



On your marks

We don't often look at the stories in the minor prophets with our children's group or as part of an all-age celebration. The complex historical references in these books, the violent imagery and the themes are largely too sombre and heavy. They're not easy to digest whatever our age! However, these spokespeople for God, living as they did in faithless times, dared to speak out for justice and for God's truth. In their day, these prophets weren't popular. They were voices from the edge that no one wanted to hear. Nevertheless, they tackled important issues at the heart of what faith is all about, then and today: they challenged empty religious practices, the neglect of the poor and marginalised; they reminded people of the need for honesty and integrity in public affairs, and that loving your neighbour is at the heart of loving God.

Traditionally, passages from the prophets help us to get ready for the season of Christmas during the time of Advent. Their message is one of warning and judgement but also hope, promise and love. Their words remind us that God does not turn a blind eye to the mess we have made of our lives and his world, and they recognise that this will need to be accounted for one day. Nevertheless, God's love for us is so great that he wants us to turn away from what is spoiling everything and find instead his power to help us change. This power to begin again is wrapped up in the gift of himself as Jesus at Christmas and so these prophets, in a way beyond their knowing, are also pointing to the coming king who will change everything.

Get set

This is part of a mini Advent series that offers a way to get ready for the events of Christmas by exploring the messages from three of the minor prophets in a way that is accessible for all-ages. This session focuses on Hosea, the prophet of judgement and justice. See also: [Amos - judgement and justice](#) and [Micah - judgement and hope](#).

Each prophet's story contains material for a session and includes: background on the prophet; a key passage to read together; some questions; an idea for a visual aid; an activity; a prayer idea; a key verse to take away; and a link to the mystery of Christmas. This material could be used for a session with your children's group or as inspiration for an all-age celebration.

For a storytelling version of Hosea, see The Barnabas Children's Bible (story 192).

Go!

Background

Hosea, unlike Amos and Micah, didn't just pass on his message with words - he acted out God's love for his people. He married someone who didn't deserve to be loved; he had children with her, giving them unpromising names, but these would change; he loved her even though she didn't love him back; and he even bought her back from slavery after she had left him for someone else. He never



gave up on her. This is the sort of love God has for everyone. God's love is always there ready to start again and give us a fresh start. Much of the book of Hosea is an angry denunciation of how the people of Israel had been unfaithful to God by 'marrying' money, power and pleasure instead... but despite all this, God still wanted to love them!

Key passage

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and I called my son out of Egypt. But as the saying goes, 'The more they were called, the more they rebelled.' They never stopped offering incense and sacrifices to the idols of Baal.

I took Israel by the arm and taught them to walk. But they would not admit that I was the one who had healed them. I led them with kindness and with love, not with ropes. I held them close to me; I bent down to feed them.

But they trusted Egypt instead of returning to me; now Assyria will rule them. War will visit their cities, and their plans will fail. My people are determined to reject me for a god they think is stronger, but he can't help.

Israel, I can't let you go. I can't give you up. How could I possibly destroy you as I did the towns of Admah and Zeboiim? I just can't do it. My feelings for you are much too strong. Israel, I won't lose my temper and destroy you again. I am the Holy God - not merely a human being, and I won't stay angry.

I, the Lord, will roar like a lion, and my children will return, trembling from the west. They will come back, fluttering like birds from Egypt or like doves from Assyria. Then I will bring them back to their homes. I, the Lord, have spoken!

Hosea 11:1-11 (CEV)

Questions

- How does God describe the sort of love he has for his people?
- How has God gone on loving them even though they hadn't understood it?
- In what way is God's love so special?
- What does God most want for his people?
- Why is God's love so important for us?
- How has God shown his love to you?

Visual aid

The fact that Hosea chose to marry Gomer would have been a shock to the people of his day. She didn't deserve him... just as the people didn't deserve God's love.

Using a wedding ring and some 'baby congratulations' cards as a visual aid to explain that Hosea



and Gomer had three children who initially were given unpromising names whose meaning reminded everyone about God's disappointment with Israel - 'God scatters', 'Not my people' and 'No mercy'. But these names were later changed and their new names spoke of God's forgiveness - 'God blesses', 'My people' and 'Shown mercy' (see Hosea 1 and 2). Find out what your name means - does it contain a promise?

Activity idea

Go and take a look at any flowers or shrubs that are growing in some soil near you.

- Are the plants healthy?
- Are there any weeds?
- How could the conditions be improved?

What grows in the soil can be a picture of what is happening in our lives. In Hosea 10:12-13, Hosea uses the picture of sowing seeds to illustrate what sort of lives the people have been living and what sort of harvest they have produced. He wanted the people to pull up the weeds, prune back the unhelpful shoots, and make sure that there was good growth. Perhaps you could spend some time weeding and tending the patch of soil you have found to remind yourselves of God's loving care for us all.

Prayer idea

Hosea uses some more garden imagery - in particular, trees - as a picture of what God longs us all to be like (Hosea 12:6-7). He mentions lilies, olives and cedars, each of which have strong scents. God wants us to be a good, positive influence in this world. Use a picture of a large tree in blossom and touch the branches as you ask God to make you strong, beautiful and a blessing to others in the week ahead.

Key verse

Plough your fields, scatter seeds of justice and harvest faithfulness...

Hosea 10:12

The Christmas link

Christmas is only part of God's great rescue plan for the world. The baby in the manger must also become the man on the cross. But Hosea predicts that something amazing will happen 'after three days' (see Hosea 6:1-3). It will bring a new beginning for the world. The truth of the resurrection is here and is also part of the promise of love which we celebrate at Christmas, as Zechariah prophesies as part of the Christmas story:

God's love and kindness will shine upon us like the sun that rises in the sky. On us who live in the dark shadow of death this light will shine to guide us into a life of peace.



Luke 1:78-79