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“High Expectationr”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
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Hosea 1:1-11

The word of the Lord that came to Hosea son of Beeri, in the days of Kings Uzziah, Jotham, Abaz, and Hezekiah of Judah, and in the days of King Jeroboam son of Joash of Israel.

When the Lord first spoke through Hosea, the Lord said to Hosea, ‘Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord.’ So he went and took Gomer daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son.

And the Lord said to him, ‘Name him Jezreel; for in a little while I will punish the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel. On that day I will break the bow of Israel in the valley of Jezreel.’

She conceived again and bore a daughter. Then the Lord said to him, ‘Name her Lo-rubamah, for I will no longer have pity on the house of Israel or forgive them. But I will have pity on the house of Judah, and I will save them by the Lord their God; I will not save them by bow, or by sword, or by war; or by horses, or by horsemen.’

When she had weaned Lo-rubamah, she conceived and bore a son. Then the Lord said, ‘Name him Lo-ammi, for you are not my people and I am not your God.’

Yet the number of the people of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which can be neither measured nor numbered; and in the place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people’, it shall be said to them, ‘Children of the living God.’ The people of Judah and the people of Israel shall be gathered together, and they shall appoint for themselves one head; and they shall take possession of the land, for great shall be the day of Jezreel.

Isaiah 1

Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth; for the Lord has spoken: I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master’s crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.

Alas, sinful nation, people laden with iniquity, offspring who do evil, children who deal corruptly, who have forsaken the Lord, who have despised the Holy One of Israel, who are utterly estranged!

Why do you seek further beatings? Why do you continue to rebel? The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but bruises and sores and bleeding wounds; they have not been drained, or bound up, or softened with oil.

Your country lies desolate, your cities are burned with fire in your very presence aliens devour your land; it is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners. And daughter Zion is left like a booth in a vineyard, like a shelter in a cucumber field, like a besieged city. If the Lord of hosts had not left us a few survivors, we would have been like Sodom, and become like Gomorrah.

Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?, says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt-offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats.

When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation — I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

How the faithful city has become a whore! She that was full of justice, righteousness lodged in her— but now murderers! Your silver has become dross, your wine is mixed with water. Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the orphan, and the widow's cause does not come before them.

Therefore says the Sovereign, the Lord of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel: Ah, I will pour out my wrath on my enemies, and avenge myself on my foes! I will turn my hand against you; I will smelt away your dross as with lye and remove all your alloy. And I will restore your judges as at the first and your counsellors as at the beginning. Afterwards you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city.

Zion shall be redeemed by justice, and those in her who repent, by righteousness. But rebels and sinners shall be destroyed together, and those who forsake the Lord shall be consumed. For you shall be ashamed of the oaks in which you delighted; and you shall blush for the gardens that you have chosen. For you shall be like an oak whose leaf withers, and like a garden without water. The strong shall become like tinder, and their work like a spark; they and their work shall burn together with no one to quench them.

Will you pray with me? Holy One, Holy God. You offer us your word for challenge and change, for hope and new possibilities. So be with us as we wrestle with the words this day. In the name of your son, we pray, Amen.

I know neither of these readings is easy. But I will share that a couple of Sundays ago on this morning after the mass shootings, a retired ministerial colleague wrote an angry post on Facebook. It said if my spouse weren't preaching today, I wouldn't be in church. I'd be on a street corner protesting for those huddled behind sanctuary walls out of fear like the disciples are out of complacency. Like much of the church today, I can only hope that the Spirit finds a way in. If you don't hear a call to action FROM THE PULPIT, you have one scared intimidated preacher protecting their job while forgetting their calling. It didn't go over very well [laughter]. I understood she was upset. But I had a strong gut reaction and I wasn't alone. One colleague responded firmly, "I have to ask you to cease and desist." Give us some credit to know that when we lead worship, we are aware that we are dealing with not one but two horrific events. So enough already, we don't need the finger-wagging. We need prayers. Please lift us up. A call to action can be appropriate, but her tone was not helpful. The shaming and condemnation, by assumption, felt like words offered in judgment without any hope. David and I struggled that day. He acknowledged it in his sermon. It was included in prayers. We were trying so hard to figure out the best way with something that had just happened, hoping that we could provide some comfort and sanity and healing in the midst of being broken-hearted over yet another act of violence. I know too that, two weeks later, the issue of racially motivated shootings is still before us and we can't ignore it. I've been haunted by this, and I struggle. I wonder what I could be doing, what I should be doing, what we could be doing. So I ask you to walk with me this morning through the words from the prophets of old to consider perhaps what we are being called to do.

The readings this morning I think, compare and contrast the very feelings we struggle with, frustration, anger, and hope for reconciliation and healing. Isaiah's words begin with wrath. Hosea's are of compassion. Both call us to faithfulness, but with two very different tones. As I reflected, I found myself thinking about the role of the prophets as those called to speak the word from God. Some saw themselves explaining why certain things happened, and that they were in exile and suffering. Another, about the call to serve and work for justice for all. But always I think the words of the prophets hold anger and concern intention with hope. A hope that we will return home to the ways of God. I think it's important to understand the context surrounding both of the prophets. Isaiah covers a long period of time, centuries. From times of losing wars into being in exile and then yearning to return home. It's considered to be a work by three different writers from three different periods. And what we heard Larry read this morning is an opening like a scene out of a courtroom. An accuser outlining the concerns of God, setting up the case at hand which is the unfaithfulness of the people. He makes a case to thoroughly cleanse Jerusalem mincing no words. If you're willing and obedient, you'll eat the good of the land. But if you refuse and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword. Not easy words. The other reading does have a different tone. More compassionate, more reflective of the sadness than anger. In fact, if you read both books, you see that the prophets weaved together both judgment and hope. Separation from God and hope for reconciliation.

