

Sermon - Lake Joseph, Sunday July 14, 2019

Title: God did what?!

Text: Hosea 11:1-9 (MSG)

“A sermon allows the living Christ to walk among his people.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer

PRAY

Once upon a time there was a man who lived a long, long time ago — 3000 years ago. He lived far-away, in a time before movies, internet, flushing toilets, sunscreen, and summer cottages. This man loved God very much and wanted to honour God in every area of his life. He decided that he wanted to marry and have a family. And one day as he was praying he heard God say, “Go and find the most promiscuous woman in your town and marry her. She will be unfaithful to you and will bear you children that aren’t yours, but I want you to be faithful to her and to love her.”

Now his culture held to high moral standards regarding marriage and fidelity. So what God was asking was social suicide. He would never be respected again, probably lose his friends, and would be the butt of every joke.

[So what did he do?](#)

He did as God asked.

He found the most promiscuous woman, married her, brought her home and gave her a name, a home, fine clothes, dignity, security, and a place of belonging. She soon bore him a son but soon afterwards left her husband and child and, as we would say, slept around with any man that would have her, eventually falling pregnant twice with two children that were not her husband’s.

[So what did the man do?](#)

He remembered God’s word to him and remained faithful, pursuing her, inviting her back into his home, as his wife, with dignity, security, and a place of belonging. Eventually she got into so much trouble that she ended up in the slave market, on an auction block to be sold to the highest bidder (this was a long time ago when debt got you sold into slavery).

[So what did the man do?](#)

This man, in his faithfulness, went to the market and bought her back — humiliating as that must have been with all the town looking on, paying the highest price required to free his wife from a future of slavery.

He once again brought her back into his home, as his wife, with dignity, security, and a place of belonging.

And he loved her as God asked him to do.

True story.

It sounds like I made it up after too much time in the sun, doesn’t it? But it’s the backstory of the passage we read earlier. As you’ve probably already guessed, it’s the story of a prophet named Hosea who was called by God to demonstrate to God’s unfaithful and wayward people, the intensity of his love and the lengths He would go to pursue those He loves.

Hosea lived in 8th century BCE — almost 3 thousand years ago — the late Bronze age. So we are as far from that time as those who will live in the year 5000 CE. Now try to imagine what life will be like 3000 yrs from now (30 centuries) — what technology will look like, medicine, our homes, modes of transportation. Will we still even exist on planet earth?

Consider that in just 100 years we now have: hairdryers (2020 is the 100th anniversary of the hair dryer!), jet engines and scotch tape, electric razors, ballpoint pens, nuclear reactors, dialysis, microwaves, Instagram, space travel, smart phones, Webers, and AI (whatever that really is). And that's just the last 100 or so years — imagine 3000 years ago, and 3000 years from now.

When we read these ancient texts of Scripture it's helpful to remember that we are as far removed from their social, scientific, economic, and cultural worldview as we are from the year 5000 CE.

In the Ancient Near East during the Bronze Age God related to people differently than God does now — we're told that in the New Testament. God spoke through prophets — men and women who heard from God, who saw God in visions and dreams and through whom God communicated. These prophets would be deemed unstable today — we'd have them medicated and locked away because God often asked them to illustrate his message through their behaviour or deportment in a way that mirrored Israel's moral condition. For example, one prophet walked around naked for 3 years. Now that's quite a calling! (I'm not sure whether church attendance would go up or down) Another started his prophetic career by eating an entire scroll (like munching on the book of Matthew with your morning coffee). This same guy had a vision instructing him to cook his food over human excrement, and so on. Remember, this is the Bronze Age and this kind of thing wasn't uncommon. God always meets us where we're at, in our culture and with our limited understanding.

For the prophet Hosea, he was to establish his family with the most promiscuous woman in town. Normally this would have been a strict violation of their moral code and religious practices. God was breaking God's own rules. But God was sending a message to his people and the message came live-streamed by a dramatic illustration: "You see people, this is you! You Israel, are the promiscuous, depraved, thankless wife whom I rescued, with whom I made a covenant and gave you my name. I clothed you, loved you, and provided for you and you have gone after other lovers. You have prostituted yourselves before other gods. Do you see what that looks like? See how disgusting that is? See how ungrateful you are? Why do you mock Hosea? This is YOU!"

