



Welcome to *3 Preachy Prophets*, the NC Synod's 2021 summer Bible reading plan.

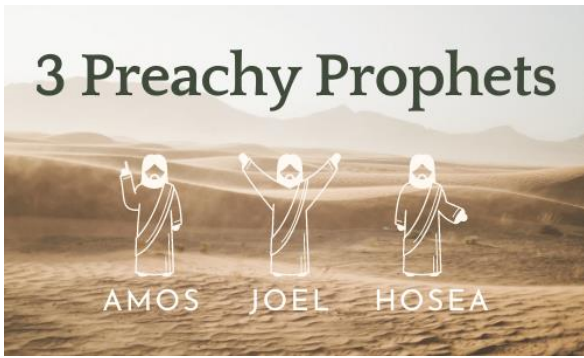
This study is the result of efforts from a variety of your fellow Lutherans from across North Carolina, both clergy and lay, and is brought to you by the synod's Engage the Bible Task Group—a Book of Faith ministry. We give thanks for the writers' contributions to this summer's experience.

Begin each day's reading by first reading the corresponding chapter from the book of Hosea, Joel, or Amos. Next read the thought-provoking devotional and sit for a while with the questions. Close your reading with the prayer.

In the introduction to *3 Preachy Prophets*, Dr. Clinton Moyer says that these three Old Testament books are, "...imposing works full of judgment and terror." Even in the midst of that, however, Moyer encourages us be on the lookout because, "...mercy is far from absent." The Engage the Bible Task Group is excited to offer this Bible reading plan for you—and the whole synod—to hear the judgment and wrath—even sit with them for a time—but then be prepared to find again God's ever-present mercy.

We pray the Holy Spirit's richest blessings on your journey this summer with *3 Preachy Prophets*.

3 Preachy Prophets



3 Preachy Prophets: Hosea, Joel, & Amos

An Introduction

Hosea, Joel, and Amos, the first three of the so-called “Minor Prophets,” are imposing works full of judgment and terror. While these works make abundantly clear the consequences of Israel’s evils, it can be difficult indeed to see God’s mercy amongst their incessant declarations of God’s wrath. But mercy is far from absent.

Hosea marries a prostitute to symbolize God’s marriage to Israel, the unfaithful bride. Using the metaphor of divorce—the statement “she is not my wife, and I am not her husband” (2:2) is language drawn directly from legal procedure—God hurls brutal humiliations on Israel. Yet for all the prophet’s vitriol, verses 14-23 recall Israel’s roots in the wilderness, returning to this “courtship” period in search of renewal and reconciliation. Brokenness is not the end: this theme should permeate our reading of the rest of the book.

Full of dread images, Joel describes Israel’s impending destruction as an all-consuming swarm of locusts. Yet one of the Bible’s greatest images of restoration and plenty is to be found beginning in 2:18. As the wave of destruction is lifted, a new order emerges: earth, animals, and humans shall experience abundance (2:21-24). Devastation is not the end: God looks beyond suffering to the healing that follows.

Amos targets the elites, particularly the vaunted religious leaders of the day. His condemnations are crushing: God spurns song and sacrifice alike, declaring, “I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies” (5:21). Yet an alternative emerges: “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (5:24). Condemnation is not the end: it is the flipside of Amos’s advocacy for the abused and downtrodden in society.

Rabbi Abraham Heschel beautifully captured this perspective on God’s wrath as expressed in the prophets: “The wrath of God is a lamentation. All prophecy is one great exclamation: God is not indifferent to evil! He is always concerned. He is personally affected by what man does to man. He is a God of pathos. This is one of the meanings of the anger of God: the end of indifference!”

To Consider:

1. What does Hosea’s metaphorical use of marriage, divorce, and prostitution say about gender roles and relationships? What about sex workers?
2. What does Amos teach us about the place of wrath in the context of social action?

Holy God, even as we are deserving recipients of condemnation, help us to be agents of reconciliation. As we wrestle with your anger, show us your presence with those who suffer; as we are solemnly reminded of our own evil, help us to recognize and realize our potential for good. Amen.

Dr. Clinton J. Moyer is a scholar of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. He specializes in the literary aspects of the Bible and has particular interest in prophecy as a social phenomenon. His 2009 dissertation focused on the foreign prophet Balaam (Numbers 22–24). Currently, he is working on a book entitled *The Unwritten Bible and Other Holy Heresies*, which seeks to inform readers about the mechanics of biblical literature, neutralize toxic theologies that have gained a foothold within American Christianity, and spark greater interest in deep, thoughtful, ongoing engagement with our sacred texts.



3 Preachy Prophets



Bad News to Good News

Reading 1, Hosea 1

This first chapter of Hosea is a bit rough. Using Luther's imagery, there is a lot of straw in this manger before we get to Jesus. Like other prophets, Hosea begins with the phrase, "The word of the LORD." It is not Hosea's word, but a trustworthy authoritative Word from God Himself. God asks Hosea to do the extraordinary act of marrying a prostitute named Gomer. It is an allegory in the flesh of our

unfaithfulness to God, seen in Gomer's self-centered running around town and always running away from Hosea. Picture Hosea's broken heart as the reality of God's hurt over our fickle unfaithfulness, blatant disloyalty and passionate pursuit of other loves.

To focus only on Gomer and our unfaithfulness however, would be like mistakenly focusing our attention on the wayward prodigal rather than the patient waiting Father. The tangled mess of the straw is only to reveal the amazing contrast of the ridiculous, relentless love-without-end of the Savior. So, God pulls no punches on how tangled this web of sin is. He makes this most unlikely to succeed union to produce children; a boy named "not my child" and a girl named "no mercy." Really? Kind of like God asking you to name your own kids Judas and Jezebel. We get it. We're that broken.

This painful disobedience transcends the bounds of time implicating even the well-meaning disciples who betrayed, denied, and ran away from their Savior. Even Paul, the best of the apostles at the zenith of his faith journey, admits to confirmand Timothy, that the saying is true that Jesus Christ died for sinners, of which he was the foremost. We would drown in this straw of sin if our failings—like Gomer's, the disciples and the apostles, and all before us—were the final and only word that defined us.

Like Hosea marrying a prostitute, we have a God who has chosen a tainted bride, the church, who as Paul reminds, while we were yet sinners, our Groom died for us. In the cosmic reality of time, just as everyday Hosea had to forgive Gomer, so our God, while we are yet sinners in a sense, dies for us each day. And in our most clear moments we can see a cross, like Gomer could see the moistened eyes of Hosea and we die to ourselves to see an absolutely amazing Savior who is always there for us.

To Consider:

1. How does Luther's comment—if we keep the first commandment, thou shall have no other gods before me, we fulfill all the other commands—make sense in this story and in our lives?

Lord, this past year has been one filled with challenging circumstances and situations. We pray that we have learned something about You and ourselves. What really matters and what we really can live without. We confess that we have even considered sacred things that are really straw before You. We repent of even worshipping our worship. Our form over function, our religion over relationship, and our fixation on the gifts rather than the Giver. May we come home to You alone again this day. Amen.

Pastor Mike Stone shares: My amazing grace for 40+ years is my wife, Laura. I am blessed with gracious parents, two sons; Matt and husband, Steed, and Josh and his wife, Jordan; and granddaughter, Julianne, and another on the way! My niece is actress Emma Stone.



3 Preachy Prophets



Judgment or Redemption?

Reading 2, Hosea 2

When I first began reading this chapter, I could feel my teeth clenching and my stomach churning, as the words of the LORD through Hosea were offering condemnation to Israel, represented as a woman—an unfaithful woman—and not just unfaithful, but a whore! Talk about misogynistic, I thought and felt. Then

memories from my Old Testament class in seminary all those long years ago came flooding back. And I recalled that, at the instruction of the God of Israel, Hosea himself took a prostitute as a wife and named his children *Loruhamah* (not accepted) and *Loamni* (not my people), his family becoming a living metaphor for the relationship between the LORD and Israel.

So...I began to relax my jaw and my stomach, and as I read further, I found that in this chapter, the LORD is not only chastising Israel for their unfaithfulness, but promising to continue to seek them out (verse 14):

*Therefore, I will speak coaxingly to her,
and lead her through the wilderness,
and speak tenderly to her. (Tanakh, the Jewish Bible)*

And not only seek them out, but be as a husband to them, in spite of their unfaithfulness (verses 19 and 20): *And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the LORD. (NRSV)*

In so doing, the LORD is offering a word of hope, of forgiveness, of acceptance. Not only to ancient Israel but to God's people throughout the generations. To us here, now, in the twenty-first century, assuring us that ours is a God of love and redemption; a God who will always come to God's people, reaching out in compassion, no matter what it takes. Even to the length of sending Jesus the Christ to show us the depths of that love. Hosea's God is our God...always, ever, eternally.

To Consider:

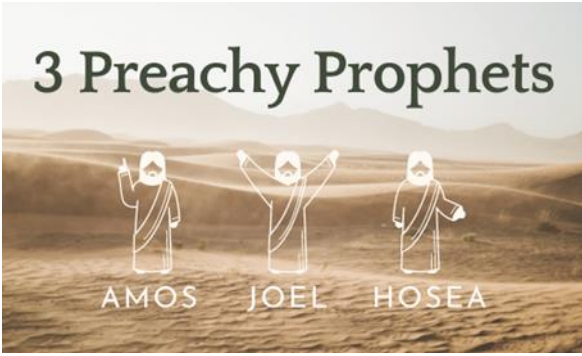
1. Have you ever thought that God could not or would not forgive you for something you have done—or not done? How did that make you feel?
2. How does the word of the LORD through Hosea telling you that God will always seek you out offer you the comfort and assurance of God's never-changing love? Or does it? Why or why not?

