

I Miss The Days When

Pastor Nicholas W. Gliha

Scripture: Hosea 11:1-11 ; Amos 5: 18-24

I don't think there is anything more wonderful than refalling in love with something. Renewing a vow to covenant. Perhaps it's literal, like a renewal ceremony for a couple. Maybe it's once again finding your stride in work and making meaningful progress there. Maybe it's fitness related, or time with your kids or whatever. But whatever it is, I always find the re-do to be better than the first encounter. Everyone loves their spouse to death during the honeymoon period. Everyone loves their job in the first year. Everyone loves the gym on the first day. And everyone eventually falls out with it. It's natural. The human brain is simply too limited to produce the neurochemistry necessary to *always* be in love with something or someone. The decision to love it again is all the more intentional.

That's the way I feel about running. I grew up a runner, I ran before I even walked I'm told. I never really had a pitch perfect training schedule. I just ran until I got tired, then I ate ice cream as a reward for running and to help me cool off. As I progressed through high school and into college, running became less of a passion and more of a job. I had specific numbers to hit, I had to habitually watch my diet and my heart rate and make note of any changes. My training was dialed in and calibrated specific to these metrics. It became necessary to check my form, perfect my cadence to be at a consistent 180 steps a minute and ensure that my stride never exceeded 2 meters. Shoes were no longer shoes, but turned into carefully researched vehicles of success where the lightest and most aerodynamic shoes would lead me to a new PR. I was diligent, but I was not passionate. I fell out of running after it all because much like love, my brain could no longer keep up with the hyper stress of it all. In the end, I missed the days when running was hastily done with ice cream at the finish line.

As school approaches and college kids make their way back to their new places of living I am reminded of how I miss the days when my family was all together. When my sister and I would play cards with our pet pet bird, when we would all go on camping trips. Sure we are all making big moves in our respective areas but it had been 5 years since I was last in Nashville to see her. During that incredible trip two weeks ago when I got to see her, I am reminded of how special our little family is. And yet, I miss the days when my family was all together.

I miss the days when God was new to me. When God was exciting. When God was a divine mystery. My earliest memory of God was sitting in the large sanctuary of Lakewood UMC, I was probably 5 or so, and looking up and seeing this little red candle flickering on the ceiling. I leaned over to my mom, likely during the sermon which was always too long and asked her what that was. She said "It's kind of like God, it's a candle that never goes out." I couldn't wrap my head around that little candle. Was gas being fed through the chain? That couldn't be it. Surely, it must be put out at sometime. So every single time I was in that church, whether it was Sunday morning and Tuesday night I would run into the sanctuary and lo and behold that crazy little candle was still burning! I talked to my pastor about it. The late Rev. Dick Parks, who confirmed to me that the candle never burns out. He told me, "much like God, we can spend our entire lives trying to figure out how God works and who God is that we miss the special things God is doing in our lives. Experience God, don't dissect God."

Rev. Parks later admitted to me he made sure the candle was always changed on time and always lit because he knew it meant something to me. My journey with God

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was a little red candle. Fast forward 20 years and now its meetings, it's carefully organizing a bulletin, it's fielding religious questions about the nature of God. It's full of words like chiasm, deconstructionism, pericope, exegesis and postmodernism. It's emails, and curriculum, and tough sermons, it's sitting with people as they process grief and so much more. Yet, when the days get long and the buzz of my office lights gets too loud, I miss the days when God was just a little red candle.

I miss the days when being a pastor meant being a paid best friend for people. Apple pie during a visitation, being paid to hangout with kids all day and make them laugh and chase them around. It meant preaching a sermon loudly and proudly that was all about positivity, optimism, and promising people that they are blessed because God will make them blessed. When every Sunday I was eager to shake hands with everyone because I knew it would be a positive interaction. The role of pastor has changed for me in just a few short years, no doubt influenced by my seminary studies, my jadedness from the imprisoning debt seminary put me in, and through interactions with those more oppressed than I am. I feel affirmed in the work I do, but when the voices get loudest, I miss the days when being a pastor was being a paid best friend.

The question I can't seem to escape this past month is whether or not God is having this same retrospective thinking about the world, about our community, about our church, about us, about me. Does God look at the world and miss the days of Eden? Does God look at the world and see evidence of Babylon and Assyria and miss the days of Israel? I can't help but wonder does God look at me and view me as God viewed the people in the book of Amos and miss the days when my relationship with God was more like Hosea? To examine this, I invite you into the world of these two prophets.

