

A Sermon Prepared for Dayspring Baptist Church

7-27-25

Hosea 1:2-10

"Too much grace"

Hi my name is Josh and I'm honored to be here with you today. I was a pastor in my previous vocational existence. 15 years. And I remember when I had guest preachers, I didn't filter their content, maybe I should have, but I really had just one hope.

*I didn't want angry phone calls on Mondays.*

So when I looked at the lectionary and I saw Hosea chapter 1, I thought, "well ... I won't be the one getting the phone calls, why not."

Alas, this is, as they say, the word of the Lord.

I would like to begin with a confession ... i've never really known what to do with the prophets. Especially the minor ones.

Isaiah I get, and I like him because I like Christmas

Jeremiah made Christian graduation cards possible

But have you ever poured yourself a bubble bath and a glass of wine and curled up with some Obadiah or Nahum ... they both read like Quentin Tarantino Screenplay

And if they were narrated by a celebrity it'd be Samuel L. Jackson

Some of the prophets eventually get to good news ... but it's pretty painful on the way there

Like it makes you wonder how God divides up messaging responsibilities

If it's good tidings of great joy, you use an angel.

If you need someone to explain to daniel why his answer to prayer is delayed, you use an angel

If you need someone to tell Israel that their destruction is imminent ... you need someone like Dwight Schrute, apparently that's a human job.

And it's not just what they have to say, it's what they have to do:

- God told Isaiah to walk naked and barefoot for three years as a sign against Cush and Egypt of their coming judgement and shame
- Ezekiel cooks his food over feces (human feces at first, but then upgrades to animal feces) and sleeps on his left side 390 days and then on his right side for 40 days ... something about sins
- Jeremiah wore a wooden yoke, which was great for his chiropractor's business, but he also wore his underwear, buried it and then pulled it back when it was rotten ... a picture of israel's corruption

And then there's Hosea's story ... God commanded him to marry a prostitute and then gave him a baby name book written by a middle schooler in detention.

Years ago when I was a pastor I had a podcast called "Pastors in a Parish Eating Pizza" (you may remember Seinfeld did something similar).

And interviewed pastor Eric and I asked him what his favorite TV show was

And without missing a beat he said *Breaking Bad* and I asked why and he said because "it's one of the most honest looks at human sin and depravity."

*Breaking Bad*, if you don't know is about chemistry teacher who discovered he had terminal cancer and used his last months on earth to create meth and ascend the ladder as a drug kingpin

Flannery O'Connor would have loved Walter White and I think that if she were sensing my own discomfort with this story from Hosea she might also say that's the point of the imagery.

The whole reason I decided to preach this Hosea text among my lectionary options was because of a quote I recently read in Richard Rohr's book *Tears of Things*. Rohr says:

"Hosea is the first prophet to clearly move from the tradition from law to heart, from the parent-child dynamic ... to spousal intimacy, to what sounds like a kind of universal betrothal to life itself."

This is what the prophets do. They use images to disrupt our imagination to ready us for the next hard thing God has to say to us.

And what is God's message beyond God's grotesque image: "I'll love you no matter what you do."

Now I expect that, that punchline didn't quite have the grit that I had hoped it would. You've been told your whole life that God loves you no matter what you do.

I think the problem is one of perspective. The way our imaginations have evolved.

As is often the case life offers us sermon material at unfathomable pace. I'm going to offer you two images from just this last week ... and hang with me all the way through ... if you don't like me after, that's fair.

You may or may not know (depending on your social media exposure), that last week a CEO of a major tech company was incidentally highlighted on a jumbotron at a Coldplay concert with a woman who was not his wife.

For the very real lives impacted by this ... spouses, children, ... this is by every measure heartbreaking.

As for the CEO, the internet has been merciless.

A white, male, cis, CEO, there is nothing about him that isn't fair game.

See here's the flip/flop. We've been taught to have compassion for Gomer and to despise the CEO, and frankly for reasons you can find in the gospel.

Probably her most famous character **The Misfit** from *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, is an escaped convict who killed his own father. In my mind the Misfit looks like Gary Oldman's portrayal of Sirius Black, but its ambiguous moral character reminds readers of the Joker.

Or there's **Tom Shiftlet** a (and here i'm quoting) "tramp and one not to be afraid of with only half an arm in his left sleeve." Shiftlet arrives on the farm of Mrs. Carter and her mute daughter Lucynell. After working his way into her good graces Shiftlet marries Lucynell, steals her car and leaves her at a diner.

