

Once upon a time there was a man named Hosea.

The name means “God is help.” Strange name!
Strange man! Strange story!

It is a story that puts reality TV to shame! A story about Hosea, his wife Gomer, and their tangled life together and life apart and life back together.

Let me put it this way: Gomer would have been the star of the “Real Housewives of the Minor Prophets!”

The Bible, I must admit is a little more than PG-13 in telling the story of Hosea and Gomer.

So, I’m going to use Frederick Buechner’s retelling of their story as he describes Gomer in his book Peculiar Treasures in what I have to say are ‘church acceptable’ ways.

He writes, “She was always good company, a little heavy with lipstick maybe...but great at a party and always good for a laugh.

“The first time Hosea asked her to marry hm, she thought he was kidding. The second time she knew he was serious but thought he was crazy. The third time she said yes.

“He wasn’t exactly [her kind of man], but he had a kind face, and he was generous...Besides, any fool could see he loved her.”

Buechner goes on, “Give or take a little, she even loved him back for a while, but everybody could see the marriage wasn’t going to last, and it didn’t.

“While Hosea was off hitting the [prophetic] sawdust trail, Gomer took to hitting as many night spots as she could squeeze into a night...

It almost killed him, of course...

He tried locking her out of the house a few times when she wasn’t in by five in the morning, but he always opened the door when she finally showed up.

He comes to the end of the story, “Then one day she didn’t show up at all. He swore that this time he was through with her for keeps, but of course he wasn’t.

“When he finally found her...he had to pay the management plenty to let her out of her contract.

“She’d lost her front teeth and picked up some scars you had to see to believe, but Hosea had her back again and that seemed to be all that mattered.”

That’s a brief telling of Buechner’s PG-13 picture of the story of Hosea and Gomer.

I confess that reading the book of Hosea, it is difficult at times to know whether Hosea is speaking of his home life or of the life of the nation of Israel.

But the outlines are clear enough: The story of Hosea and Gomer is an insightful, if not somewhat earthy, picture of God’s relationship with Israel, begun in the purity of a covenant and then, through unfaithfulness on the part of Israel, a covenant broken and betrayed.

The story portrays Israel’s unfaithful relationship with God to such a point that God has to say, “You are not my people and I am not your God.”

This is how the story moves back and forth between Hosea and Gomer, God and Israel.

Hosea brings Gomer back home, but as a thing purchased, not as a wife loved and accepted.

Hosea is still the judge, just as he sees God as the stern judge of Israel’s unfaithfulness.

He will not accept Gomer back, just as he believes God will not accept Israel back.

She has gone too far in cheating on him. He will reject her as he believes God rejects Israel forever.

Thus far, his message parallels that of his harsh-voiced contemporary, Amos.

Gomer has sinned, she must suffer. As Hosea says, 'She has sown the wind, she must reap the whirlwind.'

And Israel is just the same. She has been faithless; therefore, she must pay.

Then something happens, an unexpected twist in this tangled tale of Hosea and Gomer.

Almost as if there are two Hoseas, two seasons of Hosea's reality prophetic vision with Gomer and God, something happened.

A change of mind? A change of heart? A change of grace?

Remember what I said last week that we usually think about prophetic vision as foresighted, as seeing forward.

But prediction is not the focus of biblical prophecy. The prophet sees through the veil of appearances to glimpse a different reality.

Something happened, and Hosea saw something different for his life with Gomer, but even more saw something different in the reality of how God helps.

The one Hosea is the outraged, hurt, humiliated husband whose flashes of tenderness are overwhelmed by surges of indignant pride.

The adultery of a wife in Israel was looked upon sternly. Death was even the consequence under most conditions.

That is why, when the prophets would denounce the unfaithfulness of Israel as a people, they used the analogy of the unfaithful wife.

To this Hosea, there was no forgiveness.

In Alan Paton's novel *Too Late the Phalarope*, the police captain in South Africa comes to a father to tell him how his son, a young police lieutenant, has committed an offense against the Immorality Act and had relations with a young native girl.

The old man sits in silence, then calls for the family Bible and opens it to the place where the family names for more than a hundred and fifty years have been recorded.

As the police captain tells the story, "So he took the pen and ink, and he crossed out the name of Pieter van Vlaanderen from the Book ... and he took the Book and read the words of the Hundred and Ninth Psalm, which are the most terrible words that man has ever written, and should not be in any holy book.

"For it is written there,

⁷ *When he is tried, let him be found guilty...*

⁸ *May his days be few...*

⁹ *May his children be orphans,
and his wife a widow...*

¹² *May there be no one to do him a kindness,
nor anyone to pity his orphaned children.*

¹³ *May his posterity be cut off;
may his name be blotted out in the second
generation. (Psalm 109:7-13)*

"And... then he raised his head and closed the Book; and stood up from his chair, turning away from us, and making for the stairs to his room."

It was the police captain who later said, "if a man takes himself God's right to punish, then he must also take upon himself God's promise to restore."

When did that fact break upon the man Hosea? If a man takes upon himself God's right to punish, then he must also take upon himself God's right to restore.

How did it come about?

The first Hosea was a Hosea of condemnation, the other Hosea a Hosea of restoration and of hope.

How did it happen?

Did he find his love for Gomer so real that, at last, it embraced all the hurt and the humiliation?

Did he break through to a new vision of God, and did that say something to him about his relationship with this beaten, broken woman?

Did a startling message come through to him that God loves Israel so much that God cannot cast her aside?

Did Hosea's experience of abiding love for a woman open his heart to the limitless love of God for his people?

Or did the two experiences, the one with God and the one with Gomer, so intermingle and intertwine that they could not be separated?

In the last episode of that second season, Hosea knew only that love is final. It must have the last word, God's love, human love.

However it came to him, it overwhelmed his message of judgment and swallowed up the notes of retribution.

He says, "I will woo her, I will go with her into the wilderness and comfort her..." And that phrase "comfort her" can be translated more literally, "I will speak home to her heart."

What a beautiful picture of grace: "I will speak home to her heart."

Hosea never loses sight of the awfulness of the apostasy of his people. He is no less realistic than Amos at that point.

But the point at which he goes beyond Amos is in the sensing of the greater awfulness of God's love, awful in the original sense of that word: awe-inspiring, overwhelming in majesty.

It is a love that will not give up, will not let go.

It is a love that is dogged and determined.

It is a love that is steadfast even when tear-drenched.

It is love that speaks home to a heart.

In his vision of that love, a love wrenched out of personal agony, Hosea went beyond Amos toward the daring thought that, above all else and beyond all else, God is love.

That is the first time it comes through clearly in the tradition of the Old Testament.

And emerging from Hosea's words, we begin to see the outline of a cross.

From his words?

No, not just from his words but from his life, from his own experience of brokenness and betrayal to the redemption of love.

You see him going toe-to-toe with Gomer in rage and indignation, in a struggle for the ability to forgive.

This does not come cheap.

And out of his own struggle comes a realization of the forgiveness of God, which does not come cheap, either.

He staggered, bleeding with betrayal, into the presence of God to find that what he had learned of the mystery of human love was the secret of God's love, too.

He came to know that the pain of involvement in someone else's shame enabled him to grasp life's final meaning, which is to know God.

To love deeply, to give oneself completely to another is to be exposed to rejection and to betrayal, yet love knows no other way.

Once upon a time there was a man named Hosea, or two of them really.

One is the prophet Hosea carrying a sign that read "The End Is Near" on one side and "Watch Out" on the other.

The other is the prophet who changed the sign to read "God Is Love" on one side and "There's No End to It" on the other.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.