Amos and Hosea lived during the same era, and in the same region, the northern kingdom of Israel after the Assyrian's and King Jeroboam the second conquered. These two prophets likely knew one of one another. Hosea is a book of poetry warning of a future conflict, much like most prophecy, whereas Amos is a book of narrative examining present culture and declaring God's anger. In Amos, God is furious because the nation of Israel was built on the foundations of the slaves of Egypt, the poorest of the poor, and yet during this time the rich were getting richer and the poor were getting poorer. God cried out against the "church" (note church and nation are synonymous during this time) for "doing" church but not "being" church. Amos questions the people to ask themselves, when the day of the lord comes, will *you* actually be on the right side? I wonder if our church does enough for the poor. How does one even measure that? I'm not sure. I wonder if I do enough, and when I am honest with myself, I know that I don't. Nowhere near enough. I wonder as I lead worship today, does God lament against my own prayers, my hymns, my offerings, my words, for not being true to God's nature.

Yet, this story as with most Biblical stories does not end with sadness, wrath, and anger winning. Grace, mercy, kindness, and ultimately forgiveness wins the day. Hosea, is a largely symbolic story about how God's love forgives us when we are unfaithful to our covenant with God. In the book of Hosea God describes Godself in such passionate language. Renowned theologian and Biblical scholar, Walter Brueggeman, refers to this text as "among the most remarkable oracles in the entire prophetic literature" for it "penetrates deeper into the heart and mind of God than anywhere in the Old

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Testament.” What do we find there? What we and the prophet find there at that innermost place is grace. Recall back to what you heard - the text is intimate. God takes on this very parental figure and nostalgically looks back on Israel as a child whom God watched learned to walk. What God is describing in verses 5-7 is exactly what is happening in Amos with Assyria, how they are walking away and going to other gods and idols and so on and so forth. And so when I read that part I’m thinking this is when God is really going to tear into them. Give them the good ole Amos talk about how God hates their rituals, hates their songs, disgusted by them....but no...instead God gives them the good ole... <<play Rick Astley’s Never Gonna Give You Up>> Furthermore, God says, “Something is changed within me and all of my compassion is aroused.” Not anger, but compassion. God will roar like a lion and all of God’s children will come home again.

What is so profound about this moment is that God is going against the very law that God helped shape. In other more shocking words, this pericope is anti-Biblical, as the people would have understood it. Deuteronomy, the book containing all 600 something laws for the Jewish people lists one regarding wayward children. If a child disobeys their parent or goes away unlawfully they should be stoned to death. So when God speaks as a parent and describes God’s people as children walking away to other idols, the people have a very clear idea of where this is going. They think it’s going to be a lot more Amos, that the day of the lord will be darkness, not light. But God changes. If someone ever tells you God doesn’t ever change point them right to this moment. “Something changed within my heart.” Rather than judging us for our failures, God gets proximate. God gets to know us. God is as verse 9 says, the “holy one among us” whom we would later understand to be none other than Jesus himself.

God among us...how comforting is that? Not God above us. Not God disconnected for us. Not God over there. Not God somewhere to achieve and get to. But God among us. When we miss the days, the days when our families got along better, the days are finances were stronger, the days a beloved one was still with us, the days are jobs were still fun, the days we weren’t so busy, the days we dreamed, the days that we were closer to God...God is among us. Among *you*. If you are missing the days about something personal or in your family, I can’t offer practical advice on that, but I will sit with you and pray with you if I can.

But when it comes to God, I can offer you this. Come back. Renew your vows. Give God a chance because as Hosea 11 shows us there is no being in this entire universe that cares so deeply and profoundly about the needs of others than God. When we wouldn’t repent ourselves, God repented for us. When we wouldn’t close the separation between us and God; God did that himself. And even when God had to leave for the heavens once again, God gave us this sacrament which we will now take part in, and as the United Methodist tradition teaches, this is just bread and juice..nothing more, nothing less and yet somewhere in this room beyond the realm of our own comprehension, God, the holy one is among us. So friends, if you miss the days when you and God were closer, rest assured, God missed them more. Come to this altar for all are welcome, and receive the gift of endless love and amazing grace. AMEN.