God of love and mercy, so often we humans forget that there is nothing we can do which can separate us from your love. Thank you for the reminders which come to us in the words of scripture, in the words and actions of people around us, in the words which can whisper from the depths of our hearts: God loves you...always, ever, eternally. Amen.

Linda Faltin writes of herself: Mother, grandmother, sort-of-retired pastor, writer, child of God: that pretty much describes who I am. I live—and love living—in Greensboro, where I am ever finding new things in the community which delight me and draw me in, even in this time of pandemic.



3 Preachy Prophets



Restoration from Rebellion

Reading 3, Hosea 3

How many of us are filled with romantic notions of love, such as love at first sight, love over-riding all logic, going with your heart and not your head? How many of us are filled with anger and unforgiveness when the love we thought existed is broken or destroyed? Such as an affair, lustful thoughts, or adulterous behavior.

Illusions of love aren't about what is, but what we wish. True love is about accepting what is and going toward it.

In Hosea 3, God directs Hosea to stay with his adulterous wife and love her. At other points in the Bible, such as Deuteronomy 24:1 and Matthew 19:7-8 God permits divorce, but never commands it. God is clear on his principle of love. He says to love even when it is hard.

This Scripture shows us love as a matter of will. God's will is in everything we do. Hosea chooses to go back to his wife, Gomer. He chooses to restore their marriage from her rebellious behavior. God needed the Israelites to see Hosea and Gomer as the living lesson of His relationship with them. The people were in their own form of adultery, yet God still loved them and stayed with them. God restored his relationship with the Israelites from their rebellious behavior.

Are we any different in today's world? Are we any different from Gomer or Israel? The message of Hosea 3 is still true today. God's love is ever present. Even when we stray, God takes us back and loves us. God's love is ever faithful!

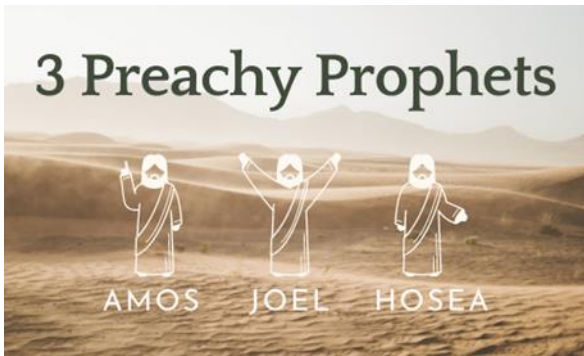
To Consider:

1. What hope did Hosea have?
2. Can you think of a time in your own life when you've chosen restoration from rebellion?

Dear Lord, we praise you for your grace and forgiveness which you bestow upon all of us. We thank you for never giving up on us and sticking by us even at times when we don't deserve your love. We ask that others in the world will know you, love you, and trust in your unfailing devotion to each and every one of us. Amen.

My name is Ellen Yang. I am a member of St. John's Lutheran Church in Salisbury, NC. I am a graduating senior at Salisbury High School and will be attending the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in the fall.





And It Shall Be Like People, Like Priest

Reading 4, Hosea 4

"...the priest had formulated, once and for all time and with the strictest meticulousness, what tithes were to be paid to him, from the largest to the smallest (—not forgetting the most appetizing cuts of meat, for the priest is a great consumer of beefsteaks); in brief, he let it be known just what he wanted, what "the will of God" was..." ([The Antichrist 26](#), accessed May 24, 2021)

The quote above comes from Nietzsche, a philosopher and a sharp critic of institutionalized Christianity. He thought there was a connection between the character of religious leaders and the morality of their followers. The historical distance between the prophet Hosea and Nietzsche, about 2,800 years, highlights that their observations are both accurate and relevant to religious people of any time and at any place.

Out of their own religious experiences, both Hosea and Nietzsche indicted religious leaders and deemed them responsible for the moral decadence of their followers. Nietzsche spoke as the son of Carl Ludwig Nietzsche, a German Lutheran pastor in the nineteenth century CE, and Hosea as Israel's prophet in the eighth century BCE.

For Hosea, it is important to list a catalog of religious diseases (unfaithfulness, disloyalty, and ignorance), morally decadent behavior (swearing, lying, murder, stealing, adultery, and bloodshed), and their consequences for all God's creation (mourning land and creatures perishing). However, for us, this should not be enough! A call to conscience for all leaders of the Church must follow! What might sound like a saying, "And it shall be like people, like priest" more than an indictment, must be interpreted as the life and ministry of this church in its three expressions: churchwide ELCA, synods, and local congregations.

In the context of this church's commitment to authentic diversity, leaders must understand that an ethnic-, gender-, and class-segregated Church will continue to exist until we—ordained and lay leaders—are willing to welcome and integrate into the life of our local congregations all people and not only all people like us.

To Consider:

Statistics show that both in modernity and postmodernity, the role and impact of religion and religious leaders in the life of congregants has steadily decreased.

1. Question for church leaders: If this statement is true in your ministry, how could this trend be reversed?
2. Question for congregants: If this statement is not true in your faith community, what do you think has been a determining factor?
 - a. the character and the example of the leaders
 - b. the character and example of the congregants
 - c. both

Gracious God, we are thankful for your forgiveness, your kindness, and your faithfulness, and in the words of the prophet Hosea, we pray and hope with anticipation for the fulfillment of your promises given to us, when you said:

4 I will heal their disloyalty; 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 strike root like the forests of Lebanon.

6 His shoots shall spread out; his beauty shall be like the olive tree, and his fragrance like that of Lebanon.

7 They shall again live beneath my shadow, they shall flourish as a garden, they shall blossom like the vine, their fragrance shall be like the wine of Lebanon. (NRSV Hosea 14:4-7)

Alfredo M Oviedo has been a pastor at Grace, Hendersonville, since 2005. He and his wife of 46 years Alexandra, have four children and seven grandchildren. Pastor Alfredo's ministry focus is ethnic and cultural integration in local congregations, faith formation, and use of technology in ministry. He has been a lifelong student teacher, likes soccer, and is an avid reader. He is a graduate of Gardner-Webb School of Divinity (M.Div.), the University of North Carolina at Asheville (MLA), and currently a Doctor of Ministry candidate at the United Lutheran Seminary.



3 Preachy Prophets



Sounding the Alarm

Reading 5, Hosea 5

“Blow the horn in Raleigh, sound the trumpet in Richmond, or Austin, or Columbus, or New York. Sound the alarm in Atlanta, look behind you, people of Houston. Desolation and punishment are coming.” This could be a paraphrase of the prophet’s words in verses 8-9.

Hosea is proclaiming the impending judgment on Israel and Judah, the Northern and Southern Kingdoms. The two kingdoms have deliberately gone astray, seeking to find their strength and refuge in places other than God. The prophet accuses both Israel and Judah in the harshest of terms, calling them prostitutes. The word used here, from the Latin *prostituere* refers not to sexual acts but to the act of devoting one’s talents, gifts, and abilities for base and discredited use, such as prostituting one’s talents and God-given gifts. This is a theological statement, but it is also a political statement. The prophets always spoke from a political and theological perspective. The words of the prophets never become irrelevant.

The prophet’s words are enduring and relevant for those who would hear in these difficult times. We, too, have seen the prostitution of talents, abilities, and gifts all too frequently and all too recently. We have seen the offering up for sale of integrity, honesty, truth, compassion, justice, and even souls. We have seen it among our politicians and their constituents, we have seen it in the highest offices of the land and the smallest of rural townships. We have been witnesses to those who would seek power with total disregard of the pain and suffering it causes just to appease and political base or a would be political demi-god. Everything is for sale, and everything has a price.

Sound the alarm!

But God will not be mocked, and the Lord reminds us, through the prophet Hosea, that the Divine word will endure. The Lord reminds us that *“I will return to my place until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face.”* (vs. 15) The alarm has been sounded. How will we respond?

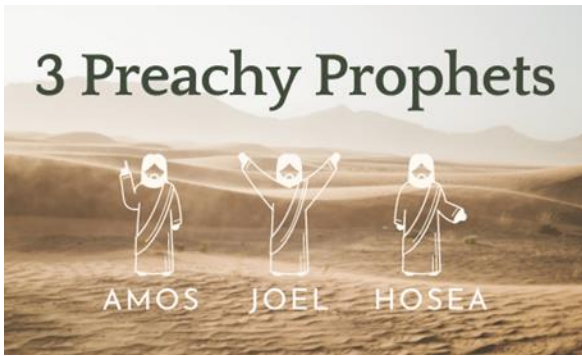
To Consider:

1. Why have we become a people for which everything we hold dear might be for sale to the highest or most powerful bidder?
2. How do the words of Jesus in the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-16) speak to us who would resist the sale of sacred truths for power and profit?

Lord God, give us the courage to place our trust in you and you alone, and the strength to hold the most precious of your gifts close to our hearts. Amen.

Peter Brown of Raleigh is a full time husband, father, grandpa, gardener, guitarist, and lover of coffee. Barbecue and long walks figure into his days.





