

Absence Makes the Heart Grow Fonder

500 years ago, in Europe, a Great Reformation of the Christian Church was underway. Certain individuals had awoken to certain sense of God's *absence* from his church and from the society. And these early lights shining in the darkness wondered what they could do about it: Martin Luther, John Calvin, William Tyndale . . . One such reformer was the English Bishop Hooper. He noted, at the time, that in all of Gloucestershire, out of 311 clergymen, 168 did not know the Ten Commandments, 31 could not even find them in the Bible and 40 could not repeat the Lord's prayer. If that was state of affairs among the clergy, think of how little the average person would know!

What was the problem? Latin. The Bible was written in an ancient language few people understood. So reformers determined to take the Bible into life of the world in which they lived. For how a people know a God who doesn't even seem to speak their language? Can that kind of a God be any more than a distant God? A foreign god, a god you can't really know?

In similar times lived a prophet named Hosea. These were times of great crisis. And the LORD says to his prophet, "Though I write [these people] the multitude of my instructions, they are regarded as a strange thing." (Hosea 8:12)

What happens when God's instructions to us become generally regarded in the society as something alien and obtuse, something irrelevant to daily life, something no longer able to be easily understood? When that happens we will find ourselves dealing with . . .

The Absent God 5:15

"I'll go back to where I came from until they come to their senses. When they finally hit rock bottom, maybe they'll come looking for me."

Hosea served during the last years of Jeroboam II of Northern Kingdom of Israel sometimes called by its tribal name *Ephraim*. This northern land had been dealt a better hand than their southern kinsmen in Judah: vast fertile valleys easily cultivated flowing with streams. The North was always more prosperous and more politically stable than the hard-scrabbled hill-country to the South. But prosperity and prominence always brings its own set of problems: law-courts -- notoriously corrupt, the gap between rich and poor growing wider and wider. And on every hilltop was the common practice of worshiping fertility gods -- "the Baals". Idolatry had totally destroyed public morality and was now threatening to completely break Israel's covenant relationship God.

The Book begins by depicting God taking Israel to court for violating the Torah. And the court grant Yahweh a separation from Israel. The Creator must now absent himself from the land. There will be an *undoing* of the creation in the form of a drought. Fertile valleys --dust bowls. The vines will wither and die. But the hope of Israel's god is that this temporary separation imposed by the court of heaven will be interpreted by the people as the direct result of their *spiritual adultery*; and when they hit rock bottom they will begin to travel the long road to spiritual renewal.

It's the old principle: *absence will make the heart grow fonder*. The Book of Hosea is the about the few remaining people still yearning for the return of the absent God. Their path to renewal will be neither perfect nor complete; yet Israel's journey in the days of Hosea is a lot more like our own journey towards genuine spirituality than perhaps we would like to admit. Are we not living in a time spiritual crisis --much like that in the Great Reformation?

Maybe as the Western world hits rock bottom spiritually, a precious few will once again yearn

for God. Could it be, as in the days of Hosea, or in pre-reformation Europe, that in *our days* the Bible can become accessible to people once again? That God of the Bible will speak our language?

So Hosea and the faithful are a model for spiritual renewal in the 21st century. But we must note in Hosea 6:1 that, their the first stage along that road is often one of . . .

Presumption

"Come on, let's go back to God. He hurt us, but he'll heal us. He hit us hard, but he'll put us right again. In a couple of days we'll feel better. By the third day he'll have made us brand-new, alive and on our feet, fit to face him."

Maybe the drought had not lasted very long enough yet. Still enough grain in the storehouse for a little while yet. They really should do something about spiritual decline "one of these days". But no urgency – not yet. But this is worse than wishful thinking. These people are actually expecting a quick-fix from God, a dramatic, overnight make-over that will, in the space of a few days, undo the damage of generations of idolatry.

For them, return to God would be a simple matter: Bring a lamb to the priests as a sin offering. It may take a couple days to get it all arranged, but then "we're good again". The priests themselves, a privileged and exclusive group, had grown arrogant and cynical. As long as the people kept bringing their offerings, *they* didn't care how people behaved at home. In fact, it is to their advantage. Hosea says of the priests, "they feed on the sin of the people." (4:8). And "like people, like priests". As long as there are the fine robes and sacraments and ceremonies, incense and altars, these people believed they could come back any time and get things fixed up between them and God.

