

## The Darwin Awards

Sunday, May 26, 2019

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Hosea 1:2-10

Charles Darwin is famous for writing about the survival of the fittest. Darwin asserted that the species which adapts is most likely to thrive and that those who cannot adapt will die out. With a nod to Mr. Darwin, the Darwin Awards are bestowed annually on individuals who self-destruct in the most remarkable manner. The Darwin Award website claims to commemorate those who improve the human gene pool by removing themselves from it, something the Darwin Award organizers call “chlorinating the gene pool.”

Recent winners include: Prabhu Bhatara (India) who stopped by the road to take a selfie with a bear, who mauled him to death. Anthony (New Jersey) , a licensed electrician, ignored detour signs and drove into a flooded street filled with downed power lines, was electrocuted and died. Zaim Kosnan (Malaysia) spotted a 35-foot reticulated python by the roadside. Thinking it might be worth some money, Zaim wrapped it around his body and hopped back on his motorbike. The python squeezed Mr. Kosnan to death.

You get the idea, right? Our text provides another possible candidate: Hosea. Read the headlines: "Prophet Marries Prostitute." We know that anyone wanting to retain a place in the gene pool is going to marry someone who will give him children, but Hosea goes another direction. Obedient to God's call to take "*a wife of whoredom*" (Hosea 1:2), he marries the prostitute Gomer, and she bears three children, none of them fathered by Hosea (2:4-5).

The names of these kids are descriptive and depressing. Jezreel, the first son, means “may God sow,” a reference to God’s intention to destroy the dynasty of King Jehu (ancestor of the current king, Jeroboam II) as punishment for the faithlessness of God’s people. From Jezreel we learn that there are consequences for our actions. The daughter's name, Lo-ruhamah, means "not to be pitied." This child would be a living reminder that God no longer had sympathy for the people of Israel because of their sins. From Lo-ruhamah we learn that even God’s patience has limits. The second son's name, Lo-ammi, means "not my people." The boy would be a stark sign of the breaking of the covenant relationship between God and Israel (1:4-9). From Lo-ammi we learn that God may disown the people if they will not follow God’s ways and laws.

God would no longer be played for a fool. God was tired of the faithless behavior of Israel. God stood ready to break off the relationship. Now, with Hosea, in a last-ditch and desperate attempt to turn the peoples’ hearts and minds around, God and Hosea act in a Darwinian Award-winning manner. The prophet marries a prostitute! Yet, by this action God demonstrates that it is not God, but Israel that has a lock on the stupid awards.

Want to talk about destructive behavior? Consider the Gomer-Israel model. Rather than returning to the comfort and security of her covenant relationship with Hosea (God), Gomer (Israel) consistently sneaks out of the house and into the streets looking for worldly paramours. Gomer knew she had a good man back at home: Hosea remained faithful, even when Gomer did not. Gomer knew that Hosea had her best interests at heart: he provided for her even when she continued to do the wrong thing. Gomer could not fail to notice that what she was doing was wrong and hurtful to Hosea, yet she could not stop. The story of Hosea and his unfaithful wife is sad, depressing, and seemingly hopeless. Both appear trapped in this loveless association with no hope of salvation.

We, like Gomer, find ourselves unable to resist the lure of shiny objects, bad habits, and behaviors that are destructive to what we love, not to speak of those whom we love. We do stupid, thoughtless, careless, hurtful things and find ourselves looking back on relationships – with God or with others – that were once rare and radiant, but which are now ruinously ruptured. We’ve gone so far astray that there seems no hope of rescuing or redeeming the relationships.

Except for God’s grace. The sanctified soap opera of our text is an illustration of our unfaithfulness and of God's faithfulness. The prophet predicts that Israel will suffer public shame like a harlot, because they have committed adultery with the gods of Canaan. But God will lure Israel back and renew God’s relationship with the people, taking Israel as God’s wife "in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy" (2:19).

Thankfully, this isn't Darwinian, it's divine. God does not react as did a Darwin Award winner from Buenos Aires. During a heated marital dispute, a 25-year-old man picked up his 20-year-old wife and threw her off their eighth-floor apartment balcony. To his dismay, she became tangled in the power lines below. He immediately leapt from the balcony and fell toward his wife. Maybe he was angrily trying to finish the job, or maybe he was remorsefully hoping to rescue her? We will never know because he did not accomplish either goal. He plunged to his death. Fortunately, the woman managed to swing over to a

nearby balcony and was saved. Neither God nor Hosea tried to annihilate Israel-Gomer when she turned away. Instead, God reached out to Israel and received her back. Rejection is never the last act of the divine drama. God's goal is always reconciliation.