Like Spring Rains that Water the Earth

Reading 6, Hosea 6

Seems that every year lately, in late spring and summer, TV weather forecasters are telling us about drought conditions. This year seems no different. So, Hosea's metaphor of God's return to his people saying, "He will come like the showers, like the spring rains that water the earth" (v3) is one we can relate to. It

describes God as bringing life and abundance.

And the weather analogies continue when Hosea describes Israel's attempts to love God as being "like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes away early" (v4). What an indictment of Israel—and us. God's love is a constant like the spring rains that renew the world but our efforts to love God disappear like the mist.

For those who have been paying at least some attention to what Hosea has had to say so far, the above paragraph is a fair summation of his message. God does not punish to destroy Israel and Judah. God's punishment is a call to repentance. If you start your reading of chapter 6 with verse 15 of chapter 5, you will see the first three verses are Hosea telling Israel exactly what repentance that God is looking for. God wants the people to "press on to know the Lord" (v3). This knowledge of the Lord is more than "book learning." It is more than a series of facts or rote recital of a creed. This knowledge of a loving God impels itself to action. It is seen in how we treat each other, especially the least among us and how we treat God's creation.

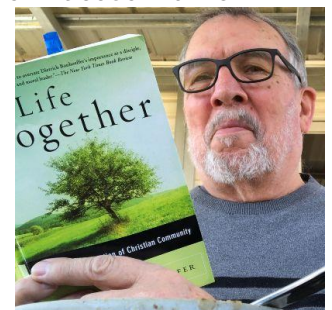
In Hosea, God's pronouncements of judgement seem harsh. No wait, they ARE harsh. They indicate how seriously God holds the covenant he made with his people. Turning away from the covenant leads away from the full life we have in God. God's call to judgement, the Law as we Lutherans refer to it, is a loving act. It is loving because it does not come from a petulant deity who is upset that his special rules are not being followed. It comes from a God of overflowing and constant love who desires nothing more than our welfare, even when we are bone-headedly obstinate in our desire to follow our own will in the other direction.

To Consider:

1. We are all, as Luther reminds us, *saints and sinners*. When the *sinner* side seems to have the upper hand in your life, what brings you back to remember God's constant love?
2. As Lutherans, we often struggle with the role of the Law in our faith lives, emphasizing God's grace. Hosea and other prophets remind us of God's judgement. Can God's word of judgement be considered loving?

Lord of life, you are both righteous in your judgements and overflowing in your love. Our attempts to love you and our neighbor are like the dew that goes away early. Open our hearts to your Holy Spirit, that your love may inform all that we do as we press to know the Lord. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Dan Voelkert, a fairly new resident of Catawba county, is a member of Macedonia Lutheran, Burlington NC who thanks God for the internet and Zoom and the ability to stay connected. He asks for prayers as he begins his search for a new church home. He offers this life hack: don't move during a pandemic if you can help it.



3 Preachy Prophets



What's Your Default Response?

Reading 7, Hosea 7

We are commonly told that although we cannot control our circumstances, we do have control over how we choose to respond to those circumstances, even under great stress. What is your default response, especially under stress?

Hosea is prophesying during the final chaos at the end of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Since the death of King

Jeroboam, Israel has had six kings, all but one of whom died by assassination. The circumstances of life were chaotic. What appeared to be secure and stable was revealed as a decadent society overtaken by rapid political and religious disintegration. Even family life became decadent. The traditional standards of morality no longer guided choices. Hosea saw lives built on the shifting sands of deceit, theft, and evil deeds. No one kept their promises to God or each other. "Woe to them for they have strayed from God," proclaims the prophet.

Hosea is the last prophet before Israel is invaded and carried captive to Assyria. (2 Kings 15:23-17:41) The Ten Tribes of the Northern Kingdom never return from captivity. They vanish from recorded history in 722 BC during the Iron Age—2,743 years ago—to become the 'Lost Tribes' of legend and speculative history.

Under stress of circumstance, Israel broke their covenant with God and tried to save themselves by making treaties with powerful foreign countries and worshiping their gods. When they didn't get the results they prayed for, they did not turn back to God. Their default response was to turn away from God, to deal falsely with each other, and to speak lies about God. They turned to that which does not profit (v. 16). It did not end well for them. If only they had trusted in God's mercy and let God redeem them (v. 13).

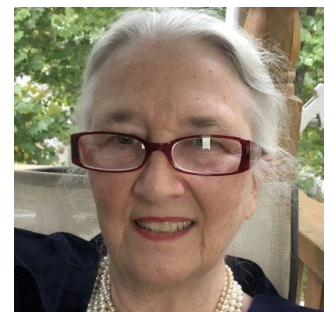
When your news feeds are filled with talk of corruption, wicked deeds, false dealing, theft, bandit raids... Filled with talk of wickedness, treachery, and adultery... When anger smolders, rulers mock, and no one calls upon God... When pride prevails over repentance and no one returns to the Lord, they all plot evil against God... Then what is your default response?

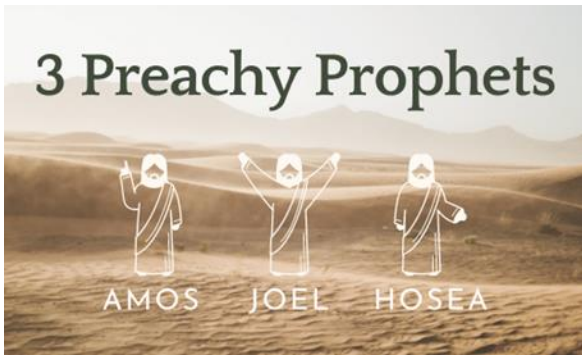
To Consider:

1. Metaphors chosen from common daily experience help to clarify and illustrate a prophet's message from God. Hosea chose two types of bread-baking ovens and bird hunting with nets. We don't live in the Iron Age and these are not part of our daily life. What metaphors would you use to clarify and illustrate the prophetic message of Chapter 7? Try them out on your family at dinner.
2. If your default response to stress isn't an ideal of humble repentance and trust in God's mercy, then how would you practice daily to change your default response?

Merciful God of judgment and justice, from you come all holy desires, all good counsels and all just works. Give to us the security of peace which the world cannot give, so that our hearts may be set to obey your commandments; defend us from fear of our enemies so that we may live together with you in peace and quietness, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.
(adapted from 7th Sunday after Pentecost).

Rejoicing together in a bohemian life of gardening, making art, and Bible study, Pastor Margaret Ashby and her husband Gerald live near Asheville.





Hosea, the Prophet of Doom with a Cool Name

Reading 8, Hosea 8

This Hosea is a real downer! One of the so-called “minor prophets” of the Old Testament, he lived in the eighth century BCE, hundreds of years before Jesus came along. He lived at a time when the nation of Israel was divided into two kingdoms, northern and southern, and

was surrounded by much more powerful countries like Egypt and Assyria.

And that’s the problem: the religions of Israel’s neighbors, especially the fertility religion of the Canaanites, prove too much of a temptation, and before you know it, the Israelites have forgotten their own God and make idols, like a golden calf, that is supposed to bring them favorable weather and good harvests. That’s not the only thing they are doing wrong. All of Chapter 8 is a list of all the grievances God now has against them: they have broken the covenant; they have disregarded God’s laws; they have installed kings and princes against God’s wishes; and they have adopted rituals and religious practices from their neighboring countries despite God’s commandment that they shall not have other gods besides the God of Israel.

Most of Hosea’s short book is about how the Israelites has fallen short, and how God will punish them. It’s no accident that Hosea is often called the “Prophet of Doom” (that’s what Wikipedia says about him, anyway). You kind of have to wait until Chapter 14, the very last chapter, until you read about God’s mercy and forgiveness.

But there are two things here in Chapter 8 that do give us a glimmer of hope despite all the doom and gloom. First, we read about God’s covenant in the very first verse. That’s an important word. When you break a contract, the agreement is null and void. But when you break a covenant, which is a promise, the other party is still bound to it. God never breaks God’s promises, regardless of how often we mess up. Secondly, the very name *Hosea* points to God’s grace and mercy because in Hebrew, the name means *salvation, he saves, he helps*. So even in this chapter, even with the list of all the wrongdoings, we see God’s grace and forgiveness underneath the mountain of sin. Thanks be to God!

To Consider:

1. How are the sins of the Israelites in the time of Hosea like the shortcomings and wrongdoings of people in our own time? Do you see any parallels here?
2. Can you think of a time when you did something wrong but in the end found forgiveness and mercy?

Gracious God, thank you for your grace and mercy in our lives. Like the people in Hosea’s time, we keep breaking the covenant and doing things wrong. Yet you love us anyway even though we mess up. Guide us and lead us into a life that is pleasing to you and shows love to our neighbors. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Josef Herz-Lane is a 33-year-old young adult who has cerebral palsy but says that “my disability does not stop me.” He is a very active member of Christ the King, Cary, where he founded the Possibility Network, a ministry with and among people with disabilities, their families, and caregivers.



3 Preachy Prophets



Ecologies of Mercy

Reading 9, Hosea 9

Wow, Hosea is preachy here—and this chapter is the second part of a two-chapter screed against Israel (called Ephraim in this chapter) and its embrace of corruption. Seriously, Hosea is not holding back one bit. In fact, he relentlessly piles on the punishment!