Catherine the Great, the 18th century empress of Russia who live in vast luxury while her peasants starved and was notorious for taking many lovers expressed this presumption when she said: "Le bon Dieu pardonnera. C'est son métier" (God will always forgive. That's his *job*.)

Hosea's people aren't outright rejecting the god of Israel, but there's a subtle presumption in their words, an under-estimation of the magnitude of the problem.

The contemporary church, especially in America, has managed to thrive on a pallid Christianity, one more concerned with nice buildings and solid budgets than with the transformation of human. Like the priests in Hosea, I wonder to what extent have evangelical pastors become chameleons, changing their colour to suite the prevailing mood of the church. But if we are to follow the path of renewal laid out in Hosea, there two things we are called to. Two things that require of us due diligence first:

A renewed diligence in the Word of the Lord 3a

To presumptuous Israel, counting on a quick-fix from God, Hosea recommends a far more realistic approach: "Let us know, let us press on to know the Lord" (NRSV) Sure, this faithful few is ready to study God, and, yes, eager for God-knowledge, but they must be realistic: this is a nation caught in a terrible snare. There will be no easy road to freedom.

The most sincere, God-seeker in Israel is still surrounded by cultural sea immersed in Baal worship which entailed unbridled drinking and unbridled sex. Instead of the high ethical standards of following Israel's god, there was the entertaining myths and magic of the corn god. And why make long and expensive pilgrimages to the Jerusalem Temple when here, on every local hilltop stands a Baal shrine just waiting to be used? The temptations were great.

To *know* the Lord will require the seeker to cross a seemingly unbridgeable gulf. The biblical and pagan concepts of holiness just do not inhabit the same world, and one must choose one or the other.

Modern, or post-modern paganism still celebrates the dark gods, still chooses unbridled sexuality over family love. Still chooses entertaining myths over the hard path to social justice. The prevailing culture around us is still as fatal a snare to the seeker as was Baalism in its time.

Our social model is one of religious pluralism that demands that we keep a studied neutrality between the world's various religious traditions.

But here's the difference: for the Jew, the ultimate revelation of God lies in the Torah – a *book*. For Muslim, it's the Qu'ran. A *book*. But for the Christian, the ultimate revelation of God is *not* a book, it's a *person named Jesus*.

Of course the Bible is inspired by the Spirit. But Bible is the Word was made *words*. Jesus, the Word was made *flesh* – a *person* and we can KNOW him through the presence of his Spirit. But to *know* him, we must choose between what the majority of people in our culture see as the normal, and the extraordinary chance to *know God personally through Jesus Christ*.

In the Bible we have the testimony of a community living in relationship with the risen Christ. He is no absent God. But to know him there must be always diligence in the Word. Time must be spent. Effort extended. Choices made. But to those are willing to “*press on*” there is the sure promise of . . .

Authentic Spirituality 3bc

“As sure as dawn breaks, so sure is his daily arrival. He comes as rain, comes as spring rain refreshing the ground.”

In the drought-parched days of Hosea, as the crops languish in the fields and the absence of God is felt more and more keenly, the God-seeker longs for a morning when the pink clouds would arrive on the horizon and drift over the land with gentle rain. That would be the proof that their god had returned. The separation – over. That God had returned to reclaim his bride. The estrangement at an end.

But the time-line for spiritual renewal is always unpredictable, out of our hands. WE can never demand God to return in power. But nevertheless there are unchanging principles of renewal: repentance and turning our lives around. Prayer and seeking the Lord. Hosea the prophet is one of those longing for the return of God. *Willing* to do whatever it takes to bring about the reconciliation. But it's always scary to say with no absolutely no reservations, “Lord, use me”. Little does Hosea know that the painful drama of estrangement and reconciliation between God and people will be reenacted *within his own home*.

