



TRINITY METHODIST CHURCH
ALBANY, NEW YORK

GOD IN THE SHADOW

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Preached on January 15, 1961

GOD IN THE SHADOW

"... and make the valley of Achor a door of hope."
(Hosea 2:15)

"They shall return and dwell beneath my shadow."
(Hosea 13:7)

Those of you who saw "Green Pastures" will remember that very dramatic scene in "God's office." God is distressed by the evil on the earth. He paces the floor and looks out of the great window that looks down on the earth. Gabriel is in the office. His trumpet is hanging on the wall. Again and again Gabriel asks God if he should blow that trumpet and end it all. During the discussion between Gabriel and God you can see the shadow of someone walking up and down outside the office door. We are told that it is Hosea and he is there to convince God that he should be compassionate and that he should forgive his people.

In a very naive and simple way that expresses the chief message of the Book of Hosea. It is a book filled with pathos and tragedy. Never in all the history of Israel had there been such a tangle of murder and intrigue. You should read the second book of Kings to get the background for this story. Hosea sums it all up when he says, "For Israel has forgotten his maker." Israel has broken the covenant. This book is filled with expressions denoting betrayal, unfaithfulness and wickedness.

It is not without a certain humor. In the seventh chapter we read, "Ephraim is a cake not turned." How better can you describe the person who is one-sided, immature, and who leaves God out of his life. I preached a sermon once with the title, "Half Baked," and, of course, this was the text. Hosea felt that his nation lost because the people saw only one side of life. Again he writes, "Ephraim is like a dove, silly and without sense, calling to Egypt, going to

Assyria. Incidentally, the term "Ephraim" is used to refer to Israel. He is here describing an unstable, frantic people, rushing from one possible solution to another while the real solution is neglected. We must remember that in the time of Hosea there were two great world powers - Assyria on the north and Egypt on the south. Palestine lay between these rivals and directly in their path. On one side was the desert and on the other was the Mediterranean Sea. When these powers clashed they marched through Israel, but Israel could never make up its mind which was going to be the stronger.

The book of Hosea is realistic. Listen to these words from the tenth chapter, "Because you have trusted in your chariots and in the multitude of your warriors, therefore the tumult of war shall arise among your people, and all your fortresses shall be destroyed." Jesus said, "They who take the sword shall perish by the sword." This has been the history of many civilizations. Again Hosea says, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge." Now here Hosea was not saying that Israel lacked clear and distinct ideas about God. What he meant was that Israel was in the wrong relationship to God. He was talking about the knowledge of the heart, that is, the response of the whole person to God's love. Israel did not acknowledge God. We say sometimes, "That person means nothing to me." We mean he makes claim on me; I have no relationship to him. Hosea recognizes that unless religion causes us to "acknowledge" God, it is useless.

Most of all the Book of Hosea is a book of compassion and hope. In the lesson we read this morning were these words, "My compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger, I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not man, the holy one in your midst, and I will not come to destroy." There are two verses in this book which give you the clue to its meaning. First, "They shall return and

dwell beneath my shadow." And second, "...and make the valley of Achor a door of hope."

Achor was the scene of one of the great tragedies of Israel's history. There a man had disobeyed God by keeping for himself that which was to have been given to God. The community had punished him. He had been killed in a horrible way. Hosea teaches that the great historical catastrophe which he felt sure would take place was intended by God as an opportunity for repentance and renewal. Even tragedy can be a door of hope.

Hosea was a contemporary of Isaiah. His call came to him after that of Amos. Hosea lived in the Northern Kingdom and possibly was of a priestly family. Certainly he came from quite a different social class than that from which Amos came. His activity lasted for at least ten years as he tried to bring to his people the message which he believed God had given him. His style indicates that he was sensitive and quite emotional. Probably he was more like Jeremiah but quite different from Amos, the rugged herdsman. Hosea moves impulsively from great exaltation to terrible despair because he was a man of great nervous tension. He was capable of beautiful and even tender language and yet on many occasions his words are harsh and even vulgar. When he attacks the abuses and sins of his people you find some of the strongest language in the Scripture. Perhaps you were offended as you read his words. Unlike Amos he is not concerned about the social sins but lifts his voice against the moral, religious and political sins.

The chief characteristic of the book is the way he uses his own marriage to illustrate his message. His wife's name was Gomer. She was unfaithful to him. It is this shocking experience which he describes. He had three children all of whom were given symbolic names. His first child, a son, was called Jezreel, literally, Yahweh sows. The second was a daughter,

called Lo-Ruhmah, meaning not pitied. His third child was a son named Loammi, "Not-my-people." In spite of what his wife did Hosea forgave her because of his great love for her. The commentaries write many pages about all of this, but it is that simple. Hosea has seen the possibility of compassion, compassion that can redeem, compassion that is finally acted out completely on the cross.

In the newspaper the other day there was a modern counterpart of this. You will recall the story of that poor boy who killed his mother. His foster father was asked if he intended to stand by the boy he had adopted seven years ago. He answered the reporter, "Good Lord man! Of course! He's my son." As I read that in the paper I thought of a story that Jesus told about a son who went away and wasted his life. When he returned one day his father was waiting for him and ran out and met him and welcomed him home. This is the heart of the Gospel. This is the hardest thing for many to understand - that it is possible for God to be both just and merciful.

Well, this is the picture Hosea draws and this is the message which he proclaims. Because his book is a compilation of things which he said at different times and then linked together in the form we have the same themes are repeated over and over again. There are some variations but we think sometimes that he is only repeating himself. Really it is a symphony. The theme occurs over and over and then the composer elaborates on it and works out new variations in order to impress the beauty of the thought on our minds.