The chapter starts with the metaphor of Israel prostituting itself for the payment of the threshing floor (v. 1)—or rather worshipping Baal for the reward of a plentiful harvest and food enough for the year. Hosea dives even deeper into his condemnation of Israel when he suggests that the people who call him a fool and madman (v. 7) have deeply corrupted themselves from the very beginning of the nation when the king (i.e. King David) was anointed at Gibeah (v. 9).

But Hosea doesn't stop there. He keeps preaching with still more fury. Israel must lead their children (should they even have them) to slaughter (v. 13). By verse 14, Hosea doesn't even know what to ask of God, and so he kicks Israel where it hurts most; "Give them a miscarriage and dry breasts." This line makes my stomach hurt. All of this language that centers women's bodies as the instruments of fidelity (or infidelity)—the ways that Hosea terrorizes and wishes violence on them—seems completely unnecessary.

And then I see the comparisons to wild grapes and fig trees (v.10), to palm trees and lush meadows (v. 13) that draw out Israel's past resilience and connection to creation. And while Ephraim's glory will fly away like a bird (v.11), even this flight reminds us of the miraculousness that is intricately woven into all living things. Anyone who has watched the earth repair itself from drought, or soothe its wounds with water, or resurrect from scorched roots, or reseed itself on the backs and through the stomachs of creeping creatures—anyone who has witnessed these miracles knows that God's unshakeable faithfulness to creation is precisely why these miracles exist. Even for the unfaithful people whom Hosea chastizes in this chapter, God's faithfulness is unwavering, unshakable, abiding with unimaginable, steadfast love.

To Consider:

1. What kinds of infidelities to God and God's creation are part of our world today? How does God show mercy even in the ugliest, most vile moments of this infidelity?
2. What role does mercy play in your own relationship with God and with creation?

Abide with us, faithful God. Even in our struggle to live in your grace with faith toward you and deep mercy toward one another and all of your beloved creation, abide with us. Remind us of the resilience you weave into all creation. Abide with us, O God. This is our plea and our promise today and each day. Amen.

Katherine A. Shaner has survived this pandemic because her most faithful four-legged furry dog-friend, Karl Bark, has never left her side. Literally never. For a more than a year. Karl's steady, snuggle-laden fidelity has helped her continue her work as the Associate Professor of New Testament at Wake Forest University School of Divinity and as a member of the Engage the Bible Task Force.



3 Preachy Prophets



Fallow or Fertile Ground?

Reading 10, Hosea 10

There is much judgment and condemnation in Hosea 10—not the easiest text to read and ponder. But, in the midst of this difficult chapter is verse 12: “Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap steadfast love; break up your fallow ground; for it is time to seek the Lord, that he may come and rain righteousness upon you.”

(NRSV). The Message Bible interprets part of the verse like this: “It’s time to till the ready earth, it’s time to dig in with God, until he arrives with righteousness ripe for harvest.” Verse 12 shows God’s mercy. Even after repeated failures to live as God intended, God again shows Israel how to live, so that God “may come and rain righteousness” on them.

I’m not a gardener, let alone a farmer, so I had to check what *fallow* means. According to Merriam-Webster, it describes land that is “left untilled or unsown after plowing” or refers to things that are “dormant” or “inactive.”

I imagine that each of us has fallow ground in our lives, an unsown area (or areas) that God can do something with, that can become fertile ground, even if it seems useless or hopeless.

In 2018, I began my journey as a candidate for minister of word and service which has entailed cultivating areas of my life that could have been described as fallow. I’d told myself I shouldn’t be involved in some of these areas. Others I’d avoided because they caused discomfort. I didn’t know some areas could be useful. Others I hadn’t explored before.

Verse 12 reminds me of the third petition of the Lord’s Prayer: Your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Luther’s Small Catechism with African Descent Reflections states, “This petition commits us to seek and to act on God’s will in every way we can” (p. 49). What powerful encouragement for us to try, with God’s help, to cultivate areas of our lives that might feel unredeemable. Even when all seems lost, our merciful God offers us opportunities to “dig in with God” in the bringing about of God’s kingdom on earth.

To Consider:

1. What areas of your life, with God’s help, might be cultivated to become fertile ground?
2. What support or encouragement do you need for this to happen?

Merciful God, help us to see the fallow areas in our lives that can become fertile ground. Guide us to cultivate these areas and put them to use in the bringing about of your kingdom on earth. Amen.

Kimberly Dunbar is the Outreach Ministry Coordinator at Good Shepherd, Brevard. She is in the Masters of Religious Leadership Program through Lenoir-Rhyne University and Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, and is a candidate through the NC Synod. Kimberly feels blessed to be the mother of 12-year-old Sophie.



3 Preachy Prophets



A Love that Never Quits

Reading 11, Hosea 11

Hosea 11 paints a vivid picture of God locked in a mighty struggle to love God's chosen people, and to love us. There is such tenderness in this passage, but great frustration, too. "When Israel was a child, I loved him," Hosea 11 begins. And it is a love that is beautiful and tender. "I was to them like those who lift infants to their

cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them." Our God who is mighty also loves with a tenderness and gentleness that is unsurpassed. The love of a mother for her infant. God's love for us. Amazing, isn't it?

So why the frustration? "The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols." No wonder God is so frustrated! After showing such love to them, and to us, we keep turning from God and giving in to sin. Why do we turn from such amazing love? Why do we keep sacrificing to the Baals of our modern world, and offering incense to the idols all around us? When will we come to our senses and return home? Home to the God whose love for us is beyond what we can even imagine? This is God's question, and the reason for God's frustration.

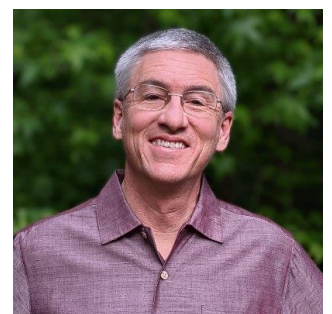
And yet, as frustrated as God is in this passage—and at times with us—God's love inevitably wins. "How can I give you up?" God asks. "My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender." God's love wins. Always. God's compassion-filled struggle continues until God's love finally becomes enfleshed in the gift of God's son. God bends down from heaven to feed us, to nurture us, and even to die for us, rather than give up on us. Because God simply can't help but love us. And all that God wants in return is for us to be so filled with that love that it spills everywhere. So that our compassion would grow warm and tender, too, until all the world knows this same amazing love.

To Consider:

1. Take a moment to ponder God's amazing love for you. What does it mean to you to be loved by God in this way?
2. Even when God is frustrated with us, God's love never quits. Is there someone in your life that you are struggling to love right now? How might this passage encourage you?

Heavenly Father, your love for us is utterly amazing. Forgive us when we question that love, or turn from it, and forgive us when we struggle to share your love with others. Help our compassion to grow warm and tender like yours, so that all those around us would come to know your love. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

James Laurence serves as pastor of First, Albemarle. He is blessed to be married to an amazing wife, and to be the father of two grown children. He enjoys pondering God's word and its implication for our world and sharing these ponderings on his blog, mypastoralponderings.com.



3 Preachy Prophets



God's Unassailable Oneness

Reading 12, Hosea 12

Reading Hosea 12, I was struck by the gloom and doom nature of this study. Ephraim feeds on & pursues the east wind, a desolate desert wind of no benefit: treaties with Assyria, trades with idolatrous nations, shows arrogance and pride against obedience to God, and engages in dishonest and fraudulent trades yielding

nothing but boasting in wealth and following the idolatry of the surrounding nations—the worship of worthless gods. Provoked to anger, the Lord should leave Ephraim (Israel) the guilt of bloodshed and repay his contempt (v14).

But in all this, God shows His mercy and grace!

Israel found God at Bethel (v4) and talked with Him there. He has only to return to his God, maintain love and justice, and wait for God always (v6). For He is the LORD his God who brought him out of Egypt (v9), who spoke to the prophets, gave them many visions, and told parables through them (v10), and who used a prophet to bring Israel up from Egypt, by a prophet He cared for him (v13).

The LORD, who will have mercy and compassion on whom He will (Exodus 33:19b), is a jealous, zealous God; there is to be no other God before his chosen people, Israel, for, indeed, there is no other God. Yet we, like Ephraim, Israel in this chapter, despise His message and turn away from his messengers even as was done in the fall of Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 15-16ff), even as we raised the “God is Dead” movement some 60 years ago and again in the 1980s.

God is not just the God of our fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob (Israel)—nor is He just my God or the God of each one of us as individuals. He is the Living God, who sees our hearts and nurtures us to love only Him, and, in loving Him, to love one another. In doing so, we can only be loving and just as He is loving and just to us where He finds us in our vile, worthless, wickedness.

To Consider:

1. What phrases in this Hosea chapter show Ephraim, Judah, or Jacob/Israel have violated the Old Testament first commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Deut. 5:7)?
2. How do these phrases show that Ephraim, Judah, or Jacob/Israel are in compliance or in opposition to the “two commandments [on which] hang all the law and the prophets” Jesus addresses in New Testament passages found in Mat 22:37-40, Mark 12:30-31, and Luke 10:26-28?

Lord, your goodness and love endures forever! Open our hearts to understand your way. Rid us of the stiff-necked rebellion that hardens our hearts to loving you with faithful, steadfast obedience. Help us always to seek your kingdom and righteousness, turning to you ever for your healing, loving-kindness, in Jesus' blessed name. Amen.

