

I've been preaching through Hosea and in our text today, chapter 4, Hosea is particularly calling out the priests of his day. Does such a scripture apply to us? How? Well, Peter had something to say about the matter as we just read moments ago. Peter, Jesus' right hand man, inspired by God, said that Christians are priests. So it begs the question?

**What is a priest?** A priest is someone who speaks to God on behalf of the people. Priests are usually set apart in a special way to be distinct from others. Priests usually offer up a sacrifice to appease their God. Priests act as conduits of the blessing of their God.

Jesus was a priest. But he wasn't born into a priestly family. He didn't wear holy clothing. He didn't slaughter animals in ritual sacrifice. He didn't act holier than thou. But he was a priest according to the ancient order of Melchizedek, which means, king of righteousness. Jesus spoke to God on behalf of people saying things like "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." Jesus was set apart in a special way because he never sinned. He offered up the perfect sacrifice, once for all, his own divine body. And by doing so he conveyed more blessing than he ever had through healings, feedings, and miracles. In his death on the cross, Jesus acted as the perfect high priest and he also acted as the spotless sacrificial lamb. When he died on the cross it is said that the veil between the holy of holies and the rest of the temple was torn in two. This signified that Christ had accomplished access to God for his people.

**Who are his people?** God's people are all those who believe in him and trust in his name alone for salvation. When his people trust him to be

their Lord and Savior, they gain access to the presence of God; they become priests. So everyone who believes in the Lord Jesus Christ has been made a priest. This is what 1 Peter is talking about when Peter says to the church “you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” If we found our lives on Christ, the cornerstone, then we are part of the holy priesthood. We are set apart. We should not cherish sin anymore. We offer a sacrifice of praise to God, our bodies. We intercede in prayer on behalf of other people, asking God to save and forgive them too. And we become a conduit of blessing to the nations as we obey all that the Lord has taught us.

So if you are a Christian, you are a priest. Not a priest like the ancient Levites by birthright. Not a priest like the Catholics according to vows of ordination. You are a priest because you are a Christian according to scripture. And if you are a priest then what Hosea has to say to priests has implications for you. But even though Christians are priests...

**America is not Israel.** We can get into trouble by seeing no connection between us as Christians and the people of God in the Old Testament. But we can also get into trouble by seeing too much of a connection between us as 21<sup>st</sup> century America and ancient Israel. Israel was founded by God by divine choosing. America was founded by men. Israel’s guiding document was written by the finger of God. America’s guiding document was written by men. Citizenship in Israel was determined by keeping covenant with God “I will be your God and you will be my people.” Citizenship in the United States of America is not, and never was, determined in such a way. The offices of ancient Israel were prophet, priest and king. The offices of the U.S.A. are judge,

congressman, and president, very different. Israel, at the time of Hosea was full of worship of idols of wood and stone. We still have idols but they are more flesh and blood, American idols.

So in a very real sense, when we read Hosea's prophecy, he's not talking to us as Americans. God was speaking through Hosea to the northern kingdom on the brink of their ruin and exile. You are neither in Israel, nor even in a kingdom. Your nation is not about to be taken into exile for covenant-breaking. But as you listen to God speaking to the priests of Israel there are implications for you.

**Overhearing someone else's scolding:** (Illustration) Do any of you have siblings? A brother or sister? Have you ever overheard them getting scolded and disciplined? We are like a younger brother or sister overhearing our parent's lecture to our disobedient older sibling in the other room. You're not being yelled at. But there are certainly implications for you. Don't do what they did. There are terrible consequences for sinning in a similar way. So listen to God's word knowing that America is not God's chosen nation but that we Christians are God's chosen nation, his holy priesthood called out from the world.

**Prayer of Illumination:** Would you pray with me before we read God's Holy Word. Make your word fresh today God. Even though you spoke these words thousands of years ago to people thousands of miles away, speak to us, here, today. Speak to us today through your preached word. Powerfully convict your priests to pursue righteousness. Let judgment begin with the household of God. Give us ears of faith this morning. In the name of our great high priest, the Word of God, king of righteousness, Yah is salvation, Jesus. Amen.

**Read Hosea 4** You can read along with me in your copy of God's word.

**Controversy.** It's something we look for on the evening news or in the morning paper but not when we go to church. Controversy, it means a big argument. It's something that happens to celebrities, political candidates, and televangelists not with everyday church folk. And yet that's what we have before us today, controversy. Not with a celebrity but with the people of God. Not to be talked about on the news, but to be talked about right here in church. Our text says "Hear the word of the Lord, O children of Israel, for the Lord has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land." The controversy was that although they were supposedly God's holy, set apart people, they looked just like the nonbelievers around them.

