Hosea 6:6 For I desire mercy and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings.

The words of this text are so awesome, and though you may not know it right now, you will also find that they are so relevant to our world today, actually to many portions of history as God works to save his people. Sometimes we forget that. We forget that God has and still does work in history for the sake of his people. That’s the nature of God. God wants all men to be saved. God has made it about as easy as could be and yet the truth is, mankind fights against the very goodness of God. It is that problem, that fighting against God that is addressed in this section. Let’s pay attention to our lesson and see what we can learn. Our theme will be: **I DESIRE MERCY.**

Hosea lived in the middle of the eighth century B.C. and was a prophet to the Northern Kingdom of Israel. (Okay, what was left of the Northern Kingdom!) We feel certain that Hosea was put together after the capital city of Samaria was destroyed by the Assyrians, and yet it is a book that summarizes Hosea’s ministry for the 25 years previous to that destruction. Hosea, pleaded, begged, preached and taught. Hosea had been sent to try and get the people to repent, to repent and return to the true faith of the Lord. But it was not to be. And about 25 years into his ministry, Hosea saw the Northern Kingdom trampled and then carried away into exile. Its people would never return and the ten tribes that formed this northern kingdom of the Jews would simply disappear into history, lost forever.

Hosea’s ministry was made even more interesting because of the unique life that Hosea had to live by the command of God. Hosea was told by God to marry an adulterous woman. Yep, a woman who cheated on him all the time. For that matter, Hosea’s wife bore him three children but the way the Scripture is written it is thought that they were actually children of her lovers rather than the children of Hosea. Yet Hosea was patient, gracious, loving and always forgiving toward his wife. In other words, Hosea’s very life was a picture of God and his people. Keep that in mind as you contemplate our words for today.

Notice that our text is kind of dialogue. You have God speaking, then the people, then God again. It is in this dialogue that we gain insight into the problem there was and still is with people when it comes to faith in the Lord. Take that very first verse of our section. It is actually Hosea 5:15, the end of a chapter where God is lamenting the unfaithfulness of his people. This lament ends with our verse, God’s words. These words are not a threat, but a fulfillment of the peoples’ desires. What is interesting is to see the heart of the Lord. Our verse says, **“I will go. I will return to my place until they are judged guilty, and they seek my face in their distress. They will seek me eagerly.”**

Here is the Lord giving the people what they want. They didn’t want him. They didn’t want his grace and mercy, his compassion and forgiveness. They didn’t want his truth and his promises for salvation as a part of their lives. So God grants them their wish. He will withdraw his blessings from them. He will, and this is figuratively speaking, withdraw to his throne in heaven and he will do nothing for these people. Again, understand, God is going to withdraw his blessings.

You do grasp the implications of God’s blessings being withdrawn, right? Things are not going to go well. Hard work will not be rewarded. Distress and difficulties will abound. To be even more accurate, we need to grasp that judgment and punishment for wrongs and sins will be felt by all. That’s what happens when God’s mercy is gone, when God no longer applies blessing to the lives of people. The people have despised the Lord and the Lord is more than willing to let their disposal of him stand. And as this verse says, they will find they face judgment and they will find themselves in distress.

Yet at the same time, note that God says that should they turn to him, should they repent and once again seek the goodness and mercy of God that He will give it. Such is the nature of God. To be forgiving to those seeking forgiveness. To overlook sin, rebellion and disobedience simply because the people seek what God has always promised. In his faithfulness, God has always promised “mercy.”

Sometimes I don’t think we grasp this mercy of God. God doesn’t owe us anything. God provides everything and is everything. What do you have that God needs? Nothing! And yet God grants you his grace. He freely, out of love for us, for the entire world, casts his goodness and love our way and has been doing so ever since sin entered into this world. Our Catechism notes this in questions 141 where it asks: *“How does God promise to bless our obedience also reveal his grace to us?”* Answer: *“Since it is our duty to obey God’s commandments, his promise to bless our obedience is really an undeserved gift.”*God’s blessing in every capacity is an undeserved gift. If we don’t grasp that, then we don’t grasp the mercy of God.

Now comes the most interesting part of this text. There is some debate as to who is speaking and the intent of the words but I do believe the EHV has done a great job of translating. I believe these words are “the people of Israel” speaking and laying out their “plan” to get the Lord’s blessings back. I believe these words are prophetic in that they point to the hope of salvation of the Lord. The problem is that I don’t think the people know what they are saying. In other words, what they are saying and what they mean by these words is still not what the Lord is looking for. It is much like Caiaphas who uttered the prophetic words, **“You do not even consider that it is better for us that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.”** We are told he did not say this on his own but uttered these words of the truth of what Jesus would do. Caiaphas uttered the words and had no clue of the truth he spoke. The same with the words before us. Listen again to the words of the people. **Come, let us return to the Lord. For he has torn us to pieces, but he will heal us. He has struck us, but he will bandage our wounds. After two days he will revive us. On the third day he will raise us up, so that we may live in his presence. Let us acknowledge the Lord. Let us pursue knowledge of the Lord. As surely as the sun rises, the Lord will appear. He will come to us like a heavy rain, like the spring rain that waters the earth.**

Initially we have to admit that these words sound godly, they sound sincere and gracious. But we know they are not because of the reaction of the Lord to them. The Lord’s response shows that the people were being hypocritical. Oh, they used the right words and sounded good, but there was no true faith, no true repentance behind what had been said. So let’s first look at the prophetic side of these words and then talk more of the hypocrisy of the people.