R. Carlos Cavazos writes personally of loss and Easter hope: *I lost my eldest sister to the COVID pandemic Easter Sunday, but that does not mean God abandoned me, my family, or our loved ones. Indeed, I can thank Him He took her home to the peace and joy we hope in Him, just as I hope He will let me cross over from death to life when my time comes. Stay faithful, and, God bless.*

3 Preachy Prophets



This Is the Thanks I Get!

Reading 13, Hosea 13

Hosea is sometimes considered a prophet of doom who used his own life experiences to represent the experiences of the people of Israel with God. In Hosea 13, God takes on the role of a parent chiding naughty children. His people have wandered so far from him that they have forgotten him. They have turned to

idolatry even though they knew that God would not bless them for this action. They just kept on doing what felt good at the time. He reminds them that he is in charge, he is God, and they will be sorry for losing sight of that.

Like most teenage girls, I was sure that my mom didn't understand anything. She was always wrong. We argued a lot about stuff that was, in retrospect, pretty minor. Usually, I had done or said something not particularly well-advised. During these confrontations, she would remind me who was in charge. Lacking the good sense to say, "Yes ma'am" and turn from the error of my ways, I would reply with an ill-advised remark that cast aspersions upon her relative intelligence. At this point in the conversation, I would sometimes hear a comment like, "This is the thanks I get!" Her remark would often elicit an eye roll, which I am convinced was audible and which did nothing to improve my situation. I would storm out of the room, slam my bedroom door, and stay out of her way for a while. Later I would apologize, be forgiven, and life would go on. I never learned that I was making it harder on myself by talking back and having to endure punishment.

The people of Israel were God's petulant teenaged children, who knew better than He did, and were dead set on following their own path. God loved them but was not pleased with them. The Israelites would turn from the error of their ways, but the lesson would not be pleasant.

We often behave like know-it-all teenagers making things harder because we are arrogant enough to be sure our way is the right way. God provides for us, and this is the thanks we give him.

To Consider:

1. Are there times when you have been a petulant child of God?
2. How do we know when we are following God's path for our lives instead of our own?

Father, thank you for loving us even when we behave like children who are sure we know better than you do. Help us to remember who you are and what you have done for us. Amen.

Julie Arndt of St. Mark's, Lumberton is a Lutheran-by-marriage, a middle school English teacher, shameless bookworm, and lover of all things Harry Potter, Star Trek, and Star Wars. Julie edits St. Mark's newsletter, which moved to weekly during the pandemic. Julie and husband, Robert, share a love of books and movies, and road trips. They are proud aunt and uncle to three nephews and one niece, a great-nephew and, by the time this is published, a new great-niece.



3 Preachy Prophets



Flourishing Gardens, Blossoming Vines, and Unfaithful Spouses

Reading 14, Hosea 14

So much of Hosea relies on the metaphor of faithless spouses who can't help themselves from being faithless. Hosea is faithful and steadfast; his bride, Gomer, is faithless and fickle. Hosea doesn't deserve a spouse like Gomer and Gomer doesn't deserve a spouse like Hosea.

He could, and perhaps should, leave her, but he doesn't. Hosea doesn't desert Gomer because he is faithful and steadfast. It's his nature.

Hosea (the faithful spouse), of course, is meant to be a metaphor for God. God (and Hosea) are faithful and steadfast even when their spouse is not. God's bride is Israel, the people of God.

Hosea, the prophet, assumes that God's people are unfaithful and are going to be unfaithful. Why is Israel unfaithful? Why are unfaithful spouses unfaithful? The reasons are many: they find other partners more attractive, more beautiful or handsome; other partners make them laugh; other partners provide a different ear for their problems; other partners give better gifts; or they like the way they feel when they're cheating and unfaithful. Or maybe it's the adventure or the risk or the "scandal" of the illicit, unfaithful affair compared to the "boring" character of their spouse at home.

Hosea knows that God's people will be unfaithful, but he hopes and prays that they will be faithful. Hosea is—and will be—faithful to his bride even though he knows it's not their nature. Hosea's nature—and God's nature—is to be faithful and steadfast; the nature and character of God's people is to be faithless.

Hosea 14 is the final appeal to Israel to return to God. Hosea appeals to Israel to return to God. God will welcome them, Hosea says. They don't deserve to be welcomed but welcomed they will be.

And this is indeed the gospel: we don't deserve anything we have, our possessions or our relationships, but God blesses us with food, shelter, and relationships, nonetheless. We will flourish as a garden and blossom like the vine. We will flourish and blossom not because of our character, but because of God's character.

To Consider:

1. What do you have that you don't deserve?
2. What would it mean to flourish as a garden and blossom like the vine?

God, you are faithful and steadfast; we are not. Thank you for welcoming us into your presence so that we may flourish as a garden and blossom like the vine. Amen.

David Ratke is a member of Holy Trinity, Hickory, and retired pastor and faculty member at Lenoir-Rhyne University who enjoys being outdoors especially in his garden trying to contribute to its flourishing.



3 Preachy Prophets



Return to the Source

Reading 15, Joel 1

Joel is tantalizingly sparse on specifics. Israel's sin and key figures during his ministry? Nothing. Yet, Joel is able to plumb the depths of the biblical story. Following his call, we are confronted with reference to a plague of locusts. Is this reference to the plague brought by God in Exodus as part of the liberation of God's people from

slavery in Egypt? Maybe. Is this reference to some swarm of locusts that's plagued God's people since? Maybe. Without catching our breath comes another biblical illusion; the image of God's people being afflicted by a conquering foe. Are these times past; present; or future? Are these the Philistines of old? The Babylonians of present? Or the Romans to come? Maybe.

Joel remains sparse in his details yet rich in his connection to the biblical story. The biblical narrative is scintillating in its ability to spiral through time and space speaking to the trials and tribulations of generations in fresh and invigorating ways. No matter where or when you find yourself, this story Joel bears witness to is your story. It invites you to see yourself as a character in the narrative. The plagues of Egypt, the conquering adversaries, the tempting of injustice are here with you now.

Chapter 1 in the book of Joel invites us to the same thing, repentance. Literally a stopping, a turning around, and a return to the source. This was Luther's call in the Reformation, to return to the source. Likewise, it is the call of Joel and the other preachy prophets; to return to the source, God's mercy for God's people. The source of the biblical story that weaves its way from the brickyards of Egypt, along the wilderness roads of the exodus, into the land flowing with milk and honey, and on into the ordinary and the extraordinary of your life. Return to the source; to the God who calls you into existence, who names and claims you in the waters of baptism, who is more willing to forgive than we are to ask, who wishes that we have life abundantly.

To Consider:

1. Review your own story in light of the biblical story. Where are places where your story connects with the story of God and God's people?
2. How has the mercy that has come to God's people in the biblical story been made fresh for you today?

God, your story comes to me afresh each morning. As you have poured out mercy on your people at all times, give me the eyes of faith to see that mercy coming to me today. Amen.

Jonathan Schnibben is the pastor at Good Shepherd, Mount Holly. In addition to writing devotions for the synod and afflicting his congregation with jokes that aren't really that funny, he also can be found hosting a Podcast, *Ground Up Faith*, where he has authentic conversations with the peculiar people, places, and practices of Christianity.



3 Preachy Prophets



Dreams and Visions

Reading 16, Joel 2

“I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your old shall dream dreams, and your young shall see visions” (Joel 2:28)

Sometimes the Holy Spirit comes in supernatural, dramatic ways as on Pentecost with the escalating sound of a windstorm, dazzling tongues of fire, disciples

speaking in different languages, and thousands added to the church through baptism; in short, with lots of excitement. Sometimes the Spirit moves in gentle, quiet, unassuming ways, yet just as powerful and effective.

On my first visit to the Great Smoky Mountains, I was captivated by what I saw every morning from our hotel balcony. Wisps of smoke and mist continually rose up from the landscape and evaporated into the air. The seen and the unseen, that action, that process silently and continually occurred. Even so, the Holy Spirit of God sends and brings us blessings to rise up in our hearts and lives. We receive and we give away. We are filled and refilled as we share His grace and His gifts with others. Sometimes visibly, sometimes invisibly, ministry takes place and people are blessed.

The prophet Joel tells us that the Lord pours out His Spirit on all humanity, universally, so that new dreams and visions can motivate us and inspire us. As our church and our world recoups and recovers from the COVID pandemic, we need to revisit the questions that have been set before us in the last few years: What is God calling us to be? What is God calling us to do? Personally, how can I respond to His challenge and call to me? Dreams and visions inspire new beginnings, fresh opportunities and endless possibilities. Jesus’ disciples discovered that in the days following Easter and Pentecost. We can too. Just as the morning mist rises up from the mountains, so does the Spirit ascend in our hearts to empower us for living and renew and refresh our ministry.

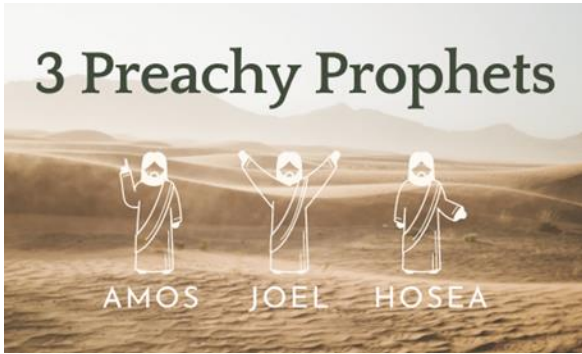
To Consider:

1. How can my dreams and visions be translated into specific ministries for the church?
2. How can they inspire me to serve and bless the lives of others?

