

In our Old Testament reading we see one of the Bible's most compelling images of God's love for us. It's a graphic, uncomfortable image, but it is a clear picture of God's never ending, faithful, steadfast love for fallen and broken men and women – people like you and me.

God uses his prophet Hosea to show us what His love for us looks like. Hosea is known as the "death-bed prophet of Israel" because he was the last prophet before the northern Kingdom of Israel fell to Assyria in 722 BC. His ministry was at the end of a golden age of unprecedented prosperity for Israel. According to pattern, this prosperity led to moral decay – it often happens this way, doesn't it? As a result, Israel abandoned God and started worshipping idols.

God then sends Hosea on the scene in a very unusual way. He tells Hosea to marry Gomer, a prostitute and have children as a living example of what Israel is doing to God by pandering after false idols. God tells Hosea to "*take a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord.*" A classic example of why the Bible is not for prigs or the squeamish.

The first thing that jumps out to me about this heavy hitting passage is that God doesn't just tell Hosea what to say; He works through his life. God uses Hosea's life to communicate His message. The same is true for you and me. It might seem obvious, but sometimes the obvious is worth saying: God works through your life.

God is not removed, a moralist God issuing creeds and laws and then leaving us on our own to follow them. Nor is He a Deist God, winding the world like a watch and then letting it tick away by itself.

The Onion had an article along these lines about God retiring. "*At a press conference Tuesday, God Almighty, our Lord and Heavenly Father, gave his strongest indication yet that he might soon step down from his post as the supreme ruler of all things.... Attempting to downplay concerns, God told reporters that he wasn't "going anywhere just yet" and that, in any case, the universe was largely self-sustaining these days. "This place pretty much runs itself by now," the Lord said. "And besides, how many people still notice I'm around?"*

God doesn't leave the world to pretty much run itself. Nor does He leave your life to pretty much run itself. This means that your life isn't random, the things that happen in your life are from the hand of God. This includes the smallest details of your life.

When that phone call comes at the right time, it not a coincidence; it's, as one friend likes to call it, a Godincidence. When that parking space opens up on the Corner, when as the Bible says your "lines fall in to pleasant places" God is at work.

I know that many people sneer at the idea that God would be interested in these kinds of details. I think the Bible tells us that clearly that He is very interested in the micro as well as the macro. Jesus says that not a hair falls from your head without our Heavenly Father's knowledge. Along with the big things, God is, as the title of the book I'm reading right now, "the God of small things."

This can be a very comforting idea. But it is also a very challenging idea when your life goes south – when you encounter hardship and struggle. The inevitable conclusion is that God is not just the God of Big Things, and God is not just the God of Small Things, God is the God of All Things. All things include the hard and awful things in your life. God works through those things especially.

As an example in our life, our oldest daughter Hilary is leaving to go to college this fall. She's going to St. Andrew's in Scotland. We are thrilled and happy, but her impending departure creates all kinds of worry and anxiety in us. We've had some sleepless nights, worrying about the things that many parents worry about. Not just, "will she be okay so far away," but deeper life issues like "what kind of parents have we been to her – where have we failed?" and ""where did those 18 years of our lives go?" Christie especially has wondered, "who am I apart from being a mother?"

Anxiety is a terrible thing, especially when it takes over, and when you know that you are supposed to trust God and be anxious for nothing as the Bible says, but it is still 3am and you still can't sleep! Anxiety is no fun, but we have found that it's one of the ways that God is at work in our lives. We feel anxiety when something is off kilter and needs to be addressed.

Usually, like the Israelites, we've put some other idol in God's place and God won't stand by to let us worship false gods. Like the god of trying to be a perfect parent or the god of finding your identity and security in anyone or anything else but Him. God does not abide idols, so He uses anxiety or any other means to turn us back to Him.

Hosea was sent by God to show the Israelites that their worship of idols was wrong and harmful. Hosea's life must have been terrible. He married a prostitute – who by all accounts kept her day job after they were married (or night job?) and had children who were named "I will punish", "I will no longer have pity", and "you are not my people and I am not your God." And I thought Johnny Cash's "A Boy Named Sue" was tough.

It sure must have been tough to be Hosea or his children. With a friend like God, who needs enemies? I was taken by Mother Teresa's biography, which came out a year or two ago, in which she confessed to feeling like Hosea's children. Even though she lived her life with a Hosea like dedication, she said that for most of her life she only experienced "*darkness, dryness, and emptiness.*" Mother Teresa wrote in a letter to a friend, "*Jesus has a very special love for you. As for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear.*"

I don't believe that this was because she was pandering after idols; I think that this is just a common experience. Her experience is in some way comforting to those who have trouble feeling or experiencing God in either the small things, the big things or the hard things. As one theologian says, Mother Teresa's interior life with all her doubts is "*a ministry to people who had experienced some doubt, some absence of God in their lives. And you know who that is? Everybody. Atheists, doubters, seekers, believers, everyone.*"

Mother Teresa's life, despite her doubts and hardships, showed us what God's love for us looks like. She loved the unlovable and the untouchable. Hosea's life shows us the same thing. I don't need to come up with an illustration to show what this love is like. Hosea's life with Gomer is illustration enough, isn't it?

Being a cuckold – a husband with a cheating wife – is the picture of humiliation. I'm thinking that Hosea is not enjoying his best life now. The intimacy that should be his alone is doled out daily to paying customers. It is a terrible image.

For my money, Othello is Shakespeare's most intense tragedy. Othello is duped into believing that his beautiful wife Desdemona has been unfaithful. The truth is that her loyalty and faithfulness to her husband are unsurpassed. Yet, Othello suspects he is a cuckold. In an awful scene, Othello strangles his loving, faithful wife in their bed. Like the Bible, Shakespeare is not for prigs or the squeamish.

Hosea, unlike Othello, was married to a prostitute, a woman unfaithful by profession. Hosea would have every legal and moral right to divorce Gomer. And yet, He doesn't. He stays with her. He raises their children together. He loves her and provides for her and cares for her. He does this because God wants to show us how He loves us despite our whoring after idols. He shows us that He is a cuckold God.

Despite our unfaithfulness we read in our passage, "*Yet the number of the people Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which can neither be measured nor*

numbered, and in the place where it was said to them 'You are not my people,' it shall be said to them, 'Children of the Living God.'"

There is a verse in John describing Jesus' love for us. It says, "having loved them who were His own in the world, He loved them to the end." This means in general that God will never ever give up on you, no matter what.

And it means in particular that the God of all things is the God of the cross. Jesus loved us to the end, by being forsaken Himself on a cross, with very few people noticing that He was around. He experienced the humiliation of a cuckold and more. While all the faithless disciples denied and abandoned Him, He alone was faithful. He was Hosea for us, the faithless bride. And the cuckold God will stand by you, even after death do you part, because He loves you to the end. Amen.