baptism we have been grafted into him who abides forever. Our Easter faith tells us that Jesus being raised from the tomb can no longer be uprooted by death. And that means in him there is a deathless bloom for us fading flowers. In Christ, our life is founded, grounded, and built on a rock. Jesus Christ doesn't just offer us a part of the rock; he makes us a rock, a person of fortitude, endurance, bravery, patience, and steadfastness.

And then there's the comfort of the adverb in verse 9. Paul writes: In Christ the whole fullness of the deity dwells *bodily*. God in our body. He knows what it's like to laugh and cry, to be sad and glad, to be lonely, depressed and discouraged, what it's like to feel scared and hurt and angry, what it's like to be on mountain heights and in valley depths. The mystery and the miracle of the manger is that God shares all our battles and burdens.

Paul then reminds us of the gift received when we were buried with Christ in baptism. Paul wants them and us to know that, when we claim our baptism, we are raised from being dead in trespasses and we are forgiven. We have been called to claim a grace that raises us from the "half-life" of living only for ourselves, for the realization of our own desires.

Having pointed out these gifts, Paul asks for certain responses. The first is that we should live *abounding in thanksgiving*. The second is that nothing else as a system of thought or way of life should draw us from the Christian story and the Christian life.

Having Christ, living, dying, rising, ascending, conquering and ruling with him, who on earth need to look anywhere else?

Let us pray:

Gracious God, We thank you for your faithfulness. We thank you that you know us so completely and provide for everything we need. Help us to be more aware of the other gods that we have placed before you. Help us to make steps today to remove those gods from our lives and live completely in you in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.