Spirit of the living God, fall fresh on me today. Enlarge my vision and help me dream big dreams, to the praise and glory of your Name. Amen.

The Rev. Joseph A. Miller has served congregations in Illinois, Iowa, South Dakota, and North Carolina. He likes to travel, play the accordion, and collect U.S. commemorative stamps. He and his wife, Marcia, have two sons and two granddaughters.





In that Day... Reading 17, Joel 3

The late prophetess, Rachel Held Evans, talks at length about how the Bible is full of contradictions. If like me, you are particularly drawn to the prophet Micah, you may have heard one of those contradictions in today's reading from Joel. Micah 4:3 tells us that swords will be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks

and Joel 3:10 tells us that plowshares should be beaten into swords and pruning hooks into spears. Quite frankly, I'm much more comfortable with the movement *away* from the violence that we hear from Micah than I am with the movement *towards* violence that we hear from Joel.

This chapter of Joel has a few purposes: to proclaim judgment on Judah's enemies—Egypt, Edom, and others—who have oppressed Judah's people and taken them hostage, and to encourage the people of Judah to rise up against their enemies, trusting that the Lord will protect them, and be their refuge, their shield.

Perhaps this passage makes me so uncomfortable because the privileges I hold as a straight, white, middle-class woman with an upper-level degree make me much more like the people of Egypt and Edom than the people of Judah. Perhaps this passage makes me so uncomfortable because the systems in which I'm complicit *other*, oppress, and outcast those who do not hold the same levels of privilege that I do: those who live in poverty, those who are refugees, those who are seeking political asylum, those who are like the people of Judah.

The Good News I hear in this passage is that the day is coming when the Lord will dwell in Zion and shower upon Judah many blessings: Judah will be occupied no more. As followers of Christ, we're called to be a part of ushering in the Kingdom of God to the here and now, of accompanying the Lord to the House of Zion. We do this by taking a hard and honest look at the currents we're swept up in, and by making conscious decisions to swim upstream. Are you in?

To Consider:

1. Do you align yourself with the people of Judah or Judah's enemies in this passage? Why do you think this is?
2. What is one thing you can commit to doing that will make your community a more just place for all its members?

God of justice and mercy, give us eyes to see the systems in which we're complicit. Give us ears to hear how you're calling us to be agents of your reign. Give us minds to know how we might make changes in our own lives to work towards justice. And give us ready and willing spirits to answer the call. Amen.

The Rev. Julie Tonnesen serves as the campus minister for LEAF (Lutherans, Episcopalians, and friends) at Elon University, and as associate pastor at Macedonia, Burlington. She loves spending time outdoors with her friends and family, reading good books, drinking strong coffee, and hiking with her dog, Gracie.



3 Preachy Prophets



A Shepherd, Not a Prophet

Reading 18, Amos 1

God needs a shepherd, not a prophet. In the eighth century BCE, His “flocks” are scattered and spiritually deaf. So, the Almighty chooses a man—not a prophet—a shepherd and an arbor keeper from the tiny hovel of Tekoa, a town huddled yet today on an angled hillside outside of Bethlehem.

After all, a shepherd knows how to gather a flock, not just with a gentle voice but with the goading swat of his staff. Here in Chapter 1, Amos prods with the prophetic formula of an un-prophet, “For three transgressions... and for four, I will not revoke the punishment” of Damascus (vss. 3-5), Gaza (vss. 6-8), and Edom (vss. 11-12). These “sheep” of the world have bullied and beaten God’s “flocks” into defeat and slavery. So, Amos’ words hammer on their power again and again.

But just when God’s “sheep” are about to say, “Yes, Lord, give it to them. They deserve it!,” Amos stuns God’s own flocks with the same formula, the same thumping rod, “For three transgressions and for four, I will not revoke the punishment.” (Of course, this is Amos 2.) The Jewish flocks of Judah and Israel are a divided kingdom, attacking each other behind two kings, Uzziah and Jeroboam, after the death of one King Solomon. They are no better than the “flocks of the nations.”

Today, Lord knows, we still need a shepherd as much as a prophet. We bully the “sheep” of the world and the “sheep of God’s hand.” We bleat against Capitol rioters and the Derek Chauvins, the George Floyds and Black Lives Matter protesters, then “baa” because “there is no unity” in the flock or really in our nation. We confess that we are Christians and belong to God’s one flock, but judge and exclude those who will not condemn gays, pro-choicers, and Muslims as “unsaved.” So, what are we saved for—only to judge and exclude and divide?

If this division is going to end, something—or someone—must happen. “I am the Good Shepherd; the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” (John 10:11). And the result is “so there will be one flock, one shepherd” (John 10:16). Only Jesus can gather us into one unified flock.

To Consider:

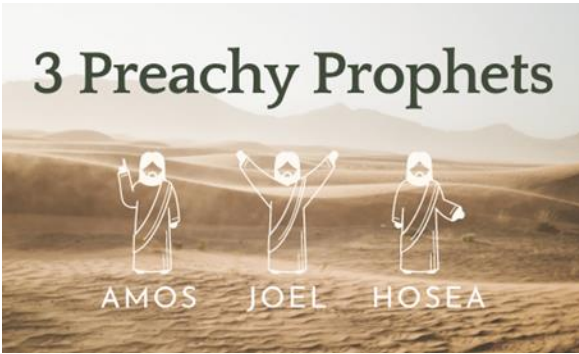
1. Name one individual or group whom you have judged in the last month. What has this judging done to them? What has it done to you?
2. How would the promise of forgiveness from the Good Shepherd toward the one you have been judging change your behavior or feelings about them? Could you Include them in your prayers? Why?

O judging and forgiving Good Shepherd, open our eyes to find You in those who hurt us, divide from us, and we from them. Remind us that You have come to open our hearts to those who feel the pain of our suspicion, separation, and judging. Make us one and unify us, not for the sake of unity, but for the one “flock” for which You gave Yourself. Thank You for the pain to make all of this happen through the staff of Your cross, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Rich Hites is a retired pastor who lives in Hickory, NC with his wife, Peg, and special needs son, Clark. In his retirement, he likes to travel and write and has published three fictional novels of New Testament characters, *God’s Centurion*, *Prophet of Corinth*, and *Great and Beloved Physician*, all available on Amazon.



3 Preachy Prophets



Judgment Time—Part 2

Reading 19, Amos 2

Amos 2 continues the judgment against the nations that was first introduced in the previous chapter. First, God speaks through Amos and issues a judgment on Moab because the “Moabites burned the bones of the King of Edom” (Amos 2:1, NRSV). The cries of the trumpet and divine fire and wrath from God will pour onto Moab, thus signaling their defeat (Amos 2:2-3). Second, Amos prophesies the destruction of Judah, and Judah’s primary offense is “rejecting the decrees and commandments of God” and “following in the ways of their ancestors (Amos 2:4-5). Judah will also be consumed by divine fire. This is scary news for those against whom Amos prophesied against, and that is nerve-wracking today as we wrestle with God’s judgment on the nations. Lastly, Amos prophesies the destruction of Israel. Chapter 2, while it mentions the other nations, is focused primarily on the nation of Israel. The ten tribes of Israel separated themselves from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. Israel’s sins against God are tricky to name, but their sins boil down to the abuse of the neighbor and the worship of idols.

The Lord recounts how the Israelites were delivered from the Amorites, inhabitants of the Promised Land before the Israelite Conquest (Amos 2:9), and the Egyptians, who enslaved the nation of Israel before God delivered them from slavery (Amos 2:10). God even recounts how certain prophets and Nazirites were raised from up within the community, but the Nazirites were corrupted with wine. Nazirites were holy men who were set apart from the community, who maintained a level of spiritual and physical purity. (Samson was a Nazirite). To maintain this purity, the Nazirites avoided alcohol and defiling dead corpses. They also let their hair grow. As the Nazirites were corrupted, the prophets were told not to prophesy (Amos 2:11-12). God tells Israel: you aren’t escaping this one.

But there is a catch within this judgment call: God still extends God’s mercy, which sets the stage for the rest of the book. God has a preferential option for the poor and marginalized, but God is slow to anger, and mercy and love abound in abundance. God is disappointed that Israel has forsaken its covenant with God, but the hope here is that God’s love doesn’t end. God promises to restore Israel and Judah following their destruction, and that even when we mess up, God still loves us.

To Consider:

1. Has there been a time in your life where you felt that you didn’t do as God commanded and you felt as if God would punish you?
2. How does this passage make you feel in today’s context?

Gracious and Merciful God, You are slow to anger, boundless in mercy and love. Grant us mercy even as we make mistakes; mistakes that are against our neighbors. Guide us to a life that also considers the needs of our neighbor, that we are freed to serve our neighbor. We ask this through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

Thomas Johnston finished his first year of seminary at Trinity Lutheran Seminary at Capital University. He enjoys reading, writing, and playing music. Thomas is also the Field Education student at Jacob’s Porch, a Lutheran Campus Ministry at The Ohio State University.