I could go on ... a scheming traveling bible salesman, a man with a botched tattoo, Gonga the man gorilla ... an hour with O'Connor's short stories is like a tour of Ripley's Believe It or Not

You'll feel like a voyeur when you're done.

But for O'Connor there's a point to all of this and it isn't voyeurism. Near the end of her life she wrote an essay titled "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction."

It's a nearly 4,000 word essay that I'm going to condense to 2 points and quote.

In O'Connor's estimation novelists do one of two things based on the way they see the world.

One either:

1. believes the mysteries and ills of life will eventually be unmasked by scientific advances of humanity
2. Or one that believes our life is and will remain essentially mysterious

The latter writer will always be pushing towards the limits of mystery because for that writer "the meaning of story begins at a depth where adequate motivation and adequate psychology ... have been exhausted."

So then

"Mystery writers will constantly look for images that connect the concrete and that which is not visible with the naked eye."

Now that would be some Grade A sermon illustration in and of itself, but unbeknownst to me when I began searching for Flannery O'Connor and her philosophy of grotesque images

I did not know that she would describe these image users as, wait for it ... **prophetic**

"In the novelist's case, prophecy is a matter of seeing near things with their extensions of meaning and thus seeing far things close up. The prophet is a realist of distances, and it is this kind of realism that you find in the best modern instances of the grotesque."

Now that 4/5ths of the way through this sermon and all i've done is exegete the notion of prostitution and explored the hermeneutics of Flannery O'Connor you might be wondering if I have a point ...

Yes I do, I promise. This might help.



But it would be odd for me if the Bible made the case that “this is how much you can know God loves you ... you are like a foster child that nobody else wanted, but God took you.”

You see my point ... we could substitute prostitute with any number of things: the obese, the mentally ill, the addicted, the poor ...

And if the punchline of any of those illustrations was, “and still God loved them” ... well, that would be odd ... given what we know about God, especially if God is like Jesus.

One question the book of Hosea doesn't answer is how it is that Gomer came into her work.

- We don't know if she was addicted to meth and things went south from there
- Or if she's a 3rd wave feminist with liberated sexual norms
- Or if she like Fantine, she's just trying to make ends meet after being dealt a bad hand

But what we do know is by the standards of 8th Century Hebrew norms she is not an ideal marriage partner.

So let us, for the sake of the text, shelve our objections and enter all the way into the scandal.

The question that confronts us is why God would want Israel then and us now to reckon with the image of Hosea and Gomer.

There are two people that I know of who have made a career out of calling our attention to the explicitly profane: Howard Stern and Flannery O'Connor.

As effective as Howard Stern might be as a sermon illustration, he might be even more effective at getting pastor Eric that monday morning phone call.

So I turn to Flannery O'Connor.

If you haven't read Flannery O'Connor and turn to any popular description of her work you will almost always hear two things said about her:

1. She wrote in the genre of Southern Gothic
2. Her characters were often grotesque

Those BTW are wikipedia's words not mine

For the sake of our discussion it's this latter literary feature I'm interested in ...

Let me describe some of her grotesque characters from her short stories

There's Mrs. Shortley from *Displaced Persons* who is described as a face like cabbage and rabbit ears

Or there's Mr. Paradise the skeptical man from *The River* who is described as having cancer over the ear and later an ancient water monster

But to focus too sharply on the appearance of O'Connor's bizarre characters would be a mistake. What she really intends to do is to get readers to gawk at our disturbed interiors.



abandoned by a wealthy student ... so Fantine in turn is fired from her job for immorality and left with few options and a mouth to feed.

As is often the case it would seem the bible itself is seemingly idiosyncratic on the topic. Rahab is held up a hero both in Hebrew literature and in Matthew's genealogy. And since I've mentioned Matthew's genealogy it's worth pointing out that the 5 women mentioned (Rahab, Tamar, Ruth, Bathsheba, & Mary) are included because of some version of sexual ambiguity (that's putting it gently for a Sunday Morning).

And then there's this story in Luke 7 of a woman who washes Jesus feet with her tears and dries them with her hair before anointing his feet with perfume. She's described "a woman with a sinful lifestyle" which I would have thought could have meant any number of things, but commentators insist "wink, wink" that it's pertinent to our topic.

Or the woman caught in adultery in John 8 when Jesus writes in the sand. And now if you're thinking well the umbrella of issues Josh is addressing has widened to include more than prostitution you are correct, but they all have this in common ... we as a culture both then and now have disproportionately made the sexual choices of women the locus of shame.