It all starts for Hosea with God's choice of Israel. This is seen most clearly in the story of Exodus when God led his people out of Egypt. Here is a basis of the covenant relationship. Hosea is one of the first to interpret this covenant by comparing it with marriage. But Israel becomes unfaith-

in three ways. First, she is unfaithful in the institution of the monarchy. "Every evil of theirs is in Gilgal; there I began to hate them." You see, it was in Gilgal that Saul's coronation took place. Saul, the first king, was born in Gibeah so we read, "From the days of Gibeah, you have sinned, O Israel."

In the second place Israel had been almost completely absorbed by Canaanite religious and social customs. The priesthood was corrupted and these corrupt priests had taken over the sanctuaries. Then in the third place, Hosea feels that Israel has been unfaithful because of her reliance on foreign powers for help, rather than upon God. Basically, Hosea is criticizing the foreign policy of his people. As a pure practical matter he distrusts both Assyria and Egypt. His point of view was justified by history. But his concern is deeper because he feels that in turning to these foreign nations Israel has turned away from God.

Hosea contends that Israel has not honored her obligations to her God - to Jehovah, or as the later translations have it Jahweh. He is fiercely exclusive. For him religion is absolute loyalty to Jahweh. He feels that religion starts in the love of God and then that it expresses itself in life. Starting with the love of God he moves on to righteousness, justice, loving kindness, compassion, and faithfulness in the relations of man with man. Because of her unfaithfulness he says that Israel will be punished, BUT, and this is his great insight, she will also be redeemed.

Now what does Hosea say to us. Centuries later we read these words which he spoke to Israel. Can he possibly be speaking to us? As we have studied this book I am sure that many times you felt that the language was strangely contemporary. He says four things to me. I need to hear his demand for absolute loyalty. Jesus expressed this when he said, "No man can serve two masters." "You cannot serve God and Mammon." Our day does not like to hear that. We

much prefer both/and, rather than either/or. We show this in every phase of our lives. Young people think they can have life's rewards without paying the cost. Jesus expressed this idea again when he said, "Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few." (Matthew 7:13-14). Every day I am impressed more and more by this fact. This is not simply moralism, this is a law as real and as valid as the laws of physics and chemistry. Absolute loyalty is demanded of us in religion, in marriage, in school, in business. We today are unwilling to pay the price of loyalty and we see the results on every hand.

Second, I need to heed his warning not to let my religious practices be taken over by the land in which I happen to live. For example, the extent to which Christmas and Easter have become simply pagan festivals is alarming. Many children hear and know more about the Easter bunny than about Christ. The culture of our day with its worship of status crowds out the deeper meanings of learning how to live in the world and yet not become a part of it. It is somewhat fantastic to think how our culture has affected our faith.

Third, I must listen to his demand for "goodness." At this point he reaches deeper than Amos. Hosea goes to the very roots of conduct. The commentators tell us that this term "goodness," or rather the Hebrew word which is thus translated, is very difficult. There is no one English word that says all that the Hebrew word says. It is the virtue that knits society together. It is goodness, it is love, it is mercy, it is loyalty, it is courtesy. The word has an emotional content that makes the love of God the source of all our conduct. The idea of zeal is included. Do you see how Hosea is trying to approach the idea of a totally integrated life?

Fourth, and finally, I need to have Hosea's faith that looks beyond the power structure of any world to a God who stands in the shadow in compassion but not in helplessness. So often our figure of God is either forbidding in its sternness or pathetic in its impotence. James Russell Lowell once wrote:

"Though the cause of evil prosper
Yet 'tis truth alone is strong:
Though her portion be the scaffold,
And upon the throne be wrong;
Yet that scaffold sways the future,
And behind the dim unknown,
STANDETH GOD WITHIN THE SHADOW
Keeping watch above His own."

Remember two things that Hosea said: "...and make the valley of Achor a door of hope." "They shall return and dwell beneath my shadow."

PRAYER

Eternal and everlasting God, we come to Thee today with the realization that already many days of the New Year are gone. Yet it seems that only yesterday we were making bold resolutions and courageous promises of what we would do this year. Now it seems to us that we were too bold and too courageous for we have not been able to do what we had thought we could do. Forgive, we pray, our foolishness in thinking that we alone could change our lives. Help us to remember that without Thee we can do nothing. Save us from discouragement and make us realize that every Sunday a memorial to the resurrection, that every day has new promise, that the hour for serving Thee is ever present.

Help us this week to recognize the opportunities which Thou wilt give us. Help us to be faithful to

those who love us, to be loyal to our friends and never to bring distress to anyone. Make us channels of Thy love and grace - more concerned to serve than to be served - able to live in sympathy and in gentleness so that we may bring comfort to those who sorrow and understanding to those who are perplexed and healing to those who are hurt. In a world of suffering make us concerned and help us to so live that we shall not add pain or distress or burden to any person. Teach us to trust Thy mercy when we are confused and to rely on Thy goodness when we are troubled. Through Thy strength may we live in serenity and in self-control so that our anger may not disturb the peace of others.

So many times our prayers are selfish. We seek to avoid that which will distress us or that which makes us uncomfortable. We forget that Jesus chose the cross. May we today through our worship find a clearer vision of Thy will for our lives, a better understanding of what Thou wouldst have us do, a stronger purpose to commit our lives to Thee. Amen.