

Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap steadfast love; break up your fallow ground, for it is the time to seek the Lord, that he may come and rain righteousness upon you. Hosea 10:12

Today is the first Sunday of the New Year of 2016, and as with every New Year season we tend to look back and reflect on where we have been – and then look forward and consider where we are going. It is always interesting to see what the media reflects on the past and considers regarding the future. But this New Year there seemed to be one common issue that most of the media saw in the past, which will still continue in the future, and that issue is *fear*. Now of course the majority of the *fear* that is in our culture today stems from the wide spread terrorist activity that has been happening throughout our world – and so even though there is a slim chance of Port Alberni experiencing any kind of terrorist attack, we still see fear in the news and its often common fodder that sparks conversations with others.

A recent survey in the U. S. found that 80% of those polled believe a major terrorist attack will happen in the next year and in a presidential election year, the billionaire Donald Trump finds himself the frontrunner of the Republican party as his campaign rhetoric is always laced with the politics of fear. This is no different than our recent federal election in Canada as Steven Harper made the need to protect our country from terrorists a campaign issue – and Justin Trudeau did the same on the opposing side by telling voters is they removed Harper, “we have the chance to beat fear with hope.” Well the truth is, removing Steven Harper will not change the fact that French intelligence agencies were fully aware of the imminent threat of the terrorist that killed 130 and injured 360 in Paris last November – *but they did not act on it*. The same was true when 3000 people were killed the U.S. in the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 – and for almost every terrorist attack since then. The question that is always being asked is: Why did those whom we place in positions of responsibility and authority ignore information that may have prevented terrorist attacks? A better question might be: Why do we all ignore warnings and cautions we read and hear in our daily lives? Warnings and cautions are posted on nearly everything we use, and while some are valid - many are so absurd or trivial, that they seem to indicate a lack of common sense in the user. A few true examples in our day:

Toilet Plunger - Caution: Do not use near power lines.

Hair Coloring – Warning: Do not use as an ice cream topping.

Sleep Aid medication - Warning: may cause drowsiness.

Christmas Tree Lights - Warning: For indoor or outdoor use only.

Floodlight – Caution: This floodlight is capable of illuminating large areas, even in the dark.

Mattress - Warning: Do not attempt to swallow.

Matches - Caution: Contents may catch fire.

Rain Gauge – Caution: Suitable for outdoor use only.

Road Sign – Caution: Water on road during rain.

Iron - Warning: Never iron clothes while on the body.

Bottle of Ketchup - Instructions: Put on food.

500-piece puzzle – Instructions: Some assembly required.

Jar of peanuts - Warning: contains nuts.

Blanket – Warning: not to be used as protection from a tornado.

Disposable razor – Warning: Do not use this product during an earthquake.

Toner cartridge for a laser printer – Warning: Do not eat toner.

A Frisbee - Warning: May contain small parts.

Heated seat cushion - Warning: Do not use on eyes.

Portable stroller - Caution: Remove infant before folding for storage.

Box of fireworks – Warning: Do not put in mouth.

Box of nails – Caution: Do not swallow nails. May cause irritation.

Because we live in a society that is abundantly filled with cautions or warnings regarding just about everything we do, we are many times numb to the reality of the consequences of ignoring such cautions and warnings – even when it might cost us our very lives. But there is one caution, one warning we must never ignore – and that is the caution and warning we are given from God Himself. God’s Word often uses the word “*admonishing*” in speaking of cautioning or warning, which we see in Colossians 3:16: “*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.*” The cautions and warnings and *admonishings* that we read of throughout God’s Word are always foundationally purposed to keep us from wandering away from God – reflecting the first act of rebellion against God in the Garden that still continues to infect us and causes our hearts to walk away from God.

The pattern of seeking the selfish pursuit of satisfaction and fulfillment in someone or something other than God that began in the Garden of Eden - is a pattern we still see in all of us and all around us today. It was the pattern we read of all throughout the Old Testament - the pattern which God cautioned and warned His people from falling into through the preaching of His prophets. Our text for this morning is a clear example of the need for such cautions and warnings - not only for the people of Israel with whom the prophet Hosea lived - but also for those of us who claim to believe and belong to Jesus Christ here at Arrowsmith Baptist Church in Port Alberni.

