

***Sermon on Hosea 5:15 – 6:6***

*by Pastor Alexander Mielke on February 3, 2008*

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1I will return again to my place until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face. In their distress they will beg my favor: “Come, let us return to the Lord; for it is he who has torn, and he will heal us; he has struck down, and he will bind us up. 2After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him. 3Let us know, let us press on to know the Lord; his appearing is as sure as the dawn; he will come to us like the showers, like the spring rains that water the earth.” 4What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes away early. 5Therefore I have hewn them by the prophets, I have killed them by the words of my mouth, and my judgment goes forth as the light. 6For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

Dear congregation,

“Hear the word of the LORD, O people of Israel; for the LORD has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or kindness, and the knowledge of God in the land.” This word from the 4th chapter is characteristic of the Book of Hosea, a very solemn, admonishing book. Powerful and impressive – to the point that it frightens us. For Hosea does not speak calmly and in a reserved manner about God; he does not speak politely and cautiously to the people. No, in all his directness he calls faults and sins by their names, and in all massiveness, he speaks of the consequences which must follow: of the judgement of God. No, Hosea is no simple fare.

We know hardly anything about Hosea’s life, just that he was active in Israel in the second half of the 8th century before Christ during a very unsettled time. The crucial point that has been handed down is his message, the preaching, to which God has appointed him. And if we pay close attention to it, we will discover that it is not only loud and frightening, but also friendly and inviting. Not only wrath is in Hosea’s words, but also tenderness, as a mother gives to her children, tenderness, as people in love give to one another. “Rough on the outside, – soft inside“, thus one could characterize the proclamation in the Book of Hosea.

**”Come, let us return to the Lord” Hosea calls us back to God, now as we have to prepare ourselves of the Lent season.**

“Come back to God!“ He has created you. Everything that you are and have, you owe to him. Therefore, do not forget him! But remember: He has granted you life, so that you will lead it in responsibility before him. Do not waste your time in doing senseless and useless things! Do not get involved in wrongdoing! Remember: You must answer for your entire life before God. Therefore, ask what God’s will is. Make your time and strength available to God. Then your life will be meaningful and valuable for God and for people.

This is not only important presently at the beginning of Lent, but every Sunday, every day. In a prayer it is expressed in this way:

When I set out on my way,  
strengthen me, my God.

When I go astray,  
lead me, my Lord.

When I grope around in the dark,  
enlighten me, you, my Father.

When I am weak,  
help me, my Saviour.

**“Come, let us return to the Lord, for it is he who has torn, and he will heal us; he has struck down, and he will bind us up.”**

What are those catastrophes which shake up the Israelites at that time?

A quarrel among brothers tears Israel apart. Even the name “Israel” points to this conflict, for “Israel“ stands only for part of the country. Since Salomon, the land is split into two parts, the Southern Kingdom “Judah” with Jerusalem as the capital and then the Northern Kingdom that is now called “Israel” with its capital Samaria.

There are economic turbulences. During a time of economic miracles, a few become rich. During the following recession, many become poor. This leads to severe tensions between the rich and the poor.

In the capital city of Samaria things are totally chaotic. During the 25 years of his service, Hosea sees six different kings! Most of them gain power through revolts, many murder their predecessors, some can only hold out on the throne for a few months.

These are the deplorable conditions which destroy the life of the society in Israel. But Hosea conceives even worse things on the horizon. The mighty kingdom of the Assyrians threatens the region of the Near Orient. Hosea foresees it: The Assyrians will conquer and destroy Israel. And here, Hosea is quite harsh: He says this is God's fair judgement for a ruined and dissolute people. In chapter 5 Hosea says about God: "I am like a lion to Ephraim and like a young lion to the house of Judah. I, even I, will rend and go away, I will carry off, and none shall rescue."

How can we understand this harsh message? I just want to give a small indication with a quote from Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker, who was the brother of the former President of the German Federal Republic as well as a physicist and philosopher.