God had given them a land of their own but the people preferred to worship the gods of their pagan neighbours instead, adopting their disgusting ways and practices. They quite literally prostituted themselves with the temple prostitutes of Baal as a means of worship, like part of their Order of Service! They also participated in the heinous act of child sacrifice, something God explicitly forbade.

(We are not immune, only our idolatry looks different) They continued to break the covenant of love that God had made with them years earlier.

But, God says through Hosea:

"When you, Israel, were only a child, I loved you. I called you out of Egypt (out of slavery). But when others called you, (i.e. pagan nations) you ran off and left me ... Still, I stuck with you. I rescued you from human bondage ... I led [you]... how can I give up on you? How can I turn you loose? How can I leave you to be ruined and devastated? I can't bear to even think such thoughts. My insides churn in protest." (Hosea 11:1-9 MSG selected).

God is saying, "Do you see how much I love you? The lengths I will go to redeem you, to bring you home, and give you a name, dignity, security, a place of belonging?"

For us, this is a bizarre story, but it's how God communicated to his people in the Bronze age. God wanted them to know beyond a shadow of a doubt, his love for them and his endless compassion — his mercy that knows no end. 'Knows no end' — let that sink in.

"Still, I stuck with you."

Redemption is what God loves to do. God was and is a redeeming God who still pursues the broken, the wounded, the misguided, those who have lost their way — those we might label "beyond hope."

The prophets were also focused on a the future of the world. As crazy as these prophets seem to us 3000 yrs later, they were actually inspired interpreters of history, pioneering social analysts and futurologists — the first people who took a long hard look at the world and began wondering what it might take to set it right. What might it look like for the world and all its people to live in peace, and the problems of society be solved, and the evils of our physical environment to end. Have you ever wondered that yourself?

It's hard to imagine isn't it? As the current global strife amps up, it's almost impossible to imagine a world where there is no more war, no more weapons or need for them, no more family disharmony, poverty, brokenness and loneliness in our society.

God's people, Israel at that time, ignored and killed the prophets. Though they worshipped week after week, Saturday after Saturday gathering to hear from God, when God did speak, they killed the messengers! And so as we know, God came himself, in the person of Jesus, live-streaming again what God's love looks like, what reconciliation and redemption look like, once again calling us to imagine what a new world order under God's benevolence could look like if we would but live and love like Jesus.

Fast forward 3000 years.

Once upon a time, there was a woman who, through childhood trauma and family dysfunction, fell into alcoholism in her teens. By her early 20s she had to be rescued from a drug-house by a friend who would later become her husband.

In her 30s she couldn't break the habit and was unable to stay sober for more than three months.

[And what does God do?](#)

He saw the real thirst in her heart and drew her into his family.

She joined a faith community and learnt to pray.

She discovered how to treat prayer as a face-to-face meeting with a Living Friend.

She became a powerful intercessor and taught others to meet Christ in the same way.

She had two children and brought them to her church as well, though her husband didn't come very often.

Still, she struggled with alcohol, sometimes even arriving at her Bible study drunk, as if to test her acceptance. She tried with all her might to stay clean and sober, only to stumble again. Eventually she fell right off the wagon and left her husband and children.

Over time, she ended up on the streets, sometimes making her home in a cardboard box or with her new boyfriend in his car. Even then, even when completely stoned, she would pray and introduce other addicts to Jesus.

Things got worse.

Her marriage ended in divorce, she began injecting drugs and contracted Hepatitis C. Her mental health was ailing, and she was in trouble with the police and barely survived multiple overdoses.

[And what does God do?](#)

God came looking for her.

Like Hosea looking for his vulnerable and misguided wife, he pursued her.

He began his quest from inside her heart, because God had never left her, even when it seemed that she had left God.

First, God inspired her ex-husband to welcome her and her boyfriend into his home, where he and the kids detoxed the couple for several weeks, before being admitted into recovery homes for drug addicts. One day, in the rehab center, she sat down and had a heart-to-heart with Jesus, basically saying, "I'm so sorry. You gave me a home, family, dignity, security, and a place of belonging, and I lost it all: my husband, my children, my home, and now my health. I ruined it. I'm not asking you to fix it Jesus, I just want you to know how sorry I am."

