

August 4, 2019

TEXT: Hosea 11:1–11

TITLE: The (Not So) Long Walk Home

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Hosea 11:1—“When Israel was young, oh, how I loved them.” This is such a familiar story. It’s a parent doting over a child. Think for a moment about someone who doted on you—who slipped you cookies even if it might spoil your supper, whose embrace was always there for you. Think about those you dote upon—the young people in your life who make you smile, for whom you’d do just about anything. It’s such a familiar story.

Now, before this turns into a Hallmark made-for-TV movie, let’s remember that those angels we dote upon can also be little devils—giving us heartburn, heartaches, and gray hair. You tell them, “Just wait right here,” and before the words are out of your mouth, they are bolting for freedom. Once, when both our kids were young, we were in an airport trying to corral the kids before entering the security checkpoint lines. I was holding a suitcase when Ian suddenly took off and I had to abandon the suitcase to go catch him. Let’s just say that by the time I returned, I had to identify my bag from the security guards, put up with a drug-sniffing dog inspection, and suddenly had extra questions asked of me by gate agents for every leg of our flight on that trip.

It’s a familiar story. God loves us; we take that love for granted or worse we run in the opposite direction. The most famous bible story on this theme is the parable of the Prodigal Son—the boy who rudely asks his father for his share of the inheritance and then goes off to blow the money in bad choices and bad behavior. At some point the son realizes he should return home; so he turns around, practices what he will say to his father, and starts on the long journey back home.

In Luke’s parable, we never hear what the father is thinking during the days when his prodigal son is gone, possibly hurt or dead. But in Hosea 11, we hear God’s thoughts in a loosely parallel situation. God is saddened by the prodigal behavior of the people of Israel—a nation that God loved; a nation God taught to walk, hugged to God’s cheeks, bent down to and fed. A people that God had rescued from slavery in Egypt, but now where were they? They had run in the wrong direction – toward false gods and idols. They had run straight into danger, back toward the slavery of old Egypt, inflicted on them by new oppressors, the Assyrians. Few things hurt a parent as much as when a dearly loved child does something self-destructive. That is true of us; it is also true of God.

It is not hard to come up with examples of how we fail to stay close to God, our loving Parent; how we disobey God’s laws and live in rebellion against God’s will. I could name economic, racial, or environmental examples. I could mention homophobia, unequal health care, exorbitant military spending, or unjust prison systems. But here’s just one example.

A couple days ago, I was speaking with someone about reasonable gun reform in America and I learned about an idea called “one gun a month.” Sadly, even though the vast majority of Americans, both Republicans and Democrats, favor universal background checks for all gun sales, we still haven’t enacted these common sense measures. Another common sense step is prevent people who go into gun shops from buying multiple handguns at a time, perhaps dozens of them, which then end up re-sold on the streets or shipped across state lines. Virginia passed a law in 1993 that was a good first step. It was called the “one gun a month” law. It simply limited handgun purchases to one per month. Being able to buy 12 guns a year is surely not impeding anyone’s right to bear arms, but it sure slowed down bulk sales that were ending up on the streets. Then in 2007 came the horrific Virginia Tech shooting with 32 fatalities. Virginians raised their voices for tighter gun controls, but in truth, a few years later the very opposite happened. Like disobedient children, their legislature repealed the “one gun a month” law, literally running in the wrong moral direction.

To be oriented toward God is to move in the direction of life, compassion, justice, and peace. To run in the opposite way is also an option given our free will – but that means we are choosing to be dis-oriented, lost, and God’s prodigal children. So how do we change course? How do we make things better and get re-oriented? Well, to answer that question I want you to think of something that’s not in the bible. I want you to think about Clark Kent’s glasses. Now, as all you avid comic-book readers and moviegoers know, long ago on the doomed planet Krypton, a young boy named Kal-El was sent to earth by his parents. The child was found by Jonathan and Martha Kent, who raised him as Clark Kent. When it was discovered he had super powers, Clark learned to hide them by adopting a mild-mannered demeanor and by wearing dark rimmed glasses. That allowed him to work at the Metropolis Daily Planet, with no one suspecting that behind those glasses hid a super hero. It’s all perfectly plausible.

In his recent book, pastor John Pavlovitz focused on how little separates the life of faith from the life of disobedience. He compared it to Clark Kent’s glasses—a minor distinction that separates us from the life we have and the life we could have oriented to God. As Pavlovitz put it, “most of us are one small decision away from completely rewriting the narrative of our lives—one conversation, one healed relationship, one nanosecond of moral clarity away from where we long to be.”¹

One of the drawbacks of the Prodigal Son story is that it implies that the journey back home is always a long one—that it will take us a long time to travel back to where we belong. Yet that is not usually the case. It can be as simple as Clark Kent taking off his glasses and being seen for who he truly is. It can be a phone call we make to break the silence and say “hello,” a note written to say “I’m sorry,” a decision at work to break the silence where there’s abuse or corruption, a willingness to write Congress or walk in a march or stand beside someone in pain who needs an ally and a friend. As Pavlovitz said, “Most of us are one small decision away from completely rewriting the narrative of our lives.” One small decision. For us as prodigal, disobedient children, the walk home is not nearly as long as we think it is.

Hosea 11 offers words of hope as we seek to re-orient ourselves and return to God. After remembering how much God loved Israel, the Lord cries out, “How can I give you up, my child? How can I hand you over or let you be destroyed?” Next comes a promise and a description. God promises: “I will not come in wrath—will not respond in anger. My compassion grows warm and tender.” Then Hosea describes this: “The Lord, the Holy One, roars like a lion; and when God roars, God’s children shall come back—trembling from the west, out of the land of Assyria—and they’ll return to their homes.”

In that moment when your child is dashing away from you into the street, I doubt your words are quiet tones of correction. You’ll raise your voice and shout to get their attention and get them back to safety. Is it any wonder that Hosea describes God’s response to our behavior as a roar of a lion? God feels and grieves and longs for us to be people of faith and justice. Yet God watches us run toward danger, slavery, and sin. Out of divine compassion come several roars—the roar that brought the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt. The terrible shout heard from the cross in Golgotha that named Christ’s sense of utter abandonment when he cried out, “My God, why have you forsaken me?” And that amazed shout from Easter morning, in response to which the woman at the tomb began to tell everyone “He is not dead! He has arisen!”

A different Christian author I read this week said this: *You cannot work on the structure of your life if the ground of your being is unsure.*² The way home is not far. Like Clark Kent’s glasses, one small action can move us from prodigals to disciples—from the life we have to the life God wills for us. Yet that journey will touch on everything we value - all that we understand to be important in this life, and all that we hope for the future.

In a moment we will share communion together. It will involve a piece of bread and a little cup of juice. They are small things yet they are a part of God’s roar calling us home. They represent Christ’s shout from the cross and Mary Magdalene’s song of joy on Easter. They are part of the Lord who loves us and has said “I will not come in wrath; but I will return them home.”

So renew your life of faith this very day. Be willing to see the depth and power of God’s love in this sacrament. Invest the elements with more than just their physical properties that you will taste and sense. Let this communion be part of the larger mystery, given to us by the Holy One of Israel, through Christ Jesus. And know that it’s time to come home, O children of God. It’s time to come home.

¹ John Pavlovitz, Hope and Other Superpowers, 2018, p. 19 with edits.

² Christian Wiman, My Bright Abyss, 98.