



Sermon Transcript

Easter Sunday
April 16, 2017

God's Persistent Love
Return to the Lord
Hosea 13:12-14 and 14:19

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on April 16, 2017 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio copy of the sermon on CD is available by request at (860) 563-8286. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text

Hosea 13:12-14

¹²The iniquity of Ephraim is bound up; his sin is kept in store. ¹³The pangs of childbirth come for him, but he is an unwise son, for at the right time he does not present himself at the opening of the womb. ¹⁴I shall ransom them from the power of Sheol; I shall redeem them from Death. O Death, where are your plagues? O Sheol, where is your sting? Compassion is hidden from my eyes.

Hosea 14:1-9

¹Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity. ²Take with you words and return to the LORD; say to him, "Take away all iniquity; accept what is good, and we will pay with bulls the vows of our lips. ³ Assyria shall not save us; we will not ride on horses; and we will say no more, 'Our God,' to the work of our hands. In you the orphan finds mercy."

⁴ I will heal their apostasy; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them.

⁵ I will be like the dew to Israel; he shall blossom like the lily; he shall take root like the trees of Lebanon; ⁶ his shoots shall spread out; his beauty shall be like the olive, and his fragrance like Lebanon. ⁷ They shall return and dwell beneath my shadow; they shall flourish like the grain; they shall blossom like the vine; their fame shall be like the wine of Lebanon. ⁸ O Ephraim, what have I to do with idols? It is I who answer and look after you. I am like an evergreen cypress; from me comes your fruit.

⁹ Whoever is wise, let him understand these things; whoever is discerning, let him know them; for the ways of the LORD are right, and the upright walk in them, but transgressors stumble in them.

Introduction

It is obvious why we are here this morning. There is no question as to why there is something a little extra special about this Sunday. At the beginning of the worship service, we acknowledged what it is that draws us here this morning. It is that wonderful declaration of hope, “He has risen! He has risen, indeed!” If this is true, it is more than an event that marks the pages of history. Rather, this is an event that marks us.

I know for the skeptic here this morning, it seems rather naïve to believe that someone has risen from the dead. And yet, it is this event that sparked the beginning of Christianity. There would be no Christianity or church apart from the message of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. This was the message of the early church. In fact, the resurrection of Jesus was an event equally surprising and unexpected to those who witnessed it. N. T. Wright says, “The early Christians did not invent the empty tomb and the meeting or sightings of the risen Jesus . . . Nobody was expecting this kind of thing.”¹ And yet, here we are affirming as true what has been passed down to us.

Tim Keller says that when he preaches on Easter, he appeals to the skeptic by saying that at the very least you should want the resurrection to be true. He recognizes that “most people care deeply about justice for the poor, alleviating hunger and disease, and caring for the environment. And yet many believe that the material world was caused by accident and that the world and everything in it will eventually simply burn up in the death of the sun. . . They don’t realize their own worldview undermines any motivation to make the world a better place. Why sacrifice for the needs of others if in the end nothing we do will make any difference? But if the resurrection of Jesus happened, that means there’s infinite hope and reason to pour ourselves out for the needs of the world.”² It means this world really does matter. It also means that you matter.

In the very last letter we have from the hand of the Apostle Paul, we hear him say this to his protégé, Timothy. In 2 Timothy 2:8 he says to him, “*Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead.*” The reason he says this to Timothy is because everything we believe hinges on this event. And it is not just an event to be commemorated on Easter Sunday. Rather, it is an event that tells us something about God and about ourselves. In order to understand what the resurrection tells us about God and ourselves, you need to couple it with the cross. These two events go together.

Here is what the cross of Jesus and the resurrection tells me about myself. It tells me that my sin is a bigger issue than what I tend to think it is. I know that talk of being

sinner is not a popular thing these days. And yet, Fleming Rutledge says, “There is no way of taking the Bible seriously unless we are willing to entertain its presuppositions about sin.”³ This whole thing we celebrate this morning, doesn’t make sense if we don’t come to a clear understanding of our sin. We have a major problem. It is sin and death.

Consider the insight we gain from the cartoon characters, *Calvin and Hobbes*

Calvin: I’m getting nervous about Christmas

Hobbes: You’re worried you haven’t been good?