Prophetically, these words represent exactly the reality of what faith and trust in God is to be. Once you have seen that you have deserted and turned away from God the right thing to do is **“return to the Lord.”** That is the issue of repentance. To not only see your sin but to be sorry for it and then to turn to the Lord for forgiveness and mercy. These words reflect the truth of faith. So for instance, life without God’s blessings is bitter and distressed. That truth is reflected in the lines that say, **“he has torn us to pieces…He has struck us.”** Yet faith is always confident, as the text says, that **God will heal, God will bandage the wounds and revive**. Such is the nature of God’s blessings. Trusting in God results in his blessings.

Or take the words: **“After two days he will revive us. On the third day he will raise us up, so that we may live in his presence.”** Here is Jesus. The two days is a reference to the Passion of Jesus. What happened? The Son of God “suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried.” All of this to pay for the sins of the world. Jesus serving as our substitute in punishment and hell. It is Jesus taking the eternal wrath and anger of the Father against sin upon himself. Jesus does this because of his mercy and love for us. That is the way of God. The third day is clearly a reference to the resurrection of Jesus. The resurrection is the way that the truth of Jesus is reaffirmed, affirmed and brought to reality. It is the resurrection that proves Jesus is God’s Son, our Redeemer and that in that redemption, as he lives so shall we. The resurrection is the promise of God that our eternal life and salvation has been secured and won by Jesus.

As you continue in this verse you see that in words they understood what faith is. Faith seeks the Lord. Faith wants to drink in, to pursue the goodness of God. And notice how the last line is such an affirmation of faith. God will bring his blessings, God will be like the rains that water the earth. In other words, the grace and mercy of God is absolutely sure and certain. Again, recognize that this is all wrapped up in Jesus. How do you know God? Jesus. How do you fathom the depth of God’s love? Jesus. How can you have confidence that God’s promises and grace is for you for eternity? Jesus. Now you begin to grasp the importance of Jesus teaching the oneness he had with the Father. Jesus even told his disciples that to know me is to know the Father. Jesus only did the Father’s will, spoke the Father’s wisdom, Jesus carried out perfectly the Father’s plan to save the souls of people completely and graciously.

Oh how I wish the words these people spoke were what they meant. But it is clear this is not true. These words are wonderful, a preaching of the goodness and love of God for his people. A setting forth of the truth and wonder of faith. But again it is clear that what the people say and what the people mean are two different things. We grasp that from the words of God in the next verses. God responds with **“What am I going to do with you, Ephraim? What am I going to do with you, Judah? For your faithfulness is like a morning mist, like early dew that disappears. That is why I cut them to pieces by means of the prophets. I killed them with the words of my mouth. The judgments against you go forth like the light. For I desire mercy, and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings.”**

Let me share with you what we know was actually going on. The Jewish people of the northern kingdom of Israel, for the past 200 years and more, had abandoned and turned away from the true God. They built their own temple, actually two of them. They filled their land with shrines and worship places of all sorts. In other words, outwardly they looked religious and like people who cared about the wonder of God but they did not. They worshipped everything and anything but the Lord God. In many cases, they followed false gods and their evil but did so “in the name of the Lord.” To be even more specific, they were a nation that had given itself completely over to work righteousness and to the belief that you “earned” God’s favor by performing the right rituals and doing the right motions. That is why this section ends with the words “**For I desire mercy, and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings.”**

The people lived the motions of worship, but they did it their way and not God’s way. They sacrificed their children, practiced the sexual immorality of the false gods and totally ignores the truth and wonder of God’s Word. They had for centuries treated God as something to be molded in their way, worshiped in their way, followed in their way and in the process had completely and totally abandoned the Lord. That all that I tell you is true is seen in the fact that God caused them as a people to disappear and be no more.

I fear this is exactly what people are doing today. They twist the Scripture to proclaim what they want instead of what God says. They determine they can follow God their own way rather than the way that God says is right and proper. And I will be the first to agree that faith and truth are not about being in church and obedience to a building but at the same time I recognize the underlying falsehood of those who will boldly proclaim: **“You don’t have to be in church to be a believer.”** That is only somewhat true. God has given us church for our faith. God has given us church to make sure we have a pure source of the Word and access to the true means of grace.

And I know, what many say, “Just because I am in a garage doesn’t make me a car.” I get that, but please note that garages are never what caused a car to be a car. Garages were built because of cars. Garages came about to protect and take care of cars. Garages are the equivalent of barns for our animals. Would you have animals and not provide them shelter and their other needs? God has provides “church” as our shelter and place of safety. Why would you despise what God has given unless you no longer cared for God? And by the way, even an animal, in the difficulty of life and weather, will seek out shelter and safety. What is wrong with you if you don’t seek the shelter and safety of the Church, especially one with the Word and sacraments for your good?

God’s desire is for mercy. God wants us to grasp what mercy is and God want us to enjoy and be blessed with that mercy. But that mercy and what it is all about is found and revealed only in God. True faith leads us to seek him out, to fathom his Word, to bask in the love displayed in Jesus, to allow His Holy Spirit to work in your heart and mind so that our faith stays sure and strong in God’s mercy. Don’t be like the people back then. They thought they could have God’s mercy doing it their way. They were wrong. Please, seek the mercy of God. Seek out Jesus the very display of God’s mercy. Seek out that mercy where God has clearly put it on display for us to bask in. Seek it in the shelter God has provided in this stormy world of ours. In the Church and the true Word that church proclaims.

I give thanks for this section of God’s Word. It is a solemn reminder to us to hear and heed God, not to follow what we think is right and good and proper. Throughout history, so many have been lost to the Lord because of just that fault in belief. Seek God’s mercy. It is what he desires for us. It is the reason Jesus came. Amen.