

Sermon: 2019/08/04 (8th Sunday after Pentecost, Year C) - Hosea 11:1-11; Psalm 107:1-9,43; Colossians 3:1-11; & Luke 12:13-21_BTR

The last two weeks we've been together, we've heard - in the Old Testament - from the prophet, "Hosea."

He lived approximately a hundred years after the "giant"-killer David, at a time when the "Promised Land" had become *sharply* divided between two, different, *antagonistic* royal dynasties.

The southern one was Juda-hite: ruled by men with a Davidic lineage through Solomon.

And so historians refer to their realm as that of "Judah" - the largest, most successful of the old Hebrew tribes.

Whilst the northern state was governed by a family of 'Ephraim' - mentioned three times this morning [Hos. 11:3,8,9 (& 12)], and their kingdom retained the traditional national name of "Israel."

And this is where Hosea pursued his God-given ministry of "speaking truth-to-power."

I quote (from last week): 'The word of the Lord came to Hosea son of Beer, ...in the days of King Jeroboam son of Joash': [1:1].

And this was a very unenviable task because Jeroboam *son of Joash* - was a wealthy, coarse, brash loudmouth with a blond comb-over and a red baseball cap. *No wait!*

Sorry, I got confused with someone else...

But *much* like the commander-in-chief, Jeroboam was *full* of pride.

He was so puffed up and over-inflated because of some minor battle-victories that he had led against a *handful* of insignificant regional powers like the Arameans, (in what is today Syria): [2 Kgs. 14:25,28].

The treasure he had stolen and extorted from them - the "booty" - had injected even more capital into an already flourishing olive oil and wine export business: [see: Hos. 12:1; Isa. 5:1-2a].[n.1]

And his little fiefdom, in consequence, was booming.[n.2]

Which is interesting, you know, because from a careless reading of the relevant Old Testament texts, 'one might get the idea that these two [new] kingdoms were roughly equal in size and strength, or perhaps even infer that Judah was the superior power and Israel only a[...]breakaway fragment. Actually, the reverse was the case. In many ways - including size, geographical position, and military strength - Israel was the dominant kingdom.'[n.3]

And this smugness - this sense of self-satisfaction - was a problem.

A *big* problem for God.

Why?

Because it was an obstacle.

An "obstacle" between Jeroboam [III] and his Creator.

A barrier, an impediment.

That was keeping them apart.

Quite literally!

The Temple, you see, a beautiful, gold and cedar wood shrine built to enrich and enliven the worship of the "Chosen People" - to be their focal point; to inspire their prayers and faithfulness was, of course, in Jerusalem *in the southern kingdom*.

In other words - from Jeroboam's perspective - it was now on the other side of a border, in the control of a foreign, hostile power.

Compare the situation, if you like, to the 38th parallel between the Koreas.

A barren no-man's land where soldiers patrolled constantly.

What chance, do you imagine, that Kim Jong-un in Pyongyang goes shopping in Seoul?

None, right?

Never.

He probably buys his Prada and Louis Vuitton on Amazon like the rest of us.

There is too much at stake *politically*.

That would be the very last place he'd go for *any* reason.

And the same situation was true in Israel and for Jeroboam.

Rather, to prove his superiority, Jeroboam had to have his own temples to attend. They were built in Dan and Bethel [see 1 Kgs. 12:29] by his great-granddaddy (of the same name) - the first rebel.

And, to run these places, priests were recruited from all over who weren't Levites. They were, in other words, illegitimate:

Because, remember, when Moses was alive, during the Wilderness Wanderings recorded in (the Book of) *Joshua*, it was '[t]o the tribe of Levi alone' that God gave this task. - Instead of land in Canaan, 'the offerings by fire...[were] their inheritance.' [Jos. 13:14]

And so what, do you think, happened?

What could go wrong with starting over "from scratch"?

With cutting ties to the traditional religious-establishment?

Well, the northern faith began to...let's say, "evolve."

Created in opposition to what had gone before, it looked not to the unbroken, conservative, faithful practices and beliefs of the southerners; but borrowed from elsewhere - from *pagans*.

Thus, even though, at its heart, the cult at Bethel and Dan was 'certainly

Yahwistic' [n.4] - that is to say, dedicated to Yahweh, our Lord, Jesus' father - confusion swept into the northern cult almost unchecked, bringing with it idols of animal deities like 'golden calves': [2 Kgs. 10:29].

And despite some hard work by Hosea to uproot this stuff, he was "swimming" against a strong "current."

Why should the people of Israel listen to him when things were going so well for them?

His predictions of "doom and gloom" were out-of-touch.

They sounded ridiculous.

He warned them, we see - this morning, that 'Assyria shall be their king': [11:5].

Now, with hindsight, you and I know he was *bang* "on the money."

This is *exactly* what would happen a few years later:

the Assyrians invaded the northern kingdom and devastated it.

But, in the moment and hour of his preaching, Hosea seemed like a mad-man; a crank.

Assyria was an ally of Jeroboam's, in fact.

A large, receptive, *hungry* trading-partner.

But the prophet could see that his contemporaries' confidence was grounded in the wrong things.

Markets go up as well as down.

Friends lose touch.

Marriages end.

Fashions change.

The Israelites weren't interested in being reminded of these truths, however.

Like the 'rich man' who Christ describes building 'larger' barns in a "bumper year," [Lk. 12:18] the archaeology of Hosea's period shows mansions "springing up" like mushrooms, and lots of ivory-made goods in circulation. [n.5]

Then, *suddenly*, a dreadful spiral of decline sets in.

We don't know really why.

Although earthquakes were common in the area; in the Levant.

And an other prophet, Amos - who lived about the same time as Hosea - speaks of a particularly massive one: [1:1b].

And all that wealth that Jeroboam son of Joash and his countrymen had accumulated vanished "over night."

And this could happen to any one of us.

We enjoy in America *such* an 'abundance of possessions' [Lk. 12:15] *and yet* so much of what we supposedly "possess" is little more than a digital record on a computer somewhere: our pension-plans, the money in our checking accounts - these are merely numbers on a hard-drive - a hard-drive of metal and silicone that

can rust or be stolen by a hacker.

There is something that cannot be taken from us, however, and that's our love for Christ; our trust in Him.

We can neglect it.

But nobody else can steal it outright.

We might allow them to erode our conviction.

But if we keep a firm hold of it; moreover, if we *nurture* it - the Bible says it is *the* key to a life of *unending, incorruptible* bliss beyond, in an eternal life after this one.

Let's take a moment to reflect.

Footnotes:

1. See: King, Philip J. (1988), *Amos, Hosea, Micah: An Archaeological Commentary*, Philadelphia, P. A.: The Westminster Press, 157-159.
2. See: Grabbe, Lester L. (2017), *Ancient Israel: What Do We Know and How Do We Know It?*, Revised Edition, London, New York, N. Y.: Bloomsbury / T. & T. Clark, 190. Also: Haran, Menahem (July 1967), 'The Rise and Decline of the Empire of Jeroboam ben Joash', *Vetus Testamentum*, Volume 17, No. 3, pp. 266-297, 266, 280-283.
3. Miller, James Maxwell and Hayes, John H. (1986), *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, Louisville, K. Y.; London: Westminster / John Knox Press, 233.
4. Gomes, Jules Francis (2006), *The Sanctuary of Bethel and the Configuration of Israelite Identity*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 54.
5. Becking, Bob (1992), *The Fall of Samaria: An Historical & Archaeological Study*, Leiden, The Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1.