

**SLD03.21.10 5<sup>th</sup> Lent**  
**Emory Presbyterian Church**  
**Job 3:2-4, 20-26**  
**John 1:1-5**

**“Breaking Free From Discouragement and Depression”**

Great day, isn't it, for us to dive into the jolly topics of discouragement and depression? Rainy, messy, gray. Perfect for curling up with a good book, if you have your wits about you. But if you don't, if your wits have fled, or bled, or are leaking slowly through the cracked plumbing of your despair, the grayness of the day might feel like apt “pathetic empathy,” as when stormy weather reflects Lear's madness.

When you and I have our wits about us, we are “collected,” calm, in control, especially regarding our mental faculties, our nimbleness of mind, our general life view. The word “wit” is related to German's **wissen** (“to know”) and Latin's **videre** (“to see or perceive [with the eyes]”); **to wit** a thing mean literally “to *know*” it.<sup>1</sup> When we have our wits about us, we know who we are and what we are about, how the world is and what our place is in it. When we are clear-witted, we are clear-headed; bright, quick, confident about our purpose, our responsibilities, our relationships, our reason for being.

But when we lose our wits, our world falls apart. We become disconnected, unanchored, untethered to whatever it was that had been holding it together. We may not even be able to say what it is that we lost when we lose our wits but surely among them are a sense of purpose, place and relevance, and a desire for active, positive engagement with the world.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.randomhouse.com/wotd/index.pperl?date=20000914>

I'm not talking about madness here, which is what we usually mean when we talk about losing our wits. I'm talking today about depression, arguably a kind of madness, I suppose; that deep discouragement of depression that unhinges us from what we know, or knew; disengages us from our own spirit, and from the Spirit of God; and that lands us in a kind floating freefall through a darkness that never ends.

Maybe you've never experienced a depression like that. Maybe depression doesn't run in your family, or your personality, or your circumstance. Don't imagine that it's a choice, though, as if you can will yourself out of it. Still, depression is not the only experience that cuts us off from ourselves, from each other, from God. So do a host of other distracting, life-draining emotions some of which we've been exploring this Lenten season: blame and shame, anxiety and worry, bitterness and resentment.

I promise we'll lighten up after Easter. But Lent is a good time to reflect on what disconnects us believers from what we believe, that cuts us off from what we ostensibly "*know*;" that strips away from us what we profess is the desire of our hearts: God's eternal and loving presence. Christ's power for healing. The active enlivening agency of the Holy Spirit. For whatever we profess to be true, we Christians are as likely as anyone, maybe more, to slip or fall headlong into the bleak, black hole depression, above which is written Dante's flat directive: "Abandon hope, all ye who enter here."

Perhaps you imagine it is unfaithful to be depressed. I suppose it is, in a way. Yet no more unfaithful than any of God's chosen ones throughout scripture. If we've learned anything in recent weeks, it's that the Bible abounds with tales of treachery, anger, sadness and revenge. And depression.

As if, from the beginning, being human, even a faithful human seeking God, has not changed all that much through the millennia. As if there is no proclamation, no doctrine, no belief system, that protects us from our humanity. Perhaps even as if the perennial challenges to the human heart, including, for some, a relentless tango between hope and hopelessness, are as much a part of an authentic spiritual journey as the divine cycle of forgiveness and redemption.

Why else include the story of Job, the most rawly honest book of the bible, in which suffering abounds and explanations never satisfy? Why else include alongside psalms of joy and thanksgiving, laments of devastating hopelessness and despair? Why else record Jesus' resistance, reluctance, and final surrender to the absolute abandonment of his destiny?

Yet John's gospel says clearly that there is no darkness that can overcome God's light. Does this make of depression a lie? Perhaps, in any ultimate sense, though most of us do not often operate in the realm of ultimacy. What I know from the standpoint of one suffering deep depression, though, is that what is "true" is neither accessible nor believable. Nor relevant, for that matter. In fact, a main feature distinguishing depression from, say, sadness or grief is its profound sense of hopelessness.

Novelist, philosopher, and veteran of depression Tim Farrington describes depression as "dryness, emptiness, hopelessness, helplessness. A loss of the juice of life, a loss of the energy to engage life, and a loss of any joy or pleasure in that engagement. In deep depression it seems useless, even painful, to lift a finger. It's a

Catch-22,” he says, “for even if I am aware that I am making my incapacitation worse through neglect and inertia, any effort to fix it seems pointless at best.”<sup>2</sup>

To be sure, the complexities of depression’s origins and manifestations makes of it a tricky topic, especially for a 15 minute sermon. Yet it seems important, somehow, to name it in worship, both to acknowledge its power AND to position it as subject to God’s sovereignty. For if there’s anything consistent about the disorder, it’s that, from the standpoint of its victim, it rules all of reality. And that *is* a lie.

In his book, *Depression – A Stubborn Darkness*, Edward Welsh explores depression from the point of view of faith. First acknowledging the many generally accepted contributing factors to depression – psychological, chemical, familial, circumstantial, existential, Welsh also examines our individual and cultural complicity in the phenomenon. Individualism, pride, self-indulgence, the idolatry of self, obsession with novelty, “the idolatry of happiness,” a willful disregard for the Word of God – all these may also play a role in the depressive personality.

Whatever the cause or contributing factors, however, Welsh see depression finally as suffering,<sup>3</sup> noting that the Bible has a lot to say about suffering.

Certainly scripture is rife with it. Ever since we got catapulted from the garden, or grew up – whichever way you want to look at it – humanity has suffered. Jesus suffered, to death. Jesus’ early “survivors” had a miserable time of it, as did almost everyone else associated with Christendom until Constantine made it the state religion in the 4<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>2</sup> D. Patrick Mill, “Till Morning Comes: Tim Farrington on Creativity, Depression, and The Dark Night of the Soul,” *The Sun*, