
The setting of this week’s Old Testament lesson picks back up where we were last week. Hosea writes in Israel, the Northern portion of what used to be Unified Kingdom of David and Solomon. He warns them about their lust for other Gods, government corruption, and abuse of the poor in Israel. The People of God had lost their way – and as a result, they were on the verge of destruction at the hands of Assyria. +++ Today, Luke joins Hosea – each challenging us in their own way to stay true to who we are as God’s People. The main problem, in both cases, is our failure to obey the First Commandment – “Thou shalt have no other gods before me.” Whether it’s Hosea’s generation actually worshiping other gods like Baal, … +++ or Christ’s criticism of us for storing up treasures for ourselves but still not being rich toward God… – both tell what can happen when we forget whose we are.

It’s not just this passage:: Hosea is filled with harsh judgment and foreboding warnings of coming disaster. But underneath the surface – despite everything – there is always the tender and unwavering love of God. A God who is heartbroken over Israel…; torn between righteous punishment and forgiveness. We see that in today’s reading, with the loss of Israel getting closer and closer, the Lord finally cries out: “How can I give you up…? How can I hand you over, O Israel?… My heart recoils within me; +++ my compassion …grows warm… and tender.” +++ +++ It’s a pattern we see time and again throughout the Old Testament, isn’t it? :: Israel forgets its commitment to God’s covenant – neglects its life as the people of the Lord – fails to obey the laws and commandments. Over and over, they suffer the consequences – … only to be redeemed and blessed again… with victory,… security,… and stability. +++ Blessed again by God… who is ALWAYS faithful, who ALWAYS remembers the covenant, and ALWAYS has their best interests at heart. +++ +++ Now, Hosea warns that the cycle of disobedience and punishment is about to be played out again. Israel has enjoyed peace and prosperity for a generation, but the prophet sees more and more of them worshipping idols and Canaanite gods. They have orgies with obscene fertility rites. And, now, even priests are turning away from Yahweh. +++ Surely, it’s time for the righteous judgment of the Lord to be aroused. +++ So… as Assyria gains strength and Hosea sees the future growing ominous, he wants Israel to understand the agony their betrayals cause God – the God who loves them dearly like parents love their children… Who brought them out of bondage and gave them the Promised Land. +++ Any sin is an insult to the Lord – but when God’s own people throw pagan worship into the Lord’s face, it is especially excruciating. …Yet, like a tender parent, God wavers… between the righteous judgment of Israel – and the desire to let them off the hook. +++ God’s love: the very thing Israel has disrespected and thrown back in the Lord’s face – God’s love: which is far beyond anything we can ever earn or deserve – God’s love: is now their only hope of redemption. The question is:: whether they’ve gone too far this time.

God’s people had forgotten who they are. They had become too comfortable as God’s chosen people. If God’s love and protection was a fact of life – why should it matter what they do? They forgot there was more to it than an inheritance – God’s favor was not something the Lord owed to them. Being a child of God must be lived into every day – it means following the law consistently – it means cherishing the love of God in our own hearts and sharing it with our neighbors. It means putting aside worldly ambitions and riches…. It means knowing that simply having a life in the Lord is the greatest treasure of all.

THAT is what Israel was meant to be – the people of God basking in God’s love and obeying the Law. But – they had forgotten who they are….. And, even though it breaks the Lord’s heart, they will suffer the consequences. They will be defeated, overrun, and exiled from the land of their ancestors – scattered like the wind. +++ BUT, the passage ends with a promise:: it will not last forever…. One day, God will call them home:: “”They shall go after the Lord, who roars like a lion; … when he roars, his children shall come trembling from the west. They shall come trembling like birds from Egypt, and like doves from the land of Assyria; and I will return them to their homes, says the Lord.” … One day… They will remember who they are and be restored to a life of blessing.
This week, as I’ve been reading Hosea – and thinking about God’s people forgetting who they are – there have been commercials and reviews on television for the new live-action version of The Lion King. Have any of you seen this new version yet? I haven’t, but I have seen the original version a number of times… So, this week, I kept thinking about how The Lion King reflects what Hosea is trying to tell us… In case you haven’t seen it, or if it’s been a long time, I’ll give you a brief synopsis: The Lion King is the story of a young lion named Simba, and the lessons he learns growing up. Simba’s father Mufasa is the king of the beasts. As a cub, Simba spends many long hours with Mufasa – playing games and learning what it really means to be the son of a king. They live in a special paradise near Pride Rock. It’s been handed down to them from their ancestors – (much like Israel’s patriarchs and the Promised Land). Mufasa teaches Simba about his place in the Circle of Life – that the pride will rely on him to always be there, to be consistent, to protect their way of life. He must never waver from this commitment. Before his death, Mufasa reminds Simba: “Always remember who you are.”