The controversy was: they called themselves God's people but they didn't know Him or His law.

Look at verse 1.

Our text goes on to say "there's no knowledge of God in the land." How could that be? This is Israel we're talking about. The nation of God. They have all the right laws. They have all the right foundations. They have God's people in all the leadership positions. And yet God can say of them that there is no knowledge of God in the land!?! They would say to one another "As the Lord lives" all the time and yet they wouldn't know of whom they spoke?! They would kill their own animals for God and yet God can say 'They don't know me.'

**Knowledge of God**, what is it? It's a personal knowing. It's a knowing and loving. There was no separation between the heart and mind in Hebrew, which is physiologically more correct than how we talk about love. For we say that you love with your heart. Do you love with your heart? What is the organ you love with? Is it not the mind? I know we

never see brains on Valentine's cards, but it's true. Scripture is assuming that you love with your mind. That knowledge of God is love of God. What if instead of saying "I love you," we said "I know you." If you think that I'm stretching the use of the word here, understand that the word yada in Hebrew, translated 'to know' is also translated to mean intimate loving relation. There was plenty of outward allegiance to God and no intimate knowledge of God. That was the case in ancient Israel. Is that the case here today? That's the question that a little brother or sister listening at the door should ask. Is there intimate knowledge of God in my life or am I merely culturally a Christian, outwardly a Christian?

**Do I love the Lord?** (application) Is there even the littlest bit of love for God that makes me want to know him more and more? Do I love Jesus? And knowledge of who Jesus is has a big part to play in how you truthfully answer that question. If you think that you love Jesus but what you mean is...I love all gods. That's not loving Jesus. You don't know Jesus if you think he's just like every other religious founder. Or if you love Jesus because, in your mind, you love everybody. If you love Jesus because he was a good teacher, an effective community organizer, an anti-establishment demagogue then you don't know Jesus and you certainly don't love Jesus.

That's like me speaking of my wife in a way that doesn't describe her accurately "I love my wife Annie, she's a social butterfly/party animal. I love her cute curly hair and sparkling blue eyes. She's an outspoken political junkie/business maven." None of these things describe my wife. And if that's how I professed my love to her, it would be offensive because it would prove how much I do not know her. And if I do not know her, I cannot truly love her. Do you know God? Or have you been

satisfied to create an image of God in your mind that is totally different from who he says he is. Know God. He has revealed himself to you in his word. He desires to know you and be known by you. Love him enough to get to know him. Know him enough to truly love him. He will give you the love. He will give you the knowledge. Faith so much as a mustard seed is enough. He will turn that faith into knowledge that fills the garden, that even overruns the walls.

Speaking of mustard seeds and gardens, we need to talk about how God's people's sin affects the environment. Look at Hosea 4 verses 2 and 3. "there is swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed. Therefore the land mourns, and all who dwell in it languish, and also the beasts of the field and the birds of the heavens, and even the fish of the sea are taken away."

**The relationship between sin and the environment,** The prophet is alleging that personal sin is devastating the environment. Sin is the reason why the land mourns, why people languish, why the beasts, birds, and fish perish. That's different than what we're told today. We're either told that there's no big environmental danger, climates have been changing and species have been going extinct from the dawn of time. OR if we're told there is great environmental danger it is in no way related to our transgression of God's laws pertaining to relationships between men and women.

But Hosea was saying that there was environmental devastation. The bible says there was a human reason for why the beasts, birds, and fish were dying! Transgression of God's laws. Lack of personal holiness.

Private and not-so-private sins were leading to the devastation of creation. Our sins have all sorts of ecological implications.

God knew that people would want to argue about this back in Hosea's time. That's why he says "Let no one contend and let none accuse." You see, immediately we want to start pointing fingers. If the country is struggling we want to look across the aisle to find someone to accuse. If our church is failing, people look for someone else to blame. "For with you is my contention O priest. You shall stumble by day; the prophet also shall stumble with you by night;" Here Hosea is saying that even the religious conservatives amongst God's people were filled with sin. God is saying to the religious leaders, you are not immune from blame. In fact it's because of you that the people are struggling as they are.

They'd forgotten the law of God. **When God's people neglect his word why should they expect their secular leaders to pay it any heed?**

When we neglect God's word why should we expect our secular leaders to pay it any heed?