So, what are the stupid and self-destructive things we do to distance ourselves from God? How do we act like Gomer, distancing and disrespecting Hosea-God? The accusations God makes against Israel sound very familiar to modern ears. God alleges that the people are unfaithful and disloyal, and that they have no knowledge of God or God's ways anymore (4:1). God indicts the people for swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and adultery; and God blames the people because *"bloodshed follows bloodshed"* (4:2). God alleges that *"the land mourns"* because creation is abused (4:3). God reproaches the people because they follow false gods, consulting wood and stone idols with *"a spirit of whoredom...forsaking their God"* (4:12).

The language is blunt, because God is angry, disheartened, and frustrated by the peoples' faithlessness. The people are called to account for their actions. We are called to account, too. All those things which God lays against Israel are still things we do today. We are unfaithful and disloyal to God, preferring to go our own way rather than follow God's way, which is difficult. We still swear, lie, murder, steal, betray one another, and inflict bloodshed upon bloodshed. We still use up the earth as if we owned it, forgetting that we are its caretakers. We follow the false gods of wealth and power and fame to our destruction. Clearly, if there were such a thing as a divine gene pool, we would be doing our part to keep it pure by removing ourselves from it through our sins.

God says through Hosea, *"You have plowed wickedness, you have reaped injustice, you have eaten the fruit of lies. Because you have trusted in your power...the tumult of war shall rise against your people, and all your fortresses shall be destroyed"* (10:13-14). God will not let such behavior persist. God cannot let such injustice prevail. So, judgment will fall upon the people in the form of outside powers who invade and conquer and drag the people into captivity. Hosea is only the first of the minor prophets to foretell of the domination of Israel by her neighbors Assyria (722 BC) and Babylon (587 BC).

Hoping to forestall this cataclysm, Hosea calls on the people to repent: *"Come, let us return to the LORD; for it is [God] who has torn, and [God] will heal us; [God] has struck down, and [God] will bind us up"* (6:1). Hosea pleads with the people to repent, not because they are worthy, but because God is faithful. God's ultimate objective is restoration, not judgment.

In the last chapter, Hosea encourages the people: *"Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity"* (14:1). He urges the people to admit their mistakes before God and to beg God's mercy, promising that they will not be disappointed. Hosea's prophecy ends with God speaking of the people: *"I will heal their disloyalty, I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them...They shall again live beneath my shadow, they shall flourish as a garden; they shall blossom like the vine, their fragrance shall be like the wine of Lebanon"* (14:4, 7). God anticipates a time when the people will return to God, follow God's ways, do God's will, and be restored by the God who loves them.

Hosea's story sounds wretched and sad upon first reading. We pity him for being saddled with an unfaithful wife. We criticize him for taking her back again and again. But then we remember, that we are that unfaithful wife betraying and disappointing God, and we are grateful that God takes us back again and again, loving us, restoring us, redeeming us. By returning to the house of God, we Gomers stand the best chance of finding safety, growth, comfort, and ultimate happiness.

As Christians, we look to Jesus as the fulfillment of God's promise of restoration and redemption. The God who spoke words of comfort and renewal to a rebellious people, is the same God who came in human form to die on a cross, cancelling out our sins so that we might live anew in God's way. Hosea's story is a cautionary tale for those who seek to do their own things and go their own way. Hosea's story is also a persuasive case for the grace and mercy of God toward God's people. Jesus' death and resurrection made it possible for us to leave our sins behind and to return to God with full confidence of God's acceptance and love. When we act in ways that lead to death and destruction, God finds new ways to bring life and light. With God, the survival of the fittest is assured!

Prayer: Compassionate God, we thank You for Your word and the truth it contains. Thank You for using the life of the prophet Hosea to paint such a graphic picture of Your relationship with Israel and of Your grace towards her and toward us. Thank You that in Your wrath You remembered mercy. We pray that from this day forward we would resist the enticements of this world system and look to Jesus day by day and moment by moment, doing only those things that honor Your name, to Your praise and glory. This we ask in Jesus name, AMEN.

**Sources:** Northcutt, Wendy. *The Darwin Awards: Evolution in Action* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 2000); and <https://darwinawards.com/> site visited May 6, 2019.