He simply for authentic spirituality and gives voice to God's frustration, ”
“What am I to do with you, Ephraim? What do I make of you, Judah? Your declarations of love last no longer than morning mist and predawn dew.”

The voices of pop culture are saying much the same thing today, mocking the shallow spirituality of the contemporary church:

The Arcade Fire sings of . . .

The neon bible, neon bible, not much chance for survival with the neon bible, if the neon bible's right” – this song reflects on the church's fascination with flashy productions to get its message across.

Or The Red Hot Chile Peppers who sing a song called “Shallow be Thy Game,” – a take off on

the words of the Lord's prayer as recited by shallow Christians for whom church is no more than a game played for an hour or so on Sunday.

But when we become diligent in the Word and acquaint ourselves with the prophets, there's nothing shallow or flashy. With the prophets, it's pure. . .

Word-power v5

"That's why I use prophets to shake you to attention, why my words cut you to the quick: To wake you up to my judgment blazing like light."

It is the job of a prophet to call us to a deeper spirituality. Their lives and words of prophets effect us profoundly.

In the case of Hosea, the Lord commands him to, "marry a harlot."

Now, that is pretty creepy.

Would God actually do that? Would any self-respecting prophet go along with that? This woman, named Gomer, was a prostitute, engaged by the shrine of Baal to go to bed with any man who paid money to the priests. And God told Hosea to marry her.

I don't know why this should shock anyone these days. Our culture has grown so comfortable with raw sexuality, exposed to it by every available media, but the story of Hosea, still has shock value.

Strangely, and ironically, both secular people and Christians alike are offended by the idea that God would command such a marriage. Believers wish this story was no longer in the Bible, and that it would just go away. Unbelievers point to Hosea's strange marriage as sure evidence of the irrelevance of Scripture for today. No one wants a God like that.

But in this strange story lies the incredible *power* of the prophetic word to awaken even the darkest conscience to God's unconditional love. For in the present culture, *many* claim the right to be free from any form of moral obedience and restriction, yet the same people insist that *God* must still behave himself.

Even the atheist, in his or her deepest heart, *doesn't want to NOT believe* in a God who is *not* merciful and good and moral, because, if after all, in the end, we do have to give account for our lives on earth, it is only a good and merciful God who will save us.

So the prophets continue to challenge hearts in our day. The prophets continue to cut us to the quick.

Now this brings us to the second due diligence that Hosea calls us to if we are to follow the path to renewal. The first was *renewed diligence in the Word of the Lord, the second . . .*

A renewed diligence in the WORK of the LORD 6

"I'm after love that lasts, not more religion. I want you to know God, not go to more prayer meetings."

Did you know that Jesus quoted this verse, Hosea 6:6, *twice*? (Matt 9: 13; 12:7) In the first instance, he quotes it in response to a question from the Pharisees as to why he eats with tax collectors and sinners. The Pharisees in their pursuit of more religion had failed to understand the passionate *love* that God has for the lost soul. If God would tell Hosea to go and love a woman who is a harlot (3:3), then why should not Jesus eat with tax collectors and sinner? There is no one who is outside the scope of God's love.

Jesus quotes this verse again on the occasion when his disciples were plucking grain on the Sabbath because they were hungry. And again Jesus' notorious religious opponents balk at

this so-called breach of the Sabbath law, failing to grasp the nurturing heart God for those in this world who hunger and thirst and who naked and in desperate straights. He wants more from us than prayer meetings.

The God who loved us in so much in the cross calls us to *embody* the work of his kingdom in this hungry world. Christianity can never be reduced to a set of dogmatic statements. It must be embodied in our acts of justice mercy and compassion.

Today we often sacrifice to build buildings to house the church; but is the house a home? Are we a family? These buildings that we cherish and keep as sacred: are they truly places that promote loving relationships that allow people to experience a deep knowledge of God? I think that is what Jesus meant when he quoted Hosea . . .

“I desire mercy, not sacrifice.”

On a personal level, this calls *me* to examine carefully of the kind of relationships I am in. Am I simply cooperating with others to accomplish common goals regardless of how it affects the weakest and the least? I want to be like Hosea and the reformers. And I have reason to hope.

