

Hosea 5:15-6: ¹⁵ I will go. I will return to my place until they admit their guilt and seek my face. In their distress they will earnestly seek me. ⁶ Come, let us return to the LORD. For he has torn us to pieces, but he will heal us. He has struck us, but he will bandage our wounds. ² After two days he will revive us. On the third day he will raise us up, so that we may live in his presence. ³ Let us acknowledge the LORD. Let us pursue knowledge of the LORD. As surely as the sun rises, the LORD will appear. He will come to us like a heavy rain, like the spring rain that waters the earth. ⁴ What am I going to do with you, Ephraim? What am I going to do with you, Judah? For your faithfulness is like a morning mist, like early dew that disappears. ⁵ That is why I cut them to pieces by means of the prophets. I killed them with the words of my mouth. The judgments against you go forth like the light. ⁶ For I desire mercy, and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings.

Have you ever heard anyone say, “My kid doesn’t lie”? “Oh, maybe he won’t tell *you* something straight, but I know my kid and he would never lie to me.” You don’t even have to be a teacher to laugh about that one. If you happen to have any life experience whatsoever or even just pay attention a little bit, you will realize how nonsensical that is. And you may even sense that the foolishness of that kind of statement is proportional to the vehemence with which it is presented as fact. The fact is: children do lie. Especially when they have done something they think will get them in trouble. They don’t like to admit guilt. I wonder where they get that from. I mean besides the fact that our holy God tells us that since the fall of Adam and Eve, every son or daughter of Adam, every human being since is born sinful. Enslaved by the sinful nature to the suggestions of the devil, the father of lies. But besides all that, look at what they have for examples. Role models. Remember that U.S. swimmer at the Brazil Olympics? After vandalizing a gas station bathroom and being detained by security staff, he lied and said he was mugged by armed robbers. And then when the video of the event became public gave the alleged apology about being sorry for not being more careful in how he described the events of that early morning. Oh, you mean “Lying”? And that was only after his excuses about the trauma of being in a foreign country and the language barrier. And it’s not just him. We are constantly seeing and hearing famous officials and athletes and media stars go through this routine when faced with the humiliation of their sinful and illegal actions coming to light. Offering the fake apologies of “Sorry if...” Sorry if you were offended. Or if you took it wrong. Taking the focus off the wrong thing that was done and putting on the other person. Or “sorry, but...” which cancels out the apology with either a criticism or an excuse. Sorry for what happened, instead of for what I did or said. Or this fairly recent phenomenon, “I take full responsibility.” Generally the ploy that occurs after trying all the lies and denials first and being caught red-handed. And it is really just a way of saying everyone should trust you after showing no responsibility in the first place, but taking it now that there seems to be no alternative option. They’re sorry they got caught. And now they still don’t expect any consequences. It really doesn’t indicate a change of heart or behavior. Just damage control. And it is very frustrating for us to hear. And for our loved ones when we do the same thing. And just imagine how frustrating for an all-knowing and all holy God.

And actually we don’t have to imagine. Because he tells us about it here in his holy Word. He had called this prophet Hosea to preach to his people. But even before he started on that preaching ministry, God called him to proclaim a message with his personal life. He was told to marry the harlot, Gomer. She would be a symbol to the people of their unfaithfulness to the Lord God who had always been a faithful husband to them. He had married his people to himself. And although he is the always-faithful Husband, his people don’t always respond in kind. God’s

history with them was a story of grace and favor and blessing and protection and forgiveness. And yet time and again, she had gone off to ply her favors on others. Seeking power and protection from superpower governments and mercenaries instead of the promises of God. Joining in the indecency and immorality of the world around them, instead of being the light and testimony their Lord wanted them to be. Getting into bed with other religions and beliefs, thinking it was okay as long as they still spent a little time with the true God, even though they preferred the entertainment and popularity they got from others. Serving money and riches and pleasures as their masters, instead of the one true Master. Her idolatry is really a spiritual adultery. But she doesn't see it that way. "What? We still come to church once in a while. We bring our sheep and sacrifices and offerings." And like many people addicted to sinful behavior, they start out trying to deny it. And even when confronted with clear evidence, they claim it's not all that serious. They could return to the Lord at any time.