Calvin: That’s just the question. It’s all relative. What’s Santa’s definition? How good do you have to be to qualify as good? I haven’t killed anybody. That’s good, right? I haven’t committed any felonies. I didn’t start any wars. . . . Wouldn’t you say that’s pretty good? Wouldn’t you say I should get lots of presents?

Hobbes: But maybe good is more than the absence of bad.

Calvin: See, that’s what worries me!⁴

See, we don’t grasp the gravity of our sin. Sin is far more than simply “wrongdoing.” Rather, sin and death is a power at work in me. Paul says in Romans 5:21 that sin is something that “*reigned*” in us. C. S. Lewis put it this way, “Fallen man is not simply an imperfect creature who needs improvement; he is a rebel who must lay down his arms.”⁵ This sin that is at work in us separates us from the eternal love of God. Think of it this way. If the cross is the remedy for our sin, then our sin is bigger than we tend to think it is. Fleming Rutledge asks, “What sort of predicament are you and I in that we should require the crucifixion of the Son of God?”⁶ We are in deeper than we tend to think.

And so here is what we discover about God through the cross of Jesus and the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. First of all, God doesn’t take our sin lightly. John Piper says this about our sin. “Sin is not small, because it is not against a small Sovereign. The seriousness of an insult rises with the dignity of the one insulted. The Creator of the universe is infinitely worthy of respect and admiration and loyalty. Therefore, failure to love him is not trivial—it is treason. It defames God and destroy human happiness.”⁷ So our problem is not just that we think little of our sin. But we also have a very weak and small view of God. God is much bigger than you think.

But here is what we are so excited about this morning. The cross of Jesus and the resurrection of Jesus, doesn’t just tell us about our sin and how God feels about our sin. Through these events we discover that God’s will to redeem us overcomes all of our past failure. In other words, God is able to heal us. This is the message of Easter. This is the message of the Bible. This is the message of Hosea.

Remembering Hosea

As a church family, this Easter season we have been walking through the Old Testament book of Hosea. Today we finish this seven-week journey and I am amazed at how well this final chapter fits with the message of Easter. In his commentary on Hosea, J. Andrew Dearman summarizes the final chapter, Hosea 14, by saying that when future generations of Israel look back on this book and how it ends they will see “a future in which past failures and their consequences are overcome by God’s will to redeem.”⁸ I can’t think of a better way to describe what we see in the cross of Jesus and the resurrection we celebrate this morning. Here we are in 2017 and as we look back on these events, we clearly see how God has overcome our past failures and their consequences and how it was clearly God’s will to overcome them and to redeem us.

If you haven’t been part of our conversation to this point, here are a few things to help you get your bearings straight. Hosea was a prophet. A prophet was someone who came to the people with a word from God. And often that word from God was a call to return to God. Hosea brought a word from God to the northern kingdom of the ten tribes of Israel and he warned them of God’s coming judgment. And indeed, God’s word through the prophet came true, and they were invaded by the Assyrians and carried off into captivity. This week I was down at the Yale Museum of Art and I love the room that houses artifacts of antiquity. And there was a large stone relief depicting in cuneiform writing the military conquests of King Assurnasirpal II, King of Assyria. His reign was a little over 100 years prior to Hosea. Here I was, up close and personal with an artifact predating this book and the detail of the artifact spoke to how advanced the Assyrian Empire was. They were the super power of the day and they were advanced in their military might and in 722 BC they swallowed up the ten tribes of Israel, bringing an end to their kingdom. Why? Hosea tells us how Israel turned away from God. Again, we tend to think too lightly of our sin and we tend to think too little of God. But the testimony of this book is that when we turn away from God there is consequence.

This ancient book of Hosea is quite relevant for our time and our western culture. In our culture we are becoming more secular and less religious. The trend is so noticeable that a lot of articles have been written about it and surveys indicate that the largest demographic shift in our culture is among those who don’t affiliate with any religion. In fact, the region with the highest percentage of such people in the United States happens to be in New England. If you will, there is this cultural turning away from God and my concern is that there is always consequence to that. If nothing else, there is a hole in the heart if God is not at the starting point and at the center of life.