In 2005 Korleen and I took the kids to Junior High Jam in Strathmore. That weekend we wanted to impress on the students that the Gospel is not just a message of spiritual salvation but also of justice, compassion and mercy. The Gospel is the WORK of God. So the Saturday afternoon activity was a food drive. Leaders and kids fanned out through Strathmore knocking on doors and collecting canned and dried goods for the local food bank. It was sobering, in and of itself, to think that in one of Canada’s wealthiest communities in Canada’s richest province there were still lots of people who needed help with basic food.

(I hate to brag, but our kids got it right away – got right into it) But there was a clique of kids at this weekend from a certain city that I will not name. And this particular group had, all weekend kept to themselves, and had showed up for the meals after most of the other kids had already lined up at the cafeteria door. And this group would simply walk to the front of the line and stand there as if they were flying business class.

It irked me, not just that they budded-in, but that the other kids didn’t call them on it. But this clique seem to be able to get away with it on the sheer power of COOL. No one challenged them. In the midst of this clique was this petite wee thing, perfect hair, make-up and the low-cut designer jeans with the underwear hanging out the top. She had the vacant look in her eyes of a store mannequin or Paris Hilton. This group seemed to be saying to the rest of us that when the door opened and the food was served, *they were entitled* to be the first to receive. . .

So at the end of our afternoon canvassing the town for canned goods, cars laden with loot converged on the Strathmore food bank, and kids were so excited as they unloaded the bags and brought them in. And there was this sense of fulfilment that they were DOING something about the Gospel.

But it was at that moment I spotted our “little sweetie,” looking very much like a fish out of water, holding a bag of groceries as if it were a dead rat by the tail. She walked through the door into the bare concrete and steel shelving of the food bank. Her eyes darted around the room, looking for where she could dump her load. And I heard her say, “*Where are all the workers?*” “

Jesus is asking the same question

Who will carry the weight and depth and truth of the Gospel into a spiritually shallow

culture?

When you ride a bicycle, you always stop and pick up junk on the side of the road. For about a week or more there was a sign by the highway in Erickson that said, "FREE STUFF." So I finally gave in and stopped and looked and found these three little earthenware vessels. Small, plain and chipped; but they reminded me of the words of Paul:

"We have this treasure in earthenware vessels. . ."

Who will carry the weight and depth and truth of the Gospel into a spiritually shallow culture? It will not be the flashy, shiny people. It will not be the big productions. It will not be the "neon bible." What will carry the weight and depth and truth of the Gospel into a spiritually shallow culture will be ordinary earthenware vessels: small plain and chipped. "So that", as Paul says, "it is clear that this extraordinary power is from God and not from us."

One commentator told of his personal acquaintance with _____ who became British ambassador to the US. _____ said that when he wanted to send important and sensitive information, it would usually be sent via diplomatic courier – put in a locked bag and hand-cuffed to the courier's arm. (Because when it comes to state secrets, you don't want to be leaving them laying around on your girlfriend's coffee table, right?)

But _____ said when he had something that was of utmost importance and sensitivity, he would not put it in the diplomatic bag, but simply put it in a plain envelope and drop it in the regular mail. That was the surest way the information would get through without being compromised.

God communicates treasure of the Gospel through ordinary earthenware vessels – ordinary people. Because God does not want anyone to confuse the *content* of the message with container that carries it.

Where are the workers? Are you willing to be an earthenware vessel? For in a spiritually shallow culture, they are the ones who know . . .

The way home.

The Book of Hosea ends without a clear conclusion, but with an invitation.

Israel has sought fertility, hence prosperity in appeasing the Baals. In response, the Lord had "put a hedge of thorns around them" (2:6-8) But absence makes the heart grow fonder. And through exile she will be led back to true spiritual prosperity. So Hosea says:

"Take words with you and return to the Lord. . . " (14:2)

No more presumption. No longer let it be said, "shallow be thy game."

Take words that are more than mere formalities.

Take words that are without reservation or excuse

For 1John 1:9 says:

"If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

The choice is ours.