As we enter the 10th chapter of Hosea, we read in the first ten verses that the prophet Hosea has been warning Israel that judgment is about to fall come because of their wayward ways. God’s divine wrath was about to break out on a rebellious people who had wandered far from God. Hosea 10:1-2: “*Israel is a luxuriant vine that yields its fruit. The more his fruit increased, the more altars he built; as his country improved, he improved his pillars. Their heart is false; now they must bear their guilt. The Lord will break down their altars and destroy their pillars.*” We see here that the more *prosperous* that Israel became (“*Israel is a luxuriant vine that yields its fruit*”) the more *idolatrous* God’s people became (“*The more his fruit increased, the more altars he built; as his country improved, he improved his pillars*”). As a result, their hearts became faithless towards God (“*Their heart is false*”) and God would call them to account regarding their wandering and waywardness (“*now they must bear their guilt. The Lord will break down their altars and destroy their pillars*”). The days of wealth and prosperity and self-centered pleasures would now come to an end. What also would end would the reign of Israel’s kings because 1) God’s people had put their trust in their leaders in rather than in God (Hosea 10:3: “*We have no king, for we do not fear the Lord*”) and because 2) God’s people had embraced and cultivated a love affair with idols (Hosea 10:5-6: “*The inhabitants of Samaria tremble for the calf of Beth-aven. Its people mourn for it, and so do its idolatrous priests . . . Israel shall be ashamed of his idol*”). God will take away from us the things we trust and treasure over Him. At the end of this section God proclaims His judgment against His people because they have not heeded the cautions and warnings He has sent to them through the preaching of the prophet Hosea: “*When I please, I will discipline them, and nations shall be gathered against them when they are bound up for their double iniquity*” (Hosea 10:10). In the remaining verses in Hosea 10 God lists the reasons why His people have wandered from Him.

1) “*Ephraim was a trained calf that loved to thresh, and I spared her fair neck*” (Hosea 10:11). Here we read that God’s people had wandered away from Him because of their love of *comfort*. “*A trained calf that loved to thresh, and I spared her neck*” is a metaphor for a life of ease and pleasure, in speaking of a young ox at work who could eat all it wanted to without restraint. Israel had become accustomed to the comfort of prosperity. But the problem with the kind of life that is focused on our ease, pleasure and comfort is that we were not created for that kind of life. We were created by God to love God and to live with God and to live for God. Jesus warned us about living otherwise: “*For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul*” (Mark 8:36). Because God’s people were consumed with comfort God would now come with a yoke of judgment and their comfort would turn to hardship. Hosea 10:11b: “*But I will put Ephraim to the yoke; Judah must plow; Jacob must harrow for himself.*”

2) *"Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap steadfast love; break up your fallow ground, for it is the time to seek the Lord, that he may come and rain righteousness upon you. You have plowed iniquity; you have reaped injustice; you have eaten the fruit of lies"* (Hosea 10:12-13a). Here we see that God's people had also wandered away from Him because of their love of *sin*. Hosea lists here the sins that have let the people astray and away from God: the sin of "*iniquity*" (wickedness), "*injustice*" (pride) and "*the fruit of lies*" (deception). God's people had fallen in love with their sin and had lost their love for God.

3) *"Because you have trusted in your own way and in the multitude of your warriors, therefore the tumult of war shall arise among your people, and all your fortresses shall be destroyed, as Shalman destroyed Beth-arbel on the day of battle; mothers were dashed in pieces with their children. Thus it shall be done to you, O Bethel, because of your great evil. At dawn the king of Israel shall be utterly cut off"* (Hosea 10:13b-15). Here we read that God's people had also wandered away from Him because of their love of *self*. The love of comfort and the love of sin are built on the foundation of the love of self. And though we may deny this, God knows this is true. And so in Hosea tells God's people that because they were living such self-centered, comfort-consumed, sin-loving lives - God would providentially allow painful and destructive division to occur within their midst as they strayed and wandered away from Him:

We need not look very far in our culture, in our community, and even in the church of today to see that that same love of comfort, love of sin, and love of self at work in the hearts of God's people today. We, as those throughout history before us, continue to fall into the pattern that began in the Garden of wandering away from God in our hearts, and wandering away from God in the way we live out our lives. Not one of us is exempt from this because sin the endless struggle and the constant tension we all experience in this life. Romans 3:22-23 tells us *"For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."* In 1 John 1:8-10 we read: *"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us."* Prior to the fall into sin in the Garden of Eden, man and woman, in having been created in the likeness and image of God were good by nature. As they enjoyed God in all His fullness, they were relational and rational and possessed a heart desire for God's will and they lived their lives for God. But the fall warped and distorted the image of God within us. We are now less fully like God than we were before the entrance of sin. Sin began when at some point man realized that he was dependent upon God for his existence, and in his heart he sinfully resisted and rebelled against that dependence. Adam and Eve displayed this in their attempt to be their own God, by seizing control over their lives to live independently from God. The core of our existence is rooted in this paradox: though we are drawn to God because He created us to be consumed by who He is, in possessing a fallen nature we still continue to be both reluctant and resistant to being fully taken in by the heat, light and glory of God's grace.