3 Preachy Prophets



Israel Gets a Time Out

Reading 20, Amos 3

When I first began reading Amos Chapter 3, I immediately thought about a disappointed parent justifying how and why they are going to punish their favorite child. I saw God as a stern dad who was provoked by his children, and now it is time for them to be put into time out. “You only have I known of all the

families of the earth: therefore, I will punish you for all your iniquities” (Amos 3:2). God gave great privilege and an anointing of blessings to His people. This makes it even more inexcusable of the behaviors exhibited by the children of Israel.

Throughout the Bible, God has shown tremendous love for the children of Israel. He brought the twelve tribes of Israel to the Promised Land out of Egypt. Because of his love and care for His people, He brought them out of great darkness and suffering into His marvelous light and an *agapé* style of love. God expected this great nation to live by a higher standard. Out of all the nations mentioned in the Bible, Israel was the only who had a very close relationship with God. He entrusted them with His law, and His children deliberately disregard what He has asked of them.

As I read this chapter, I surely thought He would have mercy upon His people for they are of flesh and did not know any better. However, Amos 3:3-6 shows the inescapable logic of God’s judgment. Amos connects “Do two walk together unless they have agreed to do so?” to “When disaster comes to a city, has not the Lord caused it?” with six statements reinforcing when nothing is of luck or chance; when the children of Israel are punished for their sins, it will be at the hand of the Lord.

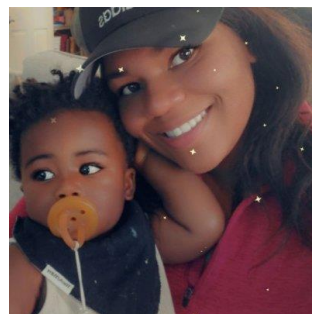
Amos is a messenger of God; he is seen warning the people of Israel to brace themselves for their time out. He is also writing to remind us that God has high expectations of His children and as a stern parent, He will give us a time out when we stray from the path He has for us.

To Consider:

1. Do you believe you have upheld the standards God has set for us as His children?
2. What standards do you have for yourself as a follower of Christ?

Heavenly Father, continue to hold us in your light and guide us back when we stray from your path. Help us to meditate daily on your holy word so that we can grow stronger in faith and put you first in everything we do. For you know of the greatness in store for us, Amen.

Tiffany Shine is a recent graduate of the Special Education Master’s program at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. She enjoys advocating for others through community outreach programs for children and fighting injustices in the classroom.



3 Preachy Prophets



I Am Because You Are

Reading 21, Amos 4

At the beginning of this chapter, one finds a poetic recount of a nation feasting comfortably on profits exploited from their most vulnerable citizens. Though Amos' language uses a feminine form to describe the oppressors we acknowledge that he is speaking to a broader audience. His words are for all people that

separate themselves from those suffering under the weight of oppression. A people cannot be whole if one person is broken by the system that supports the people.

The interconnectedness of human beings creates opportunities for joy in the crevices of life. Reminders of this truth can be found with each video of a family reuniting or children excited to see their best friends after months of separation. Hearts are touched even at startling moments when laughter permeates ears unexpectedly or nature startles with beauty beyond the imagination. There are unseen fibers binding people together throughout the world.

The fabric of humanity does not find its end at pleasure; however, it rounds the edge of pain gripping tightly to the bodies of all beings. This is exemplified when Amos reminds the reader that some fields received rain while others continued to be dry forcing populations to migrate in search of places to quench their thirst and hunger. Whether someone was food-and-water-insecure or in a town receiving climate refugees, the impact could be felt on a personal level. Each individual was affected by those hurting the most. The same hearts that are often open to share joy were closed to carry the burden of pain that bound their neighbors.

We are also asked to examine our connections to humanity. Those who hunger, who are unable to safely quench their thirst, who have no safety in their body, the poor and the needy, occupy space in our congregations, schools, and communities. Some are reading this devotional. Let us all be mindful that there is no separation between the oppression of one person and the community. Together we can move forward crafting a culture that honors each person in the fullness of their humanity. God has always loved us; may we always love one another.

To Consider:

1. How can I advocate, organize, and/or meet the needs of the most vulnerable in my community?
2. Has God created paths for me to do that work already? If so, what's stopping me?

Creator of the universe, thank you for gently caring for us even when we don't care for others. Gird us with courage to step out in action against the evils of oppression harming people as well nature. Help us to love our siblings in thought, word, and deed. In the name of the Redeemer, we pray. Amen.

Minister Kathlene Judd is Theologian-in-Residence at Prince of Peace, Greensboro. She's an avid urban gardener, reader, and poet who dreams of a world beyond her wildest imagination.



3 Preachy Prophets



A Wellspring of Justice

Reading 22, Amos 5

God does not want empty words or rituals; God wants God's people to draw near to God, to "hate evil and love what is good and establish justice." (v. 15) The word translated as 'justice' is the Hebrew word *mishpat*. (v. 7, 15, 24) *Mishpat* is the vindication of the oppressed, the restorative action of God on behalf of those who are

silenced, ignored, or forgotten.

When the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. addressed more than 250,000 people in Washington, D.C. on August 28, 1963, he echoed the prophet Amos, declaring,

*No, no, we are not satisfied,
and we will not be satisfied,
until justice rolls down like water and righteousness like a mighty spring.*

In San Francisco's Yerba Buena Gardens, a public art installation memorializes King. Granite walls and a roaring 20-foot waterfall surround engraved quotes from King's speeches, including this one from Amos. The thunderous waterfall sets the space apart and drowns out the city sounds, inviting you into a sacred space or thin place.

Streams of water, mighty springs, and waterfalls all remind me of baptism. I learned later that in fact, the installation, titled "Revelation", was designed to evoke the image of immersive baptism. In baptism we are made children of God and find life in loving who and what God loves, and whenever we affirm our baptism in worship, we promise again to "work for justice and peace among all people."

Fifty-eight years after King's speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, we still are not satisfied because our thirst for justice has not been quenched, but we can be confident that in the waters of baptism, God makes everything new, and forgiving our many trespasses and offenses (v. 12), calls us to live and speak in ways that allow abundant justice and righteousness to flow unobstructed.

To Consider:

1. How do you remember your baptism? Find out your baptism date and put a reminder on your calendar. Every year, light a candle and say a prayer of thanksgiving to God for giving you life.
2. How do you work for justice in your congregation, community, or in the world? (Looking for ideas? Check out the synod's Racial Justice Network or ELCA Advocacy)

Good and gracious God, make us relentless in loving You and each other. Help us remember our baptism and let us never be satisfied until your abundant justice flows freely to all people. Amen.

Pastor Christina Auch serves Ascension, Shelby and as a staff chaplain at Atrium Cleveland. She and her husband Jamie delight in porch sitting, campfires, and watching their two 20-something daughters take on the world.



3 Preachy Prophets



Created for Service

Reading 23, Amos 6

We have spent a few weeks listening to prophets bring a word from the Lord about the ways God's people regularly fail. In chapter six, Amos lists being at ease and feeling secure (when our neighbors are not), being sure our kingdoms are better than others, and eating lambs and calves from our vast stock (when our

neighbors are hungry) as reasons the Lord will raise an enemy up against those who claim to be faithful. We fail at generosity, community, faithful worship, neighbor-love, and good ol' self-control. Ouch. It might be hard to keep reading when these prophets don't let up!

But, let's stay engaged and discover God's grace in the love holding all of this together.

Amos brings this word of judgment from the God of Love. This contempt for selfishness comes from the deep ache for the abundant life that comes from generous living. God wants this for us, not only out of concern for our suffering neighbor but because it is the very best life for us. We know this is true because we feel most whole when we are loving and serving well. Is your favorite memory of your family the time people lavished gifts on you? Or is it when there was a crisis and you all showed up, even when it cost you time, money, or other resources?

Here at the seminary, we have plenty of fellowship around late night campfires. Those nights of laughter and storytelling are great fun. The moments when someone gets serious and shares a struggle they are having in a class or candidacy or with their child/partner/parent/friend—those moments when the laughter stops and the deep wells of concern and love take its place, those moments are richer than the laughter.

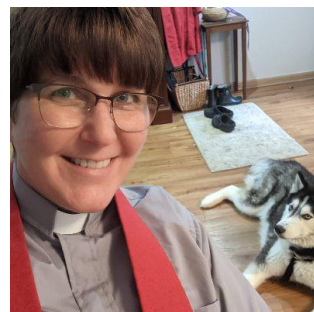
We were created for each other. We are stitched up this way. Our hearts recognize that serving a neighbor feels like home because we are created in the image of a servant God. It is from whence we come. We do not come from gluttony and self-preservation; we come from God. We come from love.

To Consider:

1. Being vulnerable and honest, what is *one piece* of your life where you could sacrifice for the sake of your neighbor? What resources are plentiful for you—resources God may be calling you to share? Considering the gifts of time, money, reputation, power, or privilege, which resource could you easily share? Which feels scarce?
2. Call to mind a memory wherein your heart felt right because you were serving rather than receiving. Give thanks to God for the deep-seated holy place in you that loves well, recognizing that the source of your neighbor-love is God.

Source of every good thing, there are many voices trying to convince us that your judgment is quick and vengeful, and you are slow to forgiveness. Remind us that your judgment comes from love and you never tire of forgiving us. We love you, and we trust you. Amen.