"The deepest experience of himself, to which a human can forge ahead in his nature and in society, is not called freedom, but powerlessness. The deepest experience of success in human life is not the experience of one's own power, but that of grace. The deepest experience of a person is not the human dimension, but God, the divine dimension."

It is the strange thing about difficult experiences of suffering, that they can open the door for us to a new life. Not the door to a carefree and successful life. In these expectations and goals belonging to the world, one was caught up before – one recognizes this now. But to a life with the perspective "God". This is the astonishing thing: When the door to health and success and some other things closes, the door to the most important factor opens, namely to God and his eternal dimension. André Gide, the French author, has expressed it in this way:

"I believe that illnesses are the keys which can open certain doors. I believe that there are certain doors, which solely the illness can open."

Illness – this is an example here for a catastrophe, which we experience in our personal sphere. At the time, Israel has realized this in its political catastrophe, with the help of Hosea's proclamation: "We had run past the most important thing. We had revolved only around ourselves, around our goals and wishes. But now, in the worst experiences of our history, we have discovered God anew, the origin and the true hope of our life."

They had not understood God's will before, had paid no attention to it. In verse 6 God says:

**"I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." God is not satisfied with an outer, pious appearance, but he is looking for inner, true faith.**

At that time in Israel, it was not the case that church services were poorly attended. No, every day sacrifices were made in the temple, every Sabbath well-attended services were held everywhere. But those, who sacrificed a strong bull, were the ones who had previously brought ruin to their less ingenious countrymen through their intelligent and unscrupulous money dealings. Those, who now raised their eyes to heaven with gladness during prayer, had been to the soothsayer just before, in order to find out, when they would be lucky in love or how they could do damage to their neighbours. Church service and everyday life, holiday and workday no longer harmonized. But Hosea emphasizes: Your attendance of the church service has only value in God's eyes, when it has consequences in your everyday life. Let the church service give you the direction for everyday life; otherwise better forget about the church service altogether!

But are the Israelites, are we humans, at all capable to live our faith purely and consequentially? In Hosea's words there is a sound of deep doubts. God says in verse 4:

“What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes away early.”

Disappointment and resignation ring in these words. The faith of the people has no stability. They appear like “Morning clouds“ and “Morning dew“, which dissolve with cloud that is rising and becoming hot, as if they had never existed. Love and faith, which dissolve quickly into air, and evaporate without leaving a visible trace!

Only one hope can be found in this paragraph, it is this call:

**"Come, let us return to the Lord – he will heal us."**

God alone can help us humans! This call reminds me of a great call for help in the New Testament. There, Paul speaks in Romans 7 quite honestly about his failure and his being torn apart: "I can will what is right, but I cannot do it." And then he cries out in desperation: "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

We humans are incapable of living purely and clearly according to God's will. Here, Christ only can save us and help us. Save us with his word of mercy, so that we no longer are afflicted and captured by our guilt and our failure. Help us with his Spirit, so that we no longer are fighting a losing battle alone against the temptations of each new day.

Hosea preaches inexorably God's will and judgement; often his words seem to be harsh and hopeless. But if they help us to discover Christ anew for our life, and the strength and hope, which his mercy and grace mean to us, then we will be able to experience Hosea's words also as guiding and helpful.

We are presently at the beginning of Lent. This season aims at Easter, new mercy and a new life from the hands of the resurrected. I would now like to pray with you a prayer by Jörg Zink, which puts the goal already in view.

Lord,  
you have called Lazarus, your friend  
out of the cave of the tomb:  
Come out!  
And he lived.

Say to my soul: Come out!  
Yes Lord, I want to come.  
I do not hide from your judgement.  
I am coming with empty hands,  
but I hear your call.

You, the living, will give life.  
You, the light, will be victorious over all darkness.  
You, the truth, will put an end to all delusion.  
You, the love, will set free of all fear.

I am yours in the light of your day  
and in the darkness of my night.

Amen.