But the Lord isn't playing that game anymore. He's going to change tactics. Turn up the heat a little. He hadn't stopped loving them, but he's going to show it in a little different way. They aren't going to be able to continue their behavior without consequences. In the case of God's people 700-some years before the birth of Christ, it was going to be in the form of the scourge known as the Assyrians. Violence and destruction by people from what we would call Iraq and Syria today. And it wouldn't be pretty. But even those dire warnings didn't change anything. The people notice the pain. They recognize something is wrong. But they don't admit their guilt. They don't look for God's cure. They go looking for *earthly* help. Political alliances. Social programs. Like you sometimes see in the modern church. We try to evaluate the painful problems and suffering, declining membership, trouble connecting people's lives with God's truth. And we look for solutions, forgetting Jesus' kingdom is not of this world. The Word he has given us to use is the only thing that changes hearts and creates and sustains faith. Remember when the church wasn't seeming so popular or successful in Jesus' day and he asked his disciples, "So do you want to leave too?" And Peter gave the right answer: "Where would we go? You have the words of eternal life." But it's so easy to forget our purpose here and want to act like an earthly organization. Fall into the same trap of Israel and Judah. Neglecting the Gospel; looking elsewhere for help – sociology, demographics, doctrinal compromise, leaders' personalities. And like those of Hosea's day, not finding the healing and help we were looking for. Oh, they thought things were looking up. It looked like there was some external improvement, a little relief from their suffering. But it was just a mirage. Things were about to get much worse. Because the real problem isn't pain or suffering. The real problem is sin.

So, even worse judgment was coming. From a Judge mightier than any of their political allies or earthly helpers. In chapter five, God had used the picture of being like a lion to the people of Israel, tearing them to pieces. And then leaving the carcasses on the ground as he returns to his lair. That's where we come in this morning: "I will go. I will return to my place until they admit their guilt." The destruction and captivity seem extreme. But it's a wake-up call from the Lord. It might seem like he is abandoning them, but that's not it. He's going to his place, where he belongs, where he always is. If they seem to be abandoned, it is because they are the ones who left. And he doesn't want them to be away from him forever. So he lets the pain and misery come to hopefully lead to repentance. And it seems to work, right? "Come, let us return to the LORD. He has torn us to pieces, but he will heal. He has struck us, but he will bandage our wounds. After two days he will revive us. On the third day he will raise us up, so that we may live in his presence. Let us acknowledge the LORD."

They're saying the right words. Or so it seems. That's what makes the context so important when it comes to God's Word. He doesn't accept what they are saying. It isn't sincere. This is just like all those televised apologies in our day. They were sorry they were suffering. They were sorry their nation was a mess. But there is no sadness for their sins. No confession. There is nothing here about admitting their guilt as God had said. Torn us to pieces ... injured us – they're talking about the military defeats and the oppressive tribute they have to pay, the physical discomfort and suffering, not the painful recognition of their sinfulness. After two days, the third day – they expect a quick fix from God.

After all, like the first couple Sundays after the September 11th terrorist attacks, their churches were full too. For a little while. When God's threatened judgments came due and the people realized he was serious, they came with their sacrifices and prayers and special services. And God told them he didn't want anything to do with their offerings and lip service. God had seen this dance before; he had heard this song before. He is not manipulated by people who think they can say a little something or do a little something to gain his favor – as if he were a god like Baal that you had to perform certain rites and rituals and bring certain gifts and then he would give you good crops and healthy kids and a better life. Where they could turn to him for an hour, but then verse 4, “Your faithfulness is like a morning mist, like early dew that disappears.” Like we get so much more serious about praying or coming to church when someone is sick or things aren't going so well. Or we go through the motions, but don't think anything of going back to hating that person; having a grudge in our heart; being discontent with the life God has given us; going back to that pornography addiction or disrespectful attitude or living in sin; to the idolatry of our greed; putting financial security or pleasures ahead of God, but then come back and smile at God, and say, “What? I'm good. Look. Here I am.” With the love that fades like morning mist. And like a parent, he says, “What can I do with you Ephraim? What can I do with you Judah? What can I do with you, fill in your name here?”

And if you can put your name in there. And if that makes you feel bad. If that makes you sad. Then good. You recognize your sin. And you are ready to hear what God wants. And what does he want? Verse 6, “For I desire mercy, and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings.” And that word “mercy” is a very special Old Testament word. It means “faithful love.” The faithful love that comes only from one place. The faithful love of the faithful Lord who proved that faithful love by making and keeping his covenant. By coming through on the promise to send his Son as the Savior from sin. And his people acknowledge God by trusting in him. By believing in Jesus as their Savior. And then that perfect faithful love of God who became man to live in our place and die for our sins. The One we see taking Barabbas' place the morning of the crucifixion, being led out to be crucified instead of him and really taking the place of all of us. And his faithful love becomes the possession and quality of whoever believes in him. And that makes our sacrifices and offerings and worship and apologies acceptable and pleasing to God. And he does heal us and revive us and restore us and let us live in his presence. And it's instant, not after two or three days. Like when David was confronted with his terrible sins and confessed, “I have sinned against the Lord.” The immediate response was not, “well, if you prove it or do this or that...” No, the very first words after “I have sinned” were “the Lord has taken away your sin.” And then we are capable of showing that faithful love in our daily lives, in worshiping our God and helping our fellow man. And then his words will connect with our hearts so we don't try to hide our sins and so we mean it when we apologize and believe it when God forgives and loves and blesses us always and forever. That's no lie. Amen.