The Rev. Jennifer L. Shimota is the Coordinator of Seminary Enrollment at Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary in Columbia, SC. She lives on the seminary campus with her Siberian Husky, Eleanor Rigby. Their very favorite thing is chatting with students while they are out for their walk around campus. Also snacks; they like snacks.



3 Preachy Prophets



Common Prophet

Reading 24, Amos 7

I admire Amos. He knows who he is: “I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees” (v 14). His clarity is calming and profound to me, yet somewhat alarming. Perhaps, he unsettles me because for the last eight years, I’ve journeyed with young adults as they grapple with who they are and who God calls them to be. They

feel pressure to pick a major, a career path with a certainty that once this decision is made and embraced, life will fall into place. This myth appeals to me even 15 years removed from college. If I just pick a career, a partner, a cause, I’ll know who I am and what my life is about.

But this line of thinking is a lie, an idol even. At baptism, the whole church celebrates as we receive our true identity through water and Word by the power of the Holy Spirit: we are a child of God. No matter how many times we change our major, our job, or neighborhood, we are a child of God. No matter how many times we change our style, the car we drive, or our hobbies, we are a child of God!

And one of the exciting parts of being a child of God, is that we know whose we are and the life God calls us to lead—one rooted in sacraments, Scripture, and community through which we embody love, justice, and healing to ourselves, our neighbors, and all creation.

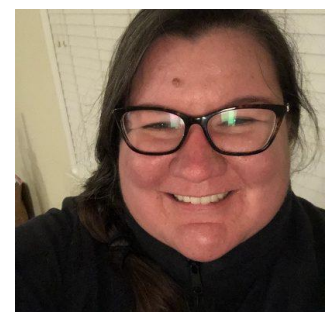
And one of the exciting parts of being a child of God steeped in Lutheran theology is how we affirm that in any vocation we are called to proclaim the good news! Whether you’re a student or teacher, auto mechanic or data analyst, homemaker or farmer, God wants you to share the good news and a prophetic word! It might feel uncomfortable. Folks might look at you funny, but when the Lord calls you to go and prophesy, I hope you respond like Amos: “I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son; but I am a parent and a teacher...and the Lord said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people’”(vv14-15).

To Consider:

1. Amos confronts Israel with how they have turned from God and doesn’t back down when confronted by the king’s priest. What gives you courage to speak a hard truth?
2. How is God calling you and your faith community to work for justice and peace?

God who calls us, you speak and we strive to listen. Root us in our calling as your child. Empower us with an abundance of the Holy Spirit. Equip us with the faith of Christ to live out and speak your word. Amen.

Pastor Jennifer M. Manis is a lifelong Lutheran and a ruff Raleigh dog mom. She cares deeply about the intersection of racial justice, trauma, Health at Every Size, and Christian theology. She’s slowly learning Norwegian and believes each day needs Jesus, coffee, and music.



3 Preachy Prophets



Be Silent

Reading 25, Amos 8

God advocates mightily for the poor, oppressed, and marginalized who cannot amplify their own voices in the book of Amos. God's harsh judgment for those in power, and for us today, leaves a deafening silence in its wake. Yet, it is through this absence of sound that God creates space for us to hear the voices of our

brothers and sisters in Christ who are too often silenced by injustice.

Amos, Joel, and Hosea challenge us to listen, to hear their jarring words, and to stay engaged with their texts. Throughout our lives, many of us have had the privilege of choosing the narratives we want to claim as our own and discarding those that don't serve us well. Amos reminds us that the privilege to choose doesn't hold true with the Word of God.

Be silent.

Courageously sit with words that cause us pain.

Own the injustice that we continue to perpetuate today.

Listen to the lived experiences of others and accept them as their truth.

Work together to dismantle systems that give some privilege and others inequity.

Live with the confidence that despite our imperfection, God empowers and sends each of us to strive for justice and peace in all the world.

God proclaims God's never-ending love for us through the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion. Living in this promise emboldens us to claim and confess the truth of our sins and receive God's abundant forgiveness. Our faith may waver and wane, but God's faithfulness remains steadfast. God will unite us as one people, transforming the mess of our broken pieces into a magnificent mosaic, through which God's light will shine upon all of creation.

To Consider:

1. Whose voice could you hear more clearly through time spent in silence?
2. How do you use your gifts to strive for justice and peace in our world? Is God calling you to anything new?

We give you thanks, O God, for the gift of your Word. Help us to listen deeply to your story and to those of our neighbors whose voices are rarely heard. Empower us to bring your lifegiving hope and love to our world. Amen.

Wendy Engelhard Roberts is Deacon at Morning Star in Matthews. In her free time, she enjoys spending time with her family and rescue pup, preferably outdoors.



3 Preachy Prophets



The Inescapable God

Reading 26, Amos 9

Amos has been bringing the heat with his words from the Lord, and in this final vision of the Lord standing beside the altar, the heat is inescapable. It begins at the altar with the ceiling crumbling in, but those who are not killed by the rubble will be met with the sword, and there is no escape—not down to *Sheol* nor up to

heaven, nor top of a mountain, nor bottom of the sea—“not one of them shall escape,” says the Lord.

Those of us who love a Gospel of Niceness don't know what to do with this. But, in truth, we don't need to know what to do with this. While there are other prophetic tasks in which we are called to participate, the execution of divine judgment is not one of them. But divine judgment from a God who is Goodness cannot be evil. Just as God's love is inexhaustible (the steadfast love of the Lord endures forever), God's judgment on sin and evil is inescapable. There is nowhere evil can hide that God cannot root it out. Even *Sheol*, the shadowy pit, is not a safe place for wickedness to hide. As verses 5-8 proclaim, the Lord is over all and this is ultimately good news. Make no doubt—it is terrifying for evil and corruption—but it is good news for creation, because God is actively involved in creation, setting the world to rights.

Amos, as a farmer, knew that a good farmer doesn't just sit back and watch. The farmer actively drives out pests and predators, and weeds, and prunes. Divine judgment is good news because God doesn't just sit back and watch evil taking over, God is involved in actively driving it out, weeding, and pruning.

Amos ends with this prophecy from the Lord of a garden that is whole—a place to be planted and thrive and enjoy the fruits thereof—a hearkening back to the first garden. This is what it has all been about: driving out evil to make space for creation to thrive as God intended.

To Consider:

1. We always like to think we're the hero of the story—in this case, an Amos—but what if we're the ones he's preaching to? Recognizing the sin and corruption in our own hearts, how do we hear God's inescapable judgment as good news for us personally?
2. How do you use your gifts to strive for justice and peace in our world? Is God calling you to anything new?

Lord God, you love your creation and hate what is evil. Drive out the sin that corrupts my own heart first—root it out; put it to death—so that I may be an instrument for your divine justice and righteousness in the world, for the sake of your Son, Jesus. Amen.

Laura Weant is the pastor at Bethany, Boone, and bears almost no resemblance to the prophet Amos, except in a nearly opposite trajectory, as a preacher who is learning to farm, as a dresser of vegetable gardens, and raiser of chickens, and trying to learn about God in the process with her husband and two kids.



3 Preachy Prophets



3 Preachy Prophets

Conclusion

Let's acknowledge the elephant in the room. You have just finished a study of three incredibly challenging and uncomfortable prophetic texts. These are not parables about finding lost lambs or uplifting psalms about the glory of God. The extended metaphor of Hosea's marriage to Gomer is full of judgement and humiliation.

The prophet's words about her sting; he calls her a whore, a term full of hatred and condemnation. The book of Joel is full of images of agricultural devastation, invading armies, and impending divine judgment. The book of Amos offers personalized curses against the enemies of Israel, and condemnation of Israel itself for valuing commerce and luxury above the basic needs of all of its citizens. The prophets' words, especially when we remember they are speaking on behalf of God, feel angry and dangerous at times.

All three prophets are describing a fractured relationship between God and humanity. The language used by the prophets suggests that God feels betrayed and let down by God's people. This language of hurt and disappointment we hear in Amos, Hosea, and Joel is likely familiar to many of us, if we are willing to admit it. I have spoken harshly and made exaggerated statements to partners, friends, and family when I have felt wounded by them. What words have you spit out at a loved one in the heat of the moment that you wish you could take back?

Just like many of our own difficult conversations (often arguments) with beloved people, understanding and a commitment to reconcile are interwoven with the tirade. Hosea 14:4 reads, "I will heal their disloyalty; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them." Joel 2: 26 says, "You shall eat plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God, who has dealt wondrously with you. And my people shall never again be put to shame." Amos 9:14 proclaims, "I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit." There it is, the promise of reconciliation when the anger is spent. The relationship with God and humanity is never broken beyond repair; abundance, mercy, and intimacy with God are always on the horizon.

To Consider:

1. Food for thought: How can we show mercy and cultivate abundance with beloved folks with whom we have quarreled?

Dear God, your words in the mouth of the prophets can shock and frighten us. We sometimes even feel deep anger at you, Lord. In these moments of doubt, hurt, and fear, when we feel that important relationships may be damaged beyond repair, remind us that return to a loving relationship is possible. Healing is possible. Abundance, mercy, and intimacy are on the horizon. Amen.

Leann Pace is a professor at Wake Forest University, mom to Clemmie (in pic), Solly and Isabella, and wife to Jon. She is committed to cultivating a welcoming but decidedly anti-racist home and classroom. She is also very worried about how the family cats will fare without constant attention once everyone returns to in-person teaching and learning in the fall.

