Is It Too Late?
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Hosea 5:15-6:6 Psalm 50:7-15

Center Harbor Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Pastor Alison Thatcher

When I learned how to ride a bike, it was early spring. In New Hampshire that meant I was still wearing a jacket and, while the sidewalks and road were clear, there were still some lingering snowbanks, dirty and hard by that time. My dad had taken the training wheels off my beautiful teal and pink bike. Then he took me out and he gave me a gentle push down, what felt to me like a steep mountain, but was in reality a modest hill. And it was scary but also exciting and he was there to help me and encourage me the whole way. One of the tips he gave me to help me keep my eyes focused on what I was doing was that whatever direction in which I looked, that's where I would end up going. And I was doing it! I was riding around on my bike without training wheels! It was all going so well until the moment I realized that I was heading straight toward a snowbank. Remembering my dad's advice at the last minute, I looked away in a different direction. But, wouldn't you know it, I still crashed into that hard snowbank and fell over into the icy mud. My dad came over and helped me up but I felt so betrayed. "I did exactly what you said, " I sobbed. "I looked away but my bike didn't go where I looked!" I don't remember how he responded but I imagine him smiling, shaking his head, and saying "What shall I do with you, Alison?"

I imagine God, our divine parent, looking like that when They say, "What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah?" I often think of this library of books we call the Bible as stories of people trying to make sense of their world and wanting to be in relationship with their loving, puzzling God. And maybe it's stories of God trying to make sense of these stiff-necked, fickle people and wanting to be in relationship with them. Ever since Jacob's intimate night-time encounter, we have been wrestling with God.

The prophet Hosea is writing in a time when the Northern Kingdom, which includes the territory of Ephraim, has turned away from God. They have not been living out the commandments given to help nourish relationship among each other and relationship with God. Instead, they seek security in their own military power and comfort in idols of silver and gold. And so, Hosea says, God will let them fall into the hands of the ever-expanding Assyrian empire for their iniquities. With pressure from the Assyrians mounting, the rulers of the Northern Kingdom come to God, sincerely contrite, begging for forgiveness and protection, like we heard in the reading this morning. But it is too late.

A helpful bit of historical-cultural context that is lost on us today, is that military defeat was an important sign about your god in the eighth century BCE. If your nation was defeated by

another, it meant that either your god is defeated by their god, or your god has abandoned you and allowed you to be defeated. In a culture that held honor above all else, and saw shame as something worse than death, it was more palatable for our ancient faith ancestors to believe that God had withdrawn Their presence and protection than to believe that God could be defeated. It goes against our modern Christian beliefs to imagine God abandoning us so it's challenging to read that in our biblical stories, but for the people in those stories, abandonment is better than defeat. Plus, abandonment allows for the possibility of that god returning someday; it allows for hope.

So, for Hosea's immediate audience, as sincere as their pleas may be, it is too late to avoid the coming chaos. God will punish them for their iniquities. Now, we modern Christians also struggle to read about a punishing God, a God who does not forgive. But does forgiveness actually erase sin? When we forgive or ask forgiveness for an interpersonal conflict, does the hurt magically go away? To repent literally means to turn around or change direction. And when I veered off the straight and narrow sidewalk into that hard snowbank on my bike, I quite literally repented at the last moment, but it was too late for my momentum to be stopped. Once hurtful words leave our mouths, they can't be taken back. Once we do hurtful things, they can never be truly undone. It's hard enough in a one-on-one interpersonal situation. How much harder is it, then, to turn a societal ship around?

That's the situation that Hosea is speaking to; a whole nation that needs turning around. He writes: "You have plowed wickedness, you have reaped injustice, you have eaten the fruit of lies." We have reason to believe that the people are still going through the motions of worship. But Hosea tells them that worship in itself is not what God desires. And this is a timeless, universal message. Hosea's contemporary Amos tells his audience that God takes no delight in their assemblies and will not listen to their hymns. The prophet Micah asks the rhetorical question, does God really want sacrifice and burnt offering?

And to put it into today's language, we may ask does God really want perfect church attendance? Does God want a show of piety while we pray and read scripture? Or does it have to do with how we act, not just individually, but as a whole society? When our society turns riches into idols like it did in Hosea's community, when our society tramples the poor like it did in Amos's community, is praying on Sunday morning going to keep us from crumbling? What will? Hosea tells us that God desires steadfast love. Amos tells us to take away our offerings and our songs, "But let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." Micah asks of us one more rhetorical question: "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?"

Sometimes I look at our world, and it resembles the times of the prophets a little too closely. The prophets' exhortations to practice justice, righteousness, and steadfast love are not just for individuals, they're for a whole society. Because we're on this big ship together. Every child who goes hungry is our child, every grandmother who can't afford life-saving medication is our grandmother, every brown-skinned neighbor who dies in detention is our neighbor. The trouble we are in is not any one person's fault, but it's too late to undo and we're all dealing with the consequences. And there is hope. It's up to each of us to play our part in reconciliation and restoration. To begin – belated as it may be – to turn toward righteousness, to love kindness, to let justice roll down like water, and to know God intimately. I don't believe God abandoned Israel and Judah to crumble in the face of foreign powers any more than I believe my dad abandoned me to crumble in the face of that snowbank. I believe then as now, individually and societally, there is hope in the midst of chaos and fear. And there is God too.

After I fell, my dad helped me up and cleaned me off. He comforted me and he gave me courage to try again. God tells the people through Hosea that God was to Ephraim "like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them." And later God promises, "They shall again live beneath my shadow, they shall flourish as a garden, they shall blossom like the vine." We'll keep wrestling and veering off the path. And when we call out in our day of trouble, God will deliver us. Maybe we'll have some bumps and bruises thanks to our own mistakes. Maybe our actions will have consequences that we can't undo. But it is never too late to turn toward God and start down that way toward healing and restoration.