

Hosea's conviction: Hosea 11:1-11

by [Elizabeth Myer Boulton](#) in the [July 27, 2010](#) issue

“Brothers and sisters, if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. Let us therefore join our hearts together in prayer. . . .”

With these words, I invite my congregation into a spirit of confession week after week. To some extent it works: everyone dutifully bows, prays, holds silence, sings a contemplative chorus and rises for the words of assurance.

It’s a nice segment of the service, but it lacks a certain punch. It lacks heart. It lacks the passionate conviction of Hosea, one of the most striking, enigmatic voices in the Bible.

Like so many of the prophets, Hosea lived during a time of chaos and upheaval: the Northern Kingdom (Israel) and the Southern Kingdom (Judah) had just split, Egypt and Assyria were bearing down and God’s people were backsliding, following other gods and breaking commandments left and right. God and Hosea agreed—this was no time for a soft-spoken call to confession.

I think my invitation lacks Hosea’s conviction because I worry that people don’t like to talk about sin and repentance; the words make them feel embarrassed and uncomfortable. The prophet’s deep wisdom, however, is this: the fear of repentance springs from insecurity and spiritual amnesia.

Israel, Hosea cries, has forgotten her story. It’s been too long since she’s opened up the family photo album, lingering over those tiny ink footprints, touching the fine locks of hair that fell to the floor after the first haircut. It’s been too long since she’s remembered who she really is.

Israel has forgotten her birth narrative, and this memory lapse has landed her back in bondage—and this time the slavery is as spiritual as it is tangible.

So God sets up the projector, dims the lights, and through Hosea begins to narrate the sequence of images: “I remember the day you were born, the groaning and the aching and the crying out. I remember the Red Sea water breaking; I remember the

pangs of labor, as if the whole world was going to rip apart, but then I caught you in my arms and I fell madly in love. I taught you how to walk. I picked you up when you fell, pressed your cheek against mine. When you cried out, I let down food for you. Like a mother bird I fed you; like a good physician I healed you. Don't you remember?"

Far too often we don't. A friend of mine is pastoring a small church in Chicago that is experiencing its own chaos and upheaval: the church almost split this winter over the color of the carpet in the ladies' parlor. On the night of the vote, the Northern Kingdom (the Maroon Camp) wouldn't speak to the Southern Kingdom (the Forest Green Camp), and the moderator had to call for a secret ballot, the first in 75 years.

While they were voting, thousands of Haitians were leaving their makeshift homes to wade through rubble in order to hold an open-air worship service and conduct a national day of mourning. They lifted up their hands and their voices to remember the thousands of people buried in mass graves without a funeral, without flowers, without anyone sharing scripture's proclamation of resurrection for the body and newness of life.

My colleague called me from her office a few hours after the vote. With all the congregational drama, she had forgotten to pray for her brothers and sisters in Haiti. She was angry with herself and her people. While worshipping the carpet as if it were Baal, they did nothing to remember, nothing to soothe the pain or to help put back together the brokenness of the world.

In the face of our self-centered amnesia, Hosea's tone shifts markedly, and God declares the unthinkable: "They shall return to the land of Egypt . . . because they have refused to return to me."

These words fly in the face of the sentimental portrait we paint of God, and of any concept of divine love that is more saccharine than serious. As Christians, we're not supposed to be fighting over carpet! We're supposed to be fighting for the dignity of all people, praying for the relief of suffering and playing our part in God's coming new world, where mourning, crying and pain will be no more.

This is who we really are. This is what we were born to do. When we turn away from this important and tender work, when we fight over carpet, deny our destructive addiction to oil, eat or drink too much, or cross to the other side of the road to avoid getting involved with a neighbor in need—we need a prophet to stop us in our tracks

and turn us around. In other words, we need to trust in God's mercy, confess our brokenness, repent of our sin and remember that God brought us up out of slavery and into freedom and will do so again.

The next time I invite my congregation to confess, I'm going to try to spice it up a little. I'm going to channel not only that enigmatic prophet of old but also that fierce, uncompromising grace that makes all things new.

God is angry with us—and I can see why. But God is also tender and forgiving, and at the end of the day, divine mercy will have the last word: "I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath." No, God will come like a lion, roaring love's hair-raising roar, and all the trembling birds will finally come home.