The Book of Hosea also begins in the time after the Northern Kingdom was taken by Assyria. But he uses interesting imagery. He speaks as if he is talking about his own life and the pain of being married to an unfaithful woman. In his words, his wife represents the people of Israel who have been unfaithful. But he moves on to talking more directly about the unfaithfulness.

There is no faithfulness or loyalty and no knowledge of God in the land. Lying, murder, stealing, and bloodshed. But when we move on to Chapter 11, the tone is very different. There is still frustration but there is also love. Hosea tells them that while God may be angry, theirs is such a deep relationship that even though it's been tested it cannot be broken. God remembers with tenderness and compassion the beginning of their relationship. And like a parent speaking to a wayward child, God says, "I taught Ephraim to walk. I took them in my arms. They didn't know I healed them. I've led them with the cords of human kindness and the bands of love. My people are bent on turning away from me. How can I give you up? My heart recoils within me. I will not execute my fierce anger. You may have been unfaithful but like Hosea with his wife, I want to welcome you back home." I think the readings this morning reflect the raw emotions attributed to God. We hear pain, frustration, worry, the wrath of a God who is brokenhearted. But here we witness God struggling. That in spite of all that has happened, God remembers that love wins. "I will not execute my fierce anger. I am God and no mortal." His words move from deep anger to a yearning for reconciliation. And what occurred to me as I read these passages is that our relationship with God is not the only part of being faithful. God sees the relationship with the whole people. God also reminds them that while sacrifices may be part of worship, if they are offered without commitment to serving others, God's had enough. "I don't delight in the blood of bulls or goats. Sacrifices offered just to impress me when you don't care about others is not pleasing. Cease to do evil. Learn to do good. Seek justice. Rescue the oppressed. Defend the orphan. Plead for the widow." The words that are offered are not just about helping others in need. But the recognition of the need for justice for everyone. Faithfulness then includes not only being in right relationship with God this way but deeper faith is expressed in community. Without concern for others, both those in need and those who are aware they are not seen as equals, we are forgetting a major part of our calling. And I think many of the parables of Jesus point that out. The lost coin, the lost sheep. They're both about rescuing the person who has wandered away or feels they've been lost. The man in the temple who pounds his chest while judging the other as a tax collector not as worthy as he is. The one forgiven a great debt by the judge who then turns around and shows no mercy to the one who owes him just a little.

All these things ring of the call to care for others, the lost and the lonely, about the call to treat others with justice and welcome and equality. And as I considered this, the parable of the Good Samaritan came to mind. And I know I preached on that about a month ago. It was the words of Professor Amy-Jill Levine that stuck with me when she interpreted Martin Luther King's view of the passage. King said that he found that the concern for the priest and the Levite was, "What will happen to me? If I walk by this man and I touch him when he's unclean, I'll have to be cleansed. If I stop going to where I'm supposed to be, I will be late. If I help him, what's it going to cost me, whether in time or money or reputation?" But King says the Samaritan, the unexpected helper, reflects a different perspective. "If I don't do anything for him, what will happen to him? What will happen to others in difficult situations if others do not respond? The hungry will grow weak. The one in prison may think there is no hope. The one who grieves may feel increasingly alone. The one who is not shown justice and respect is not feeling as though they are welcome and afraid of becoming a victim of violence." So as I considered all this, I thought about the shooting in Texas and struggled not only with the horror of the event but the very fact that the person who perpetrated this was someone who felt people of another color were not as worthy as he is. And I wondered, as King does, what will happen if we do not address these issues? Not only what will happen to others, but what will happen to us as a people? There are no easy answers. There are no easy solutions. But we cannot let fear and anxiety rule the day. We can keep our hearts open, our minds open, our eyes open, to both the significant and the small ways that we can make a difference. To listen to fears of those who share them, and take them seriously. To live out our faith as those who recognize that what we say and what we do matters.

I found myself moved last night watching the news about the powerful gift and simple gift of just showing up. Many of you probably saw it as well. The story of a man named Antonio whose wife was killed in the shooting in El Paso. He told the funeral director he had no family in town, so he thought he'd invite the people of El Paso to come to share in this time with him. Over 700 people showed up. Antonio was deeply touched, and he greeted each one of them.

The call to faithfulness is about living lives with integrity and mercy, compassion and justice. A reminder that faith is lived out not only for ourselves as individuals, but in our relationship with one another. While the readings from the prophets include very difficult words, there is always the balance of hope and the expression of the love of a God who sees us all as God's children. I think that the prophets, like Martin Luther King, had a dream, too. For the kingdom of God to be one of justice and grace and love and truth. Indeed, Martin Luther King did speak about a vision and a dream. A dream that all children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. Where children of different races will join hands as brothers and sisters. A dream that one day rough places will be made plain and the crooked places will be made straight and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed. The words of Martin Luther King, I think, are words of hope. I think that the prophets offer words of hope. Hope that we will turn to the work of justice for all. That we will create a world of welcome, and not fear diversity. Hope that we will find our way to being reconciled with God and one another. Through these

prophetic voices, we are reminded that God's love is not based on achieved outcomes or perfection. It is grace grounded in love. A love so deep it cannot be shaken. I think it is not shame but love that best inspires us to live out justice and grace ourselves. Not only in our relationship with God, but with one another. And that is the hope that Christ offers. The teaching that Christ shares. That through commitment and faithfulness and challenge and healing and listening and loving, we will indeed come to know that neither Jew nor Greek nor brown nor white nor slave nor free nor male nor female can keep us from loving one another. And that we will live and love and be one in his name. Amen.