Lord Kenneth Clark, one of Great Britain's prominent art historians and authors, and the producer of the BBC television series *Civilization* is a secularist and yet he tells of a time when he had what he calls a "religious experience" while living in a villa in France. He writes, "I had a religious experience. It took place in the church of San Lorenzo, but did not seem to be connected with the harmonious beauty of the architecture. I can only say that for a few minutes, my whole being was radiated by a kind of heavenly joy, far more intense than anything I had experienced before. This state of mind lasted for several minutes . . . But wonderful as it was, it posed an awkward problem in terms of action. My life was far from blameless. I would have to reform. My family would think I was going mad, and perhaps after all it was a delusion . . . I was too deeply embedded in the world to change course. But I had 'felt the finger of God' I am quite sure."⁹ You get the sense from his brief experience with something transcendent beyond this material world that it filled him with a fullness and a joy that he couldn't find anywhere else. And yet at the same time, did you notice how this encounter with God made him keenly aware of his own inadequacies? He confessed, "My life was far from blameless. I would have to reform." And so, sadly, he chose to continue to walk away from God and he describes this decision to walk away from God with a sense of loss.

May I tell you, that what we are experiencing in the West with the rise of secularism, is not the common experience around the world. In fact according to a 2015 Pew study the trends show that world wide religion is on the rise and secularism is on the decline. In East Asia, by 2020, it is estimated that the number of Christians since 1970 will go from 11.4 million to 171.1 million.¹⁰ In Africa, by 2020, it is estimated that the number of Christians since 1910 will go from 12 million to 630 million.¹¹ Eric Kauffman, a Canadian academic and a secularist, wrote about these trends in a book *Shall the Religious Inherit the Earth?* When he was asked what secularists could offer to turn the tide, he said that religion has something a secularist doesn't have. He said, "religion does provide that enchantment, that meaning and emotion, and in our current moment we [secularists] lack that."¹² That is the consequence of stepping away from God. Only God can fill this God-shaped vacuum of wonder and the quest for meaning in our lives. There is consequence in turning away from God.

It has been our experience that reading through Hosea is like watching a tennis match. As you follow the "ball of thought" at one point your head is turned to one side to hear about God's judgment against Israel for turning away from God. The past several weeks we had to look at things about God that aren't very popular with our contemporary version of God. But when you look at Jesus dying a cruel death on the cross, and if you accept that his death is the punishment for sin, then you must come to the conclusion

that God is a God of justice and he judges sin. That is the message of the cross. God has judged our sin through the death of Jesus. But then the next thing you see in Hosea is the ball hit back over the net where we hear of God's love for Israel and his desire to woo her back to himself. Back and forth it goes between God's judgment and God's love. In Hosea 13-14 we have the final volley across the net and the great thing about this book is that like the empty tomb it is a book that ends with the ball on the side of hope for the one who returns to God. It is a book that ends on the side of God's persistent love.

Before we venture into Hosea 14, let's take one final look into the side of the court that speaks of God's judgment found in Hosea 13. In Hosea 13:12 it says, "*The iniquity of Ephraim is bound up; his sin is kept in store.*" It is a sobering thing to know that all of life is lived in full view of God. In Psalm 33:13-15 it says of God, "*The LORD looks down from heaven; he sees all the children of men . . . and observes all their deeds.*" He knows you. He knows what is done in the light and he knows what is done in the secret places. He knows your thoughts and the attitude of your heart. In Revelation 20 we read of a final day of judgment and it is likened to a day when the books are brought out and opened and it says in Revelation 20:12, "*and the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done.*" And so here in Hosea 13 the sin of Israel had been "*kept in store*" and their day of reckoning has come.

Hosea 13:14 is probably best read as two rhetorical questions and the answer to these questions is a resounding, "No!" "*Shall I ransom them from the power of Sheol?* (Sheol is a word used for the grave or the underworld, the place of the dead.) The answer is, "No!" "*Shall I redeem them from Death?*" Again, the answer is "No!" "*O Death, where are your plagues? O Sheol, where is your sting? Compassion is hidden from my eyes.*" And so, as we have seen throughout this book, we have a final declaration of the sure judgment of God upon his people. It is a sobering reminder that the God of the Bible is not a God to be trifled with and that he is holy. When you hear Jesus cry from the cross, "*My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me?*", you can't help but wince and shudder at the thought of what it must be like to have God turn against you. It would be a very dark book if Hosea ended in Hosea 13.

