

“God’s Idea of a Romantic Getaway”
by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)
A Reflection for the Third Sunday of Advent

Hosea 2:14-23

December 16, 2018

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Next month I’m taking Barb for a little getaway. We’ll be whisking off for a romantic weekend in . . . Steinbach . . . Manitoba . . . in January.

Hey, that’s not bad! We just heard God’s idea of a romantic getaway. God proposes to woo back God’s beloved People. *“Honey, I’ve got the perfect place for us,”* says the Lord Almighty. *“The Valley of Trouble.”*¹

We are learning from the prophet Hosea this Advent. It’s not an ideal romance story. God uses prophets to speak and show us what God wants us to know. God told Hosea to get married . . . to Gomer . . . Gomer . . . who had already given adultery a bad name. She’d keep to her “sleeping around” ways after their wedding day. Their marriage was designed for doom. *“You see,”* God said, *“that’s how my people are. I committed myself to them, but they’ve kept cheating on me. They are unfaithful. It’s breaking my heart.”* Hosea and Gomer’s terrible marriage is a living metaphor for God’s relationship with God’s People.

They had three children. Hosea could not be sure any were his. So God suggested baby names for them: “God Scatters,” “No Compassion,” and “Not Mine.” God was not messing around because God’s family was messed up. *I will Scatter them, with No Compassion, because they are Not Mine.*

Remember these names for later. There *is* more to the story Thank God! More to our story too. It could end there, terribly. Instead, God rekindles the relationship. God takes us on a “first date” all over again . . . to Trouble Valley.

II

That’s a real place, the Achor Valley in the Judean wilderness. Achor means “gloom,” “dejection,” “trouble.”² It was empty and desolate. *“That’s where I’m taking you, my beloved People,”* says God. *“Trouble Valley will be our doorway to hope.”*

Why a place like that?

The first reason: good memories.

¹ John Goldingay, Daniel & The Twelve Prophets for Everyone (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 69.

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Achor>

Barb and I did not honeymoon in Steinbach, but Muskoka. Because of what it meant to us, it still means a lot. For God's People, the desert wilderness is where they lived after God freed them from slavery in Egypt. That's where their relationship with God was planted and grew. That's where they discovered they can depend on God, because God's dependable. That's where they began learning to live God's ways. It was a place very much like Trouble Valley.

The second reason God takes them there: no distractions. No email, texting, meetings, appointments, children. For God's People in Hosea's day, it meant "No Ba'als."

III

Ba'al was a god. The ancients worshipped many deities. Ba'al was an important one. Ba'al means "master." Ba'al was master of the weather. Their whole lives depended on agriculture. They needed good weather. They needed Ba'al on their side. They did all they could to please Ba'al.

But God's People, Israel, were supposed to be different. God alone is the Creator, of everything. Ba'al has no power. Ba'al is not real. Ba'al is nothing. There are no other gods but God: God, Who strangely called Israel; God, Who unexpectedly led Israel to freedom; God, Who remarkably made a covenant-commitment to Israel. God, Who did all this so God's People would be God's light of truth, hope and life for all the world's peoples. (For us!) Though no one else knew it, everyone was depending on them. God's People had to keep faithful and devoted to God alone. Otherwise, they would become like everyone else, and we all were doomed.

But God's People got thinking. *"Let's keep our options open. We need rain. So let's worship God, and Ba'al too."* Maybe they thought they were keeping faithful to God, but no. Instead their ideas of God became Ba'al-like. They even started calling God "Ba'al."

That's a problem. Our problem too. We pick up all sorts of ideas what God must be like, what God should be like, what we'd like God to be. There is this idea out there, and in Jesus' church, that God wants us to have financial success. If we have enough faith, and give enough money to our church (and its handsome pastor), God will bless us with prosperity . . . prosperity as our greedy, consumption-driven, materialist culture thinks of it.³ They call this the "Prosperity Gospel."⁴ But the Gospel of Jesus, it is not! Still, it's

³ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prosperity_theology. For a good selection of resources that describe, expose and rebut this heresy, see www.christianitytoday.com/ct/topics/p/prosperity-gospel.

⁴ "At stake in all of this is Yahweh's own character. In turning to Canaanite fertility gods, Israelites had attributed fruitfulness of both crops and people to them (2:5,12) and thus has abandoned Yahweh, the Creator of all, who alone provides the crops and opens the womb (2:8, 18, 21-22; 9:11, 14). At the same time the Israelites have become like the gods they worship — full of lies, deceit, and caprice. Thus the bottom line for Hosea — and the reason for the coming judgment — is that although it should be otherwise, the people simply do not know Yahweh (4:1, 6, 14; 8:2-3); they have come to think of Yahweh

tempting.