Sadly, because we are still sinfully selfish by nature, we sometimes (actually, oftentimes) refuse to acknowledge and embrace our constant, desperate, dependent, need for God. That's true for all who claim Christ because He is God and we are not. God is the One who saves us. Romans 8:33 asks the question: *"Who shall bring any charge against God's elect?"* The answer: *"It is God who justifies."* Romans 9:16 tells us that our salvation *"depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy."* In John 1:12-13 we read that when we trust Jesus to be our Lord and Savior, we are given *"the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God."* Yes, God is the One who saves us *and* He is also the one who empowers us to live our lives for Him. In Philippians 1:6 Paul wrote: *"I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ"*- and then in Philippians 2:12-13 he encouraged those in the church to *"work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure."* God's Word clearly states we are not independent contractors when it comes to salvation (putting our faith in Jesus Christ) or when it comes to our sanctification (our walk with God) because we are saints who will still struggle with remaining sin.

But our refusal to acknowledge that truth is why the comfort and pleasure of humanity have now become the star in this contemporary drama we call life; it's why the health, wealth and prosperity, word of faith, name-it-and-claim-it gospel is so popular today. God is on stage today, but only in a supporting role as He is being told to adjust to the cultural expectations and personal entitlements of our time. But God will not allow His name to be profaned indefinitely. Though He is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, He will not tolerate forever those who will not give Him their whole heart and who regard something or someone else more worthy than Himself. God says: *"I am the Lord; that is my name; my glory I give to no other"* (Isaiah 42:8). The Bible defines sin as self-seeking rather than God-seeking; a wayward pursuit of self-glory rather than the greatest glory of God in Jesus Christ. In our text for this morning we hear God calling us back to Himself from our incessant wayward wandering: *"Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap steadfast love; break up your fallow ground, for it is the time to seek the Lord, that he may come and rain righteousness upon you"* (Hosea 10:12).

"Sow for yourselves righteousness." This verse is constructed in the Hebrew text in such a way as not so much emphasize the "what" that is to be sown, but the "how" the sowing is to be done. Sowing righteousness in our lives yields healing from the destruction and devastation of sin. No matter how far we have strayed away from God and into the camp of the enemy, we can always turn back to God. Like the Father of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) God mercifully waits to run to us and welcome us back home with open arms. While the consequences of our sin may not be fully removed on this earth, God will heal us when we turn from our wandering and seek Him and His purpose for our lives.

"Reap steadfast love." There are many pragmatic ways to sow righteousness into our lives: loving God, loving each other, loving our enemies, giving to others, sharing what we have, sacrificing for those in need, respecting authority serving in the church and serving the community we live in. As we walk with God and sow seeds for His kingdom, we will *"reap"* the blessings of God's *steadfast love*.

"Break up your fallow ground." Fallow ground is a field that has been sown with crops in the past and has yielded much fruit, but has now been left unworked for some time and now is hard and full of ruts, and yields nothing. This is a land that was plowed and seeded for righteousness but has now turned away from God and grown cold toward Him. This is a perfect picture of North America today.

God calls us to *"break up the fallow ground"* in our lives. These are areas where we have cultivated habitual sin, areas where we have drifted far from God and just can't seem to get under control. Such areas have hardened our hearts by the deceitfulness of sin like dry and crusty ground, areas that need to be tilled under and replenished and replanted with God's goodness and grace and mercy and love. This is our call to make a new start, to renounce old ways, to open new fields, to get out of the rut of selfish habits and thoughts and ways of doing things. This is your call and my call to go where we've never gone before in trusting and living for God, seeking God so that He would plow up the crusty ground in our hearts and lives, to break down the hard clay and remove those things that will just not be broken. The tilling process begins when we start applying God's Word to the lies behind our selfish habits, and as the new soil is cultivated, the seeds of restoration begin to grow in our hearts once again.

"For it is the time to seek the Lord, that he may come and rain righteousness upon you." Hosea tells us that God will *"rain righteousness"* upon those who *"seek the Lord."* What this means is that *"righteousness"* will *"rain"* on us when we *"seek"* and surrender our lives to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. In 2 Corinthians 5:21 we read that *"For our sake he (God) made him (Jesus) to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him (in Christ) we might become the righteousness of God."* God, by His sovereign grace, imparts perfect *"righteousness"* into us through our Spirit empowered faith in Jesus Christ. In Ephesians 3 we read that God does so *"according to the riches of his glory"* so that *"he may grant you (us) to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your (our) inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your (our) hearts through faith"* so that we might *"be filled with all the fullness of God"* (Ephesians 3:16-17, 19).