**Have we forgotten the law of God?** (application) Have we experienced destruction in our lives, in our families, in our church because we have cared little for knowing God? The consequences for forgetting Him are breathtaking. "I will destroy your mother. I reject you from being a priest to me. I will forget your children." Woe! Oh may it not be so people of God. Let us weep and wail, fast and pray, and renew our covenant with the Lord. Let us pursue knowledge of God more than knowledge of any other earthly thing. Let us take up, read, remember, meditate, memorize the word of God. Remember, God was saying this to people called by his name. Fear God, people of God. Do not think Him one to be trifled with. Do not think him one to be taken advantage of. Do not think Him a fool, fooled by your show of religion when your

heart is an open grave filled with malice, malaise and deceit. If you look into the shadow of your heart and see no love of God, no true knowledge of God, a neglect of his word, and a blithe forgetfulness of his commands, this message is for you. Even if you call yourself a Christian, even if you bring your offering to the Lord, even if you use your gifts to serve the Lord, if you have no love for Him God will leave you alone. The Lord speaks through Hosea when he says “Reject knowing me and I will reject you.” But there is grace for those who hear

For those of you that when you look in your heart you see a struggle, you see a faltering faith. You see a trust in God’s word but a sporadic dependence on Him. If you see deep down a love for the true God of the scripture despite a questioning of your circumstances. If you see a lack of personal righteousness and so turn and take Jesus’ righteousness. Do not fear. Though you only have faith so much as a mustard seed, though you only have fire enough to be a smoldering wick, though you have the strength of a broken reed, God will not break you, he will not quench you, he will sustain you and grow you. Perfect love casts out fear. In Christ, he calls us friend. Hallelujah. We obey not out of fear but out of thankfulness for his remembrance of us, his salvation, and his commitment to us and our children.

Verse 7 not only did the priests sin more as they increased in power, and influence, they fed on the sin of the people. They wanted the people to sin. They were greedy for iniquity. Why! Well, whenever God’s people sinned, they were to bring a sacrifice to the priests. The priests would kill it, burn parts of it and eat the rest. So they began to love it when the people sinned big. The more the people sinned, the better they’d eat. A requirement that was meant for conviction of sin,

that was meant to provide for God's servants had become horribly twisted.

Religious authorities still struggle with the same stuff today. Some leaders in God's church would love for you to continually feel very guilty so that you will bring in a big offering to assuage your guilt. Sin big, give big. But God hates this kind of superficial religion. That's why he says in another place "I desire mercy and not sacrifice." If that's your motivation for sacrifice, don't bother. If you're giving out of guilt. Don't bother. It won't suffice and it corrupts the priesthood.

**Where do you go for answers?** Google, Bing, Wikipedia, Ehow? Verse 12a My people inquire of a piece of wood, and their walking staff gives them oracles. Wow. Dogs like sticks but even a dog knows not to ask the stick any questions. My kids were interested in finding the best walking stick on our hike up the billy goat trail a couple weeks ago. But even they aren't so simple as to pretend that a stick could give them traffic updates on the trail ahead, or think that they found a walking stick that could give them career advice. I have nothing against wood and sticks, they just aren't very good at telling the future or answering questions. So the ancient Israelites were tempted to go to wood and stone for their answers.

Where do you go for answers? Okay so you don't ask a piece of wood but do you ask a website? Where do you go when you desperately need help? To your own resources? Where do you go for comfort? Is it to the Creator or to created things? Where do you go to find beauty? Is it to people or to God? Is God your last resort? He should be your first. Do you go to God when all else fails? You should go to God before. Do you believe that he can answer your deepest questions? And even

when he doesn't, maybe he's answering a question you should have asked, the question behind the question. Do you know that the only thing that can really help you is God himself? Everything else is powerless as a piece of wood. Psalm 33:20 Our soul waits for the Lord our help and our shield. Hebrews 13:6 The Lord is my helper. I will not be afraid. What can man do to me? Do you want to know the future? God's word is more helpful than the traffic app on your smartphone, than the stocktips in your email, than all your plans and calendars. Are you going to God with your deepest desires?

Maybe what you seek is beauty and comfort. The Israelites went to pieces of wood: oak, poplar, terebinth "because their shade is good." What sorry, limited, powerless created thing are you going to instead of to the beautiful Creator, Adonai Eluhenu, Adonai ehad, Yahweh Tsaboth, El Shaddai, Iesus Christos Kurios, Pantokrator. Oh thy beauty is beyond words. All art and beauty has its headwaters in thee great three in one. All symmetry has its foundation in your balance of justice and mercy. All intricate design has its foundation in your amazing mind. Tension between two disparate subjects is moored in your sovereignty and human responsibility. Melody and Harmony merely scratch the surface of the warp and woof of redemptive history that you have authored, Ancient of Days. And truth, Oh glorious truth we are endlessly looking an authoritative articulation of that elusive reality. Only in you "I Am" can we know true truth for you are the God who is there and is not silent.