It's tempting to think God is like that, to try to make God into our own Ba'al.

IV

Barb and I are going to Steinbach in January. Not for a second honeymoon. Not even a date, really. We're part of a team from the United Church of Canada, checking out a ministry there called Church Renewal.⁵ It's an approach to prayer and listening to God, and we want to see how we can adapt it for our United Church congregations. Maybe for the two of us, Steinbach will be a bit like the Achor Valley: a place away that God will use to rekindle our relationship with God.

But Israel never did traipse out *en masse* to Achor Valley. Hosea wrote poetry. It's a symbol. Getaway retreats can be great and helpful. Really, though, we need our relationship with God rekindled where we are, in our day-to-day living.

We don't need to go to the desert to find Trouble Valley. No, it can be right where we are, when everything our Ba'als have promised is stripped away. The gods we have been really worshipping will let us down. God might take away any illusions we have of them, all the things we've grown to count on instead of God.

You won't like it, certainly not when it's happening. It's Trouble Valley, after all. Still, you can trust God there, as God does what you need God to do.

Our relationship with God is what matters most. And God won't let that go. Or you.

V

God's People have been doing this. Here's what God says:⁶

I'm taking you away, back to the wilderness, to Trouble Valley even. There, you will have no illusion that Ba'al can help you. It never rains! You will depend on Me, entirely.

I'm taking you back to where we began. Remember Me. You've picked up all sorts of lies about me along the way. Let me show you who I really am.

Stop calling Me "Ba'al." No more! I am not your Master, not like that. Call Me "husband." I love you. I give Myself to you. For you.⁷

not in terms of their own story of redemption, but in terms of Canaanite religion — and the result is deadly." [Fee 212f.]

⁵ <https://churchrenewal.com>

⁶ What follows is my expansive paraphrase of Hosea 2:16-17.

⁷ There's a play on words here. The word "ba'al" was often used to refer to husbands. It emphasized the very unequal power relationships in marriages. The word translated "husband" in verse 16 is *ish*. It

Here's what God says:⁸

All the wild animals, the vultures circling over you, and creatures that creep and slither along the ground . . . I will make a deal with them for you. All the weapons of war, I'll haul off to the dump. You will be able to rest safe.

I have wedding gifts for you. Not flash and bling, or any of those Ba'al things I've made you leave behind. They won't last anyway. My gifts are My righteousness, My justice, My devoted love, My compassion and My faithfulness forever. They are for us to share, freely. I know you. You will know Me.⁹

Here's what God says:¹⁰

I will talk to the skies. (I made them!) Skies will talk to soil. (Made that too!) Soil will talk to the grains and corn, the grapes for new wine, and olives for fresh oil. (All mine, for you.)

Remember our child, Jezreel, whose name means "scattered." It also means "sows." I will sow seeds of life throughout the land.

Remember our child, No Compassion. I will cover her with My compassion.

Remember our child, Not Mine. To you, I will say, "You are My People. And you will say, "You are my God!"

That's God's idea of a romantic getaway. It's exactly what we need!

means "man." In the creation account in Genesis 2, when God makes a companion "fit" for the *Adam* (human), the *Adam* exclaims: "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman [Hebrew: *ish-shah*] because she was taken out of Man [Hebrew: *ish*]." (2:23) While *ba'al* emphasizes power and subordination, *ish* shifts the focus to "fittedness," commonality and mutuality. I don't want to overstate it, however. Clearly Hosea has a patriarchal understanding of marriage relationships; to expect anything different in the 8th-century BCE would be unreasonable. Perhaps, then, this shift from *ba'al* to *ish* is even more noteworthy.

⁸ Now from verses 18-20.

⁹ ". . . when a marriage gift was given to the bride, the gifts became the property of the couple for the duration of their marriage. The noble assets of righteousness, justice, love and compassion would be theirs to share within the context of their marriage, family and home. Whereas God has taken away material goods that served as a snare to his wanton wife, he now repays in abundance with the lasting gifts of his own loving, faithful character." J. Glen Taylor, "Hosea" in John H. Walton (ed), Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary Volume 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 20.

¹⁰ And, finally, verses 21-23.