

1 Sermon, December 9, 2012

Texts: Hosea 2:2-3,3:1, Romans 3:23-24

Title: "Scandalous Love"

1. Story of Hosea
2. Story of Mary & Joseph - scandalous
3. Story of Jesus – scandalous
4. Is your story scandalous?

The story of the prophet Hosea is a little different than that of the other prophets. It casts Hosea, and even God in a scandalous light.

You see, in the first chapter, God tells Hosea to go and marry a hooker. Why would God tell Hosea to do something that would ruin his credibility with others? Why would God tell Hosea to do something that probably won't work out.

But Hosea goes and does what God asks.

Hosea marries Gomer, a woman whom no respectable man would marry. And maybe, at first it goes OK, but soon Hosea starts naming their children names that no good father would give his children. The first boy is named Jezreel (a place where the Israelites are defeated in battle), The girl is named "not forgiven" or "no sympathy" (it's hard to translate). Then the youngest boy is named "not my people," maybe because Hosea suspects that the youngest is not his child.

The names he gives to his children are messages to the nation of Israel that they are in trouble. They will be defeated in battle, they are not forgiven, and they have turned away from God so much that they are no longer God's people.

After the youngest son is born, Hosea's wife, Gomer, leaves. She apparently abandons her children and goes to pursue her former ways.

In chapter 3, God commands Hosea to go and buy Gomer back. He pays money and some barley and some wine. And she goes to Hosea's home again, and what follows is not written in the book. Hosea leaves us hanging, without knowing the end.

Scholars have questioned whether Hosea really did all this. Would he have the respect of the people if he did this? Would they listen to him if this really happened?

So some have said that this is a parable, or an exaggeration, or a literary device.

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But I tend to take this passage literally. The prophets were not known for their logical or likely actions. It seemed that prophets could get away with shaving off a third of their beards and spreading it one place, or burying their underwear in some rocks and using it as an object lesson.

Hosea practiced scandalous behavior, but people kind of expected something over-the-top from prophets.

Hosea's point in doing all this was to say that God is steadfast. God will welcome us home, even if we have been unfaithful. But we *need* to come home. Hosea's actions tell us that God wants to buy us back from slavery to whatever sins may have entrapped us, God wants us to return into a relationship.

Another scandal in the Bible is the story of Joseph and Mary as found in the gospel of Matthew. Mary and Joseph were promised to each other, but had not had relations when Mary became pregnant. When she started showing, it was a real scandal, and Joseph thought to divorce her. But an angel appeared to him in a dream, and he changed his mind.

Joseph's friend may have thought he was a gullible fool, but Joseph knew better. In this second scandal story there is also a name given, in fact two names. In the dream Joseph is told that his son will be called Emmanuel, which means "God is with us," and he named him Jesus, which means "one who rescues or saves."

It's a scandal – the love of God expressed in human relationships. There's a veneer of the sexual, but it's not about sex, it's about the power of God, and God's desire to love us.

Joseph may have not been the most worthy man to raise Jesus. Mary may not have been the most qualified. But God chose them, ordinary human beings – and the purest expression of the love of God lived in their home.

You may not feel worthy or qualified. You may have sinned in your heart or hurt someone emotionally or physically. You may have done something you don't want anyone to know about. You may just feel you're not capable of anything.

But God chooses you, an ordinary human being, and Christ can live in your home.

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Jesus himself was surrounded by scandal – a woman who was a sinner washed his feet – an intimate act. Another touched the fringe of his garment – also an intimate act. Jesus was criticized from all sides. He didn't fast like the followers of John the Baptist, he healed on the Sabbath, was accused of blasphemy.

Jesus' birth was a scandal – because great leaders were supposed to have auspicious births. Great leaders were supposed to be born in palaces or to scholarly families or great warriors. But Jesus didn't have the background, so to think that Jesus was important was to defy common wisdom.

The love of God is scandalous. It doesn't come in the way we expect it, or always at the time we expect. The love of God arrives no less in a child born out of marriage than in a child who born into a married household.

The love of God is expressed in a drunk's confession, or in an abuser's repentance. The love of God arrives in a generous gift to charity, or in a casserole to a neighbor.

The love of God happens in an embrace, or in an argument when two people are really talking about cherished values.

The love of God can be seen from the seat of a tractor, or through the bars of a prison, or in the halls of power.

God's love is over and through and in all, and we just need to wake up to it. We can be like Hosea's wife, Gomer, who was loved but ran away.

Could it be that Gomer just couldn't quite believe in Hosea's love? Could it be that she just couldn't accept that the love of God was for her?

As we prepare for Christmas, let's remember what a scandal it is. How inappropriate that the great God, creator of the Universe should pick out you or me as beloved. What a mismatch!

And yet it's true. God sent Jesus to tell us that the scandal is true. We are loved beyond our understanding, and we are asked to live as though we believe it's true: bear one another's burdens, pray like we mean it, and live our lives as servants in Jesus' name.