And if nothing else, that feels unfair.

Why, for example, isn't Solomon with his 700 wives, 300 concubines held up as an offensive symbol of Israel's infidelity?

*Well if i've done nothing other than complicate our understanding of Gomer then I'll have accomplished what I wanted because preaching her marginalized status as a metaphor feels complicated to me.*

And here I should have some humility ... i'm not a woman so there are real limits to my vicarious understanding, but I'll tell you what I do know.

My wife and I have fostered children for the past 5 years. We've had 11 children from 6 placements.

And I would say that 95% of the questions we entertain about these children are well intentioned.

But because we are licensed foster to adopt each time we do this work we have to ask that question all over again, would we be willing to adopt them.

And as people engage those questions with us, sometimes people will offer unsolicited advice about the difficulty in doing that.

And what's odd to me about these hypothetical conversations, that almost divide possibility into pros and cons, is that sometimes they seem to ignore the reality *that the children in question are humans created in the image of God who deserve love.*

And that's not to suggest that that means every foster parent ought to adopt their foster children

As Burt Burleson always says, "just another story about good biblical family values"

I will say, all jokes aside, preaching this story in 2025 gives me some pause.  
This does seem to me to be a bit fraught

I thought i'd start with the Hebrew. In my experience it has a kind pliability as a language  
Hebrew words can sometimes imply double or even triple entendre  
The vowel points weren't added until sometime between the 6th-10th C.E./A.D. and while the  
context can usually indicate meaning i thought it worth a look  
But when I found the Hebrew word that described Gomer "a woman of *Zeninum*"  
I consulted google, which consulted chatGPT, which consulted Strong's concordance entry  
#2183 I got a very resolute response which was "zeninum is a masculine plural noun signifying  
fornication, harlotry, or whoredom"  
And I thought well that feels more like an insult than a definition ... but alas

On May 24th 1883 after 14 years of construction the Brooklyn Bridge was completed. The  
project took so long it's designer John Roebling didn't live to see it finished. At the time it was  
the biggest suspension bridge in the world. Its steel cables were a new engineering concept  
and as such people were apprehensive to use it.

Enter PT Barnum

There was a mythic wisdom in the late 19th C that Elephants were key discerners of safety.  
Elephants, it was thought, don't take risks they know aren't safe.  
So Barnum, with the blessing of NYC, marched 21 elephants and 17 camels across the bridge  
as a demonstration of the bridge's safety.

The truth is elephants aren't very good civic engineers, but they do make for a good spectacle.

*And sometimes images can move people in ways that logic can't.*

This marriage is an image. It's a prophetic action.

The text is inviting us to be scandalized precisely because Gomer is a prostitute.  
Her lewdness is what is supposed to make the image jarring, and to undermine that I think  
would be a kind of exegetical mistake, but I do want us to pay some compassionate attention to  
Gomer.

One way to exegete her role is to pay attention to attitudes towards prostitution in culture.

I think about Satine, the courtesan protagonist from *Moulin Rouge* who embodies France's  
licentious attitude towards sexuality at the end of the 19th century. If you've seen the movie or  
the musical you know that her work does not negate her loveliness.

Or I think about Fantine from *Les Miserables* (sorry for another French example, but this is a  
subject they are fluent in) ... if you've seen Anne Hathaway's piercing performance than you  
may recall that her situation was created after she discovered she was pregnant and then

But what if, in the interest of disrupting our imagination to in fact tell us how much God loved us God embodied the position of the lover who pursued the CEO. I think we'd might only not be moved, but we'd be scandalized.

Here's the other image. Texas house state representative James Talarico was on Joe Rogan's podcast. Now if you don't know who either of those people are then just know this, they represent the political binary that's destroying our culture.

There's this clip of the interview that went viral and in the clip Talarico says, "you only love God as much as you love the person you love the least"

And in the comments of that clip people are posting about how much love James Talarico and how much they hate Joe Rogan

The irony is thick.

Here's my point ... the CEO, the social media comments, Gomer ... they all reveal a singular truth about human history ... we all have a breaking point with God where we bail

*And that is at the point where we believe God is dispensing too much grace.*

It's the whole point of Jonah's story

It's the perspective of the older brother in the prodigal son

And it's the attitude disgruntled workers in the parable of day laborers

The gospel isn't very good news if you don't need it.

But if you're like Gomer, or the CEO or if you live at the mercy of someone who is keeping your secret so you don't get cancelled, I have great news for you.

The gospel begins at the place where you are broken. God will keep coming after you.

Amen.