

struggle after another. Hosea saw six Kings in twenty-five years and of those six, four were assassinated by their successors. You get the picture....

The land seems to have been fertile and it was easy enough to gain a good living but unfortunately, this gave the people an increasingly materialistic attitude to life and a growing interest in the old fertility religions. I am not going into this in detail but, when you hear people say that the “gods” of today are sex and money, this is pretty much how it was for Hosea’s country. Hosea was not a hard-line, kill-joy kind of person but he could see that these values were producing a country with a weak citizenship, fragmented communities and families, and with an unstable government at its head. Any serious religious faith that might hold the people together had long gone. And right on the borders a super-power was waiting to invade. As Hosea foresaw all too well, Assyria ended up destroying his kingdom and most of his people were either killed or exiled.

In the meantime, as I said, things were not happy for him at home. He knew that his wife-Gomer- was promiscuous when he married her. Perhaps he thought that the love of a good man would change her. But it did not. She went off with other men and, when Hosea took her back, he accepted the fact that he would be bringing up other men’s children. He was not the kind of preacher to share his personal life in the pulpit but the turmoil in his mind and the pain in his heart come over very clearly in his words. He was doing his best to be a good, faithful, loving husband and still the woman he loved betrayed him, not just once but over and over again. Maybe we have known people who have been where Hosea was- whether in their relationship with a partner, children, parents or friends. Maybe some of you have been there yourselves. The pain is unbearable; the frustration like no other. You are willing to give everything for the sake of one you love and they throw it back in your face.

Hosea, a patriotic, loving man was faced with a crumbling nation and a crumbling marriage. And there was nothing he could do about either. Even his religion could do little to comfort him because his religion had always been based on a covenant agreement between God and the nation. If the nation remained faithful to God, then God would remain faithful to them. If the nation abandoned God then God would abandon them. It was set out quite clearly in black and white. Hosea did not blame God for his devastated nation. From the standpoint of a wronged husband, he could see that if he, Hosea, was quite within his legal and moral rights to divorce Gomer for her unfaithfulness then God was well within his covenant rights to leave the nation of Israel to stew in its own juice.

So whichever way he looked, Hosea was in a very dark place and with no way out.
&&&&&&&&&&

When there is nothing you can do, you are left with a lot of time to think.

And when you are in the kind of crisis Hosea was in, your emotions weave fast and furiously through anger “*why did all this have to happen,*” guilt “*where did I go wrong*” fear “*what is going to become of me*” and despair “*this is the end. There is nothing left for me now.*” Hosea went through all this but then he found an emotion he had not reckoned on. He found hope and in the most unexpected place.

He was badly hurt by his wife and very angry with her. Yet, despite it all, he still loved her. He could not help it. He told himself over and over again that he was a fool to love someone who was treating him so badly. He reminded himself sternly that no self-respecting man would allow himself to be betrayed like this. He knew that no-one

to them; that God is only interested in how many Bible verses they can recite off by heart and not in their broken marriage or their children who have gone wrong or the job they are finding it hard to cope with or the money worries that are keeping them awake at night. They will come back to church, they say, when they have sorted themselves out and they have time to learn Bible verses off by heart again. It does not occur to them that God's love is concerned about what is happening to them; that God's love might want to get involved in what is happening to them; that, like Hosea, they may even come to understand God a hundred times better through what is going on in their lives.

Hosea, through the pain and confusion in his personal life, gained deep insights into the nature of human love and human frailty, divine love and divine strength. The message he was given of hope for love is a message that changes lives. If we live in constant hope of knowing the love of God, then no experience will ever be so painful that we cannot hope for healing; no mistake will ever be so disastrous that we cannot hope for forgiveness; no situation will be so dark that we cannot hope to be shown a way through; no person will be taken so far from us that we cannot hope to reach them; no faith will be so feeble that we cannot hope that it will be stirred up into flame again.

No matter where we are, God will find us if we call him and knowing this gives us the confidence we need to love, to give, to serve, to create, to enjoy. Living in hope changes the way you feel and changes the way you live.

“Other prophets explored the kingdom of God, Hosea took it by storm.”

Eight hundred years before Jesus Christ, Hosea blew apart the notion that you earned your right to be in God's kingdom and preached instead the blessed truth that you entered the kingdom of God through the love of God welcoming you home.

Live in hope of that love this Christmas and become people of hope, as Hosea was, to a sad and frightened world.

Amen.