But Simba forgets. He thinks his father’s death is his own fault, so Simba runs away into exile. Far away in a different land, he finds a new way of life with his new friends Timon and Pumba. Simba tries to put his past behind him. He disobeys all his father’s lessons by adopting his friends’ philosophy of life, called “Hakuna Matata.” It means “no worries for the rest of your days.” They call it a “problem free” philosophy, with no rules and no responsibilities. Years pass. Simba grows from a cub into a full-grown lion – still dancing and singing about the empty ideas – the false god – of Hakuna Matata.

Like Israel, Simba was driven from his land. Like Israel, he turned to philosophies that violated everything his forefathers stood for. Like Israel, his land was taken over by hostile forces in his absence – land was torched – food became scarce – family and friends were abused and scared. Like Israel, Simba had forgotten who he was.

But this was not the last word. The story of God’s people, like the Lion King, is not about judgment and eternal punishment…. It’s about God’s persistent love that calls us back… It’s about redemption. One night while looking into a pond, Simba is confronted by Mufasa’s spirit, staring back from his own reflection. “Simba, you have forgotten me. You have forgotten who you are so you have forgotten me… Look inside yourself, Simba – you are more than what you have become. You must take your place in the circle of life. Remember who you are. Remember.” And Hosea tells us, Israel will return to “the Lord, who roars like a lion; when he roars his children shall come trembling from the west… and return to their homes.” Mufasa’s voice is like that lion’s roar of God. And, Simba follows it home. He finds the courage to put everything back in order and takes his place as king. He remembered who he was.

I wonder this morning if we always remember who we are…. As Christians, do we sometimes forget who we are – and turn our back on God? Do we sometimes get too comfortable as the people of Christ? If Christ’s love and forgiveness are a facts we can rely on – does it really matter what we do? I think this is part of what Jesus is getting at today when he warns against “all kinds of greed” and cautions, “one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." In the parable, it’s not a problem that the rich man’s land produced abundantly – or even that he’s rich at all. The problem starts when he says to his soul, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.” Hakuna Matata. Notice: he’s not just speaking to himself; but to his own soul. The rich man believes that his riches somehow fulfill his Soul. But it does NOT. He confuses treasures of the earth with treasures in the Lord – and he thinks there’s nothing to worry about… Just as Israel had taken God for granted – just as Simba thought Hakuna Matata would somehow be enough.

Our covenant with God was established in the time of Abraham, in the early chapters of Genesis,: that the Lord will be God to us and we will be God’s people. As Christians, we are called to live into that covenant every day… AND Christ calls us to LOVE - Love God,… love our neighbor,… fight for justice,… feed the poor,… heal the sick…. We are called to an active life, following in the footsteps of Christ. This is why the rich man
stops acting like a child of God when he decides his soul can be filled by stuff. - when he decides that life demands no more than sitting back to relax, eat, drink, and be merry…. He forgets who he is. +++ Do you remember who you are? You are a child of God, called to live in the example of Christ. We all own stuff of this world – to a greater or lesser degree – money, property, cars – different things for different people. We take some pride in our accomplishments, our jobs. That’s not the problem. It becomes a problem when we begin to define ourselves by our stuff – and Christ’s call to love begins to fade in our hearts. THAT’S the spiritual emptiness Hosea knows will be Israel’s downfall – that’s when we put ourselves into exile and scatter like the wind, that’s when we begin serving the wrong master. +++ +++ Do you forget who you are? +++ How far into the wilderness do you wander? +++ The Good News is that God never gives up on you. Whatever far away land you run to – no matter how long you forget who Christ wants you to be – even now, a voice comes to you like a lion’s roar in the wind, calling you home – Calling you to remember, and to be redeemed.+++ +++ Listen… Remember… and Follow it home.
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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.