[And what does God do?](#)

God gave her a vision (God still gives visions today) and she saw Jesus take her needle kit, fill the syringe with drugs, tie off his arm and empty the contents into his own veins! As she was watching this vision play out in her mind, she yelled: "What?! Jesus you can't do that."

But is that not exactly what Jesus has done for every one of us?

On the Cross, has he not drawn all of our sorrow and sickness and rebellion and pain into himself, assuming the totality of the human condition, precisely in order to heal it?

She heard him ask: "Do you feel the grief as I do this? That's how I felt for you every time you used."

There was no anger. No disgust or disdain. No shaming or guilt-tripping. No condemnation.

Only grief.

And something amazing happened. The craving left.

The need to self-medicate was gone. Jesus gave her the gift of sobriety, gave her a path to recovery and then,

[Do you know what God did?](#) The story gets even more unbelievable!

He healed her Hepatitis.

The doctors cancelled her treatments and signed off on her file with the words, "Healed by the power of faith!"

Over 10 years later she was still clean and sober but, she had lost her husband, her home, her family — her place of belonging.

[And what does God do?](#)

Her new boyfriend came to faith in Jesus in recovery.

He too was given the gift of sobriety.

He asked her to marry him, AND, guess who walked her down the aisle? Her first husband!

Can grace be *that* kind?

Could her first husband be *that* forgiving?

Can Jesus following be *this* radical and *this* life transforming?

But the story didn't end there.

She missed her kids and she would phone them every night to pray with them before they went to bed.

[So what does God do?](#)

God inspired her first husband to invite the new couple to move into the first floor of his home and raise the children with him!

[Does God do that?](#)

The two men began reading the Bible and praying together every morning.

Eventually the first husband sold his half of the home to them, moved out and was remarried himself. The two couples love each other and often come together for family events. Her new husband started a landscaping business that hires and trains addicts in a new trade.

The young woman went back to school.

[And what does God do?](#)

She completed her masters in marriage and family counselling and is now working in that field.

Together the couple serves meals to the homeless and ministers hope to addicts who need to hear their story of redemption.

True story. 3000 years later.*

This is the God who never turns from us, never abandons us, and walks through the mess of our lives whether self-inflicted or others inflicted, longing to bring redemption in the most surprising and unbelievable ways. Nothing is too messy. Nothing is unredeemable.

So, as we should do every time we read Scripture, ask yourself: Who are you in the story? It sounds like a Cinderella story — a fairy tale or low-budget chick-flick. But, there would be no story if the first husband hadn't taken a risk, hadn't swallowed his pride and hurt, hadn't put himself second and his ex-wife and kids first, hadn't responded to God's prompting — God's radical, reckless invitation to partner in this redemption project.

We marvel at this story (and so we should). It's a miracle story if there ever was one. But the hinge on which this miracle hangs is what? It's the first husband's willingness to partner with God. God invited him into a wild adventure of grace and like Hosea, he accepted the invitation to do the difficult thing, the radical thing, the selfless thing, the seemingly impossible thing, so that God's grace and power to redeem could be demonstrated in living colour.

I wonder, what amazing redemption stories have escaped us because we underestimated grace? What amazing reconciliation stories await us as individuals, families, churches, neighbourhoods, businesses, if we would accept God's invitation to live in reckless grace?

The world is starved for grace.

We were at our neighbours for a barbecue this weekend and it was holy ground. I sat and just listened as they discussed God and religion and rules. Finally, one man turned to me, knowing I was a minister, and asked, "Tell me, what does God want from us anyway?" Do you hear the story — the history — behind the question? Whatever form of faith he was raised with and witnessed, it was void of grace.

I wonder what difficult, radical, selfless thing might God be calling you and I to do in order to see redemption and reconciliation; in order to see a miracle; in order to experience grace?

Amen

Rev. Robyn Elliott

*This is the story of congregants in Keith Giles' church as recounted in Jesus Unbound, by Keith Giles.