Now when some of us read this verse, we are also reminded that Hosea is not the final book in the Bible or in God's story. The words of Hosea 13:14 are very familiar to us because Paul uses them in a very different way in 1 Corinthians 15. In this chapter, he is speaking of the resurrection of Jesus Christ after the fact and this time death and judgment do not have the final say. In fact, we can hear Paul taking these words and flipping them around and actually taunting sin and death when he says in 1 Corinthians

15:55, “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” And so when you put the whole Bible together, you discover that it is God’s will, through Jesus, to overcome our past failures and their consequences and to redeem our lives.

With that, we come into Hosea 14 and we discover that God’s will to redeem us from all our past failures and the consequences of our failures is also the message of the book of Hosea. Because God is God, he is able to redeem us from our past. From Hosea 14, I would like to give you four “R’s” that will put you on the road to a life that is redeemed from your past. It is the resurrection of Jesus that secure these things for us.

Four “R’s” on the Road to Redemption

Return to the Lord: In Hosea 14:1, we read this wonderful invitation from God. “Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity.” Clearly we learn from the end of this verse that it was their sin that had taken them away from God. If ever there was someone who had a long protracted checkered past, it was Israel. The laundry list of their sin is clearly articulated throughout this book. Over and over again we hear of their idolatry, how they worshiped gods that were not gods at all. When all along it was God who had redeemed them out of Egypt and graciously provided for them. But they rejected God and their idolatry is likened to spiritual adultery. All of a sudden God is using terms that we can understand.

Consequently, by shaking free from the restraining presence of God in their lives, nothing became sacred anymore. Sexual immorality was rampant among them. We rehearsed the political corruption that existed at this time. We noted how four of the last six kings of Israel were removed from the throne through assassination. We saw how religious leaders were complicit in the shedding of blood. All the institutions that hold a society together were filled with corruption. For years, God sent his prophets to call them back to God, but they refused to turn from their ways and now judgment has come. Is there any hope to offer them?

It is here we see this wonderful invitation of God to his people. “Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God.” If God can say this to Israel, after all the “water under the bridge” of their past, don’t you think he can say that to you? In fact he does say that to you. That is the message that comes out of the death and resurrection of Jesus. I like how Paul describes his calling in Acts 26:18. He says that God sent him to open the eyes of people

“so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God that they may receive forgiveness of sins” That statement assumes you have checkered past. The “water under the bridge of your life” is not too deep for God to forgive you. But you need to return to him and he will be found waiting for you with open arms.

Repent of your sin: The second thing you need to do is repent of your sin. In verse 2 he says, *“Take with you words and return to the LORD.”* You might be asking, how do I return to the Lord? It starts with the confession your mouth. It starts with the words you utter. This confession is laid out for you in the rest of the verse. *“Take away all iniquity.”* There needs to be this recognition of the sin that reigns and resides inside of you. There needs to be this humble act of contrition that is willing to acknowledge and confess your sin. Gary Smith observes that we don’t hear much about repentance anymore. I think the reason is because to preach repentance requires you to embrace the Bible’s assessment of your sin. And yet, Smith says, “Preaching repentance is necessary since there is no other way to begin a relationship with God.”¹² You don’t begin a relationship with God by trying to clean up your act. You begin by telling God that “your act” is not very clean.

Too many times I have heard people say, “I can’t come to God because of some of the stuff I have done.” People have told me that it would be dangerous for them to come to church because the lightning would strike the minute they stepped into the building. Can I tell you what is positive about statements like that. At least you know your sin. But what you don’t realize is that the cross and the resurrection of Jesus is God’s guarantee to you that it is his will to redeem you from the failures of your past. There is not a person in this room who is worthy to stand before God on their own standing. You can’t get a foot in the door with God if you don’t start with the confession, “God have mercy on me a sinner.” So don’t think your checkered past is too checkered for God to handle. He is in the business of forgiving an honest confession. That is what he means by, *“accept what is good, and we will pay with bulls the vows of our lips.”* A good confession of repentance is a confession that comes from the heart and is expressed through the mouth. Paul says in Romans 10:10, *“For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.”*

Rely on Jesus: The first “R” is the invitation of God to “Return” to him. The second “R” is to “Repent” by confessing your sin and your desire to turn away from it. But when you turn away from your sin, where do you turn to? You turn to Jesus. So the third “R” is “Rely on Jesus.” Put your trust in Jesus. Look what it says in verse 3. *“Assyria shall not save us; we will not ride on horses; and we will say no more, ‘Our God,’ to the work of*

our hands.” What he is saying here to Israel is that this is what you used to put your trust in before you turned to God. They sought alliances with Assyria for security. They put their trust in gods they actually fashioned with their own hands and they sought the gods of Baal to bring rain upon the land and to meet their needs. But to return to the Lord is to rely on God and not the work of your hands or in nations that come and go.

And so he says, *“in you the orphan finds mercy.”* I find this an interesting statement because at the beginning of the book we hear this jarring statement that Israel is no longer God’s people. He says of Israel in Hosea 1:9, *“You are not my people and I am not your God.”* Where then is their hope then? Well this is the God who gives mercy to the orphan. He gives mercy to the one on the outside who humbles himself in repentance and relies on Jesus. Peter picks up on this in when he says about us *who have been called out of darkness into his marvelous light* in 1 Peter 2:10 that *“Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”*

When we turn away from our sin in repentance, we then turn in faith to Jesus. Why Jesus? Well what are we doing this morning? He is the Son of God who took our sin upon himself and he paid for our sin through his blood. Three days later, he rose from the dead, indicating that he has conquered sin and death and to all who turn in faith to Jesus, we are forgiven. Paul says in Romans 5:1, *“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

Renewed by God: The final “R” is really something God does to us. When we “return to God” by “repenting of our sin” and “relying on what Jesus has done for us on the cross and through the resurrection” God renews us. He makes us like a tree that takes root and bears fruit. It flourishes and blossoms. I will let Scripture speak for itself here, *“I will heal their apostasy; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them. I will be like the dew to Israel; he shall blossom like the lily; he shall take root like the trees of Lebanon; his shoots shall spread out; his beauty shall be like the olive, and his fragrance like Lebanon. They shall return and dwell beneath my shadow; they shall flourish like the grain; they shall blossom like the vine; their fame shall be like the wine of Lebanon.”*

In other words, in finding God through Jesus, you are renewed and you find true life that transcends the issues of life. Listen to how Jeremiah puts it in Jeremiah 17:7-8. *“Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. He shall be like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not*

cease to bear fruit.” In other words, if you find God, you find all that you need. I feel sad for Lord Kenneth Clark who at one time felt “the finger of God” but chose not to return—repent—rely—and be renewed.

Conclusion

The last verse in the book is an application for the book of Hosea and an application to the cross and the resurrection of Jesus. After all that we have looked at and after all that is said and done, you need to decide what you will do with this Jesus. Hosea says, “*Whoever is wise, let him understand these things; whoever is discerning, let him know them; for the ways of the LORD are right, and the upright walk in them, but transgressors stumble in them.*” You either receive what God offers you through Jesus or you reject it. But what you do with Jesus makes all the difference in the world, in this life and the life to come.

I said at the beginning of the sermon that the resurrection of Jesus isn’t something that just marks our calendars. It is something that marks us. Because he lives and rose from the dead, he is Savior and Lord and he can forgive your sin. The resurrection of Jesus declares to us that God’s will to redeem us overcomes all of our past failures and the consequence of our failures. So . . . Return to the Lord. Repent of your Sin. Rely on Jesus who died and rose again. Be Renewed by God and his grace!

¹N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Fortress, 203) 707

²Tim Keller, *The Reason for God* (New York: Dutton, 2008) 211-212

³Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015) 168

⁴*Calvin and Hobbes* comic strip by Bill Watterson, December 23, 1990

⁵C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Harper and Row, 1952) 59

⁶Rutledge, 200

⁷John Piper *The Passion of Jesus Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004) 21

⁸J. Andrew Dearman, *The Book of Hosea* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010) 334

⁹Quoted in Stuart Babbage, “Lord Kenneth Clark’s Encounter with the ‘Motions of Grace,’” *Christianity Today*, June 8, 1979, p. 28

¹⁰Timothy Keller *Making Sense of God* (New York: Viking Press, 2016) 26

¹¹*Ibid.*, 26

¹²*Ibid.*, 26

¹³Gary Smith *Hosea, Amos, Micah : The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001) 200