With the Holy Spirit living in us, we are empowered to walk in obedience to God and reap the blessings of God - in spite of our fallen, self-centered wandering away from God. In Romans 8 that we read that, *"If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you. . . For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God"* (Romans 8:11, 13-14). This is our call, brothers and sisters: we are to seek God and pursue a deeper, more intimate relationship with God; we are to let go of our selfish ambitions and desires and seek after God's will, purpose and desires for our lives.

"For it is the time to seek the Lord." Imagine there is a bank that credits your account each morning with \$86,400. The bank does not carry that balance over to the next day. The bank does not allow you to keep the balance. Every evening the bank cancels whatever of that money you refused to spend. So, I would suspect that if you and I were to know of such a bank, we simply would draw out every cent every day. Amen? Well we each know of such a bank, and it's called "time." Every morning we wake up we have 86,400 seconds to do something with during the day. Each night it burns the remainder of those seconds. The question is: What will you do with the 86, 400 seconds that God has given you?

The Bible tells us that God has only allotted each of us a certain amount of time on this earth, and that time, God's Word tells us, is to be used as *"time to seek the Lord."* Yet the reality is our day timers and schedules are filled to overflowing with time that is not used to seek the Lord. In fact I will step out on limb and say that most of our time is rarely used to seek the Lord. The truth is Jesus' time on the earth was limited to thirty-three years and the last three years in particular he spent in intimate company with twelve common, regular folks like you and I. Each of those men had ample opportunity to know Jesus on a deep personal level during that time - but it still took a radically, dramatic commitment on their part to step away from life as they wanted it to be before they could fully know the life God designed them for. Ultimately it paid off, when just as when everything seemed to fall apart, the Holy Spirit came upon them and they were then empowered to a life filled with the fullness of God.

"Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap steadfast love; break up your fallow ground, for it is the time to seek the Lord, that he may come and rain righteousness upon you." The truth is, when we refuse to seek God, when we resist God by not inviting Him to come in and break up the hard, fallow ground of our hearts we will then experience what every farmer and every gardener knows as fact - *that ground that lies hard and fallow will ultimately fill up weeds.* This is true in the field, in the garden, and in the heart of fallen humanity *because that which is natural and supernatural abhors vacuum.* Life on earth is about change because we are fallen creatures who live in a fallen world, and we are either in the process of either living or dying. There is no coasting - we are either growing stronger towards life or growing weaker towards death. There is no status quo when it comes to our natural or spiritual lives. It is God who alone gives us life - and if we refuse to bow our "self" to God, we will find ourselves set adrift, wandering and astray, with weeds and rocks and troubles and trials popping up all around us.

The story is told of a mother who was scraping and peeling vegetables for a salad, when her daughter came in and asked to go with her girlfriends to a movie that was somewhat sexually explicit. The young girl defended her request with the retort that "all my friends are seeing it" - and she reasoned "what's the harm", and began a barrage of excuses to support her right to go. As the girl talked, the mother took a handful of discarded vegetable scraps out of the garbage can and threw them right into the salad. Startled the girl said, "Mom, you're throwing garbage into the salad!" "Yes", her mother said, "but since you don't seem to mind garbage in your life, I figured you wouldn't mind garbage in your food." The young girl quietly and thoughtfully removed the offending material from the salad, said "thank you" to her mother and left to tell her friends she wouldn't be going to the movie. There is so much more garbage in our lives than we are willing to acknowledge. And even if we deny the garbage of vegetable scraps - we most likely then prefer our own gourmet food over the feast of God.

1 Chronicles 16:11 says: *"Seek the Lord and his strength; seek his presence continually!"* Because of the opposition we face within our own sinful hearts, and from the world and the devil - we are all in need of continuous spiritual renewal and revival. The struggle from both inside and outside of our hearts reveals an infinite spiritual abyss that power, possessions, position and prosperity can't fill. That void can only be filled *with God Himself*. When we put God at the center of our hearts and lives, when we fully commit to denying ourselves, taking up our crosses and following Jesus, we will then joyfully know the intimacy and fullness of God that we were created for. While the Word of God does caution and warn us regarding the dangers of wandering, we are also promised in Ecclesiastes 5:20 that when we urgently and continually and expectantly seek God that *we will not much remember the days of our lives because God will be keeping us occupied with His joy in our hearts*. God's Word also tells us:

*Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near;
let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts;
let him return to the Lord, that he may have compassion on him,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.*

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord.

For as the heavens are higher than the earth,

so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

*For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,*

so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;

*it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*

For you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace;

the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing,

and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;

and it shall make a name for the Lord, an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

Isaiah 55:6-13

Have you not known? Have you not heard?

The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable.

He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength.

Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted;

but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength;

they shall mount up with wings like eagles;

they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint. Isaiah 40:28-31

Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen. Jude 24-25

3 January 2016

Pastor Leland Botzet

Arrowsmith Baptist Church