**The consequences of forgetting God.** Verse 13 says "They sacrifice on the tops of mountains and burn offerings on the hills, under oak, poplar, and terebinth, because their shade is good. **Therefore** your daughters play the whore, and your brides commit adultery." Israel

seems to be in a situation of rampant sin affecting multiple generations. Adultery and prostitution are pervasive amongst the people of God. So how did it get this way? Which came first the adultery or the idolatry? Which is worse idolatry or adultery? Which makes you more upset people leaving their wives or people leaving God? The secular culture around us mocks Christians for being very angry about homosexual sin whilst being nonchalant about our spiritual adultery.

Spiritual idolatry leads to sexual adultery. Idolatry comes first. Idolatry is worse. And we should be more angry about our own idolatry than about someone else's sexual sin. It was because Israel was willing to try anything besides God to satisfy their hungry soul, that they were led by the devil to adultery. When we do not make God the chief joy of our heart the only savior of our soul we will turn to any and everything to fill that hole in our heart. Turning away from the Creator to created things opens us up to the worst kind of depravity known to man. This is exactly what Paul is arguing in the first chapters of Romans.

So if we're very concerned about the culture of adultery not only in our nation but amongst the people of God we should zealously root any and all idolatries in our lives because they are adultery against God. Stop going to whatever it is you go to besides God for comfort, strength and joy. Return to him.

**A cautionary tale.** Imagine an Olympic cyclist. He's flying down the road at incredible speed and up ahead is a turn in the road. He's wondering if he should take it really tight to gain a couple of meters on his opponents. As he's wondering this he sees another opponent up ahead use that strategy. That guy takes the corner really tight but can't make the turn in time and flies off the road, off the track. Now if you

were the Olympic cyclist behind you would see that and think to yourself. I'm not going to do what that guy did. That was a cautionary tale of taking the turn too tight. In a similar way, God has laid before us the story of Israel going off the track in her sin to serve as an example to us not to do the same. The story of Israel is a cautionary tale.

Have you ever felt like all around you are cautionary tales? You look at this tragedy over here and think, that's me if I just keep heading down this path. I've got to change. The wise man notices any sad tale of human sin before him and instead of judging others, judges himself. When we see Christians around us struggling in their sin we're tempted to judge but what we should do is use each of those situations as an opportunity to take a look at our own hearts. We have cautionary tales all around us. It's as if they are other cyclists running off the road. Instead of scorning them we should take heed.

That's what is before us today in our text. This is the cautionary tale of wicked Israel told in the hearing of Judah who Hosea hoped for but who fell as well. So as you see the sin of Israel and Judah before you today are you tempted to judge them or do you in wisdom judge yourself? Verse 15 "Though you play the whore, O Israel, let not Judah become guilty." Though you see the sin of Israel and Judah before you today, let not the church become guilty. So people of God will you be soft to the message of our Savior this morning? Will you repent of whatever idols you're going to instead of to God? Oh be not like Israel in verse 16 "Like a stubborn heifer, Israel is stubborn; can the Lord now feed them like a lamb in broad pasture?"

Think about the pastoral example that Hosea uses here. Imagine you're a farmer who's got a cow who has eaten up all around her, she's

thinning, she's not producing milk, she's in danger of sickness. And abundant food and water are just over the ridge. And you, as a good farmer are trying to move her over there, trying to pull her over there, and she won't move. She is set in her ways. She thinks she knows better than the farmer. Are you being like that stubborn heifer to God? God is trying to move you over the ridge to a wide and abundant pasture in his word, in his means of grace, in his covenant community, in his ways, in his communion, he longs to feed you. But are you being obstinate, unmoved by the urgings of His Spirit?

The grace that is on offer for you today is a broad pasture. Life and health and food as far as the eye can see. God is giving away good green nourishment to sinners like me and you if we will but let him lead us in his paths. Submit to the pull of his Spirit on your heart this day and you will be like that lamb in a broad pasture. In God's ways there is peace, there is life, there is health, there is joy, there is love, there is shelter, there is calm, there is victory. You can lay hold of this now. The moment you submit to God, stop all your striving and be soft to his Spirit you will find life abundant. Right now in the midst of pain or poverty or strife and you will certainly lay hold of life abundant in heaven as you submit to the Lordship of Christ and trust not in your work but in his finished work on the cross for your sins. God's word doesn't say that if you really believe in him he'll instantly give you health and wealth in this world. But he does promise to bring us to abundant pasture in the end if we trust in him for our righteousness.

Let us not persist in our sin. We do not know when God will say of us "He or she is joined to idols; leave him or her alone." Oh most terrible of all the judgments of God is that he would leave us alone. It is above all else what the heart set on sin desires and yet it is the most awful

punishment. Know from this text that at times God does give this judgment. Know that he does and cease following foolish ways. "When their drink is gone, they give themselves to whoring;" One sin's pleasure will run out and you'll turn to another which will run out. It's like being blown like a leaf from one gust to another, never settling, never having peace, never resting, never satisfied. "A wind has wrapped them in its wings and they shall be ashamed because of their sacrifices." In the end the sinner looks back on his life, not with pride, but with shame. God will bring him to shame. Shame at all they've wasted and how little they have to show for it.

Will you be wrapped in the wind of your own desires which lead you further and further away from fulfillment or will you be wrapped in the wings of another wind? For there is another wind. The mighty Ruah, the Spirit of God, which is more mighty and strong than the highest tempest or fiercest gale. The Holy Spirit is a dangerous Derecho that destroys any sinful tendencies, uproots addictions and idolatries that attempt to hold God's people back from experiencing the fullness of his holiness. Submit to that wind. Be blown right out of your sinful ways and into destructive usefulness in God's kingdom. As we are wrapped in the wings of the Spirit we become one with the force that the gates of hell cannot prevail against. By the Spirit of God we will assault the last stronghold of Satan. We will attempt to free the souls of those still bound by his lies and by the power of the almighty we shall be victorious. Victorious. No weapon formed against us shall prosper. God has not given us a spirit of fear but the Lord has given us... power.

So then if we are in Christ we are not controlled by our sinful nature. You are controlled by the Spirit if you have the Spirit of God living in you. Romans 8:9 So dear brothers and sisters, you have no obligation

whatsoever to do what your sinful nature urges you to do. For if you keep on following it, you will perish. But if through the power of the Holy Spirit you turn from it and its evil deeds, you will live. For all who are led by the spirit of God are children of God. Romans 8:12-14.

So if you claim the name of Christ you are his priest to make intercession on behalf of the people to God. Will you represent him well by being holy? Or will you persist in being a pernicious priest who will in the end be no priest at all.

Maybe you've come here today because you're not sure. You like Jesus but it's his fanclub you have a problem with. Know that the Lord has a problem, yay a controversy with his fanclub too. We just heard it. He is jealous for his fan club because they have desired to become bigger fans of success, pleasure, and fertility. Jesus does quality control on his fan club don't worry. But even though Jesus has sinful followers that isn't a good enough reason to reject him. Furthermore, it should fill us with hope when Jesus has all sorts of misfits in his fan club because then we too can be let in. Jesus can abide sinful misfits like us in his presence only because he has already paid the entrance fee, his life. Jesus invites people from all walks of life to come and follow him.

Let us pray.

If you had never seen the Lord's supper administered before today you might look upon our table with scorn. You might look and laugh that we call this a supper. It seems to be burnt crackers and watery juice. It seems more like a snack than a supper for whoever saw a cup so small as this. And they appear to be serving bits of broken cracker, as if a

whole cracker was too much. It looks like the meagerest of meals and yet here at the Lord's supper we dine on a delicacy that can be found no where else. We are sustained by the fullness of a feast that we anxiously await each month. For it is not merely cracker bits and juice that we eat here. We dine on the body and blood of Jesus Christ. For Jesus declares that he is spiritually present in this food for those that take it by faith. For in the old covenant the people would make a sacrifice to God and then, depending on the sacrifice, they would eat it. Here we feast on a sacrifice that didn't merely suffice for a year but suffices for all time, the sacrifice of Christ's own flesh and blood. As we feed on him let us think of how it is Christ who really sustains us, not our flesh and blood, not our earthly food and drink. It is Jesus by whom we live and move and have our being. We are truly sustained only by him. Therefore let us feast richly knowing that this morsel is sufficient to show satisfaction for all our sins. This mouthful bespeaks more grace than we ever deserved. And this meal is God's means of grace to sanctify you as you spiritually feed on him.

The invitation to Christ is open to all. The invitation to his table is only for those who have been admitted to it through membership in his visible church. We invite all who are members in good standing of any evangelical church to come be a part of our body as we take Christ's body. For children of the covenant, the invitation to Christ is open to you as well. Jesus said "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them for to such belongs the kingdom of God." So come to Christ. Come before the elders and profess your faith and trust in Christ and they will admit you to the Lord's table. But until that time we ask that you children refrain from the sacrament lest you eat and drink judgment on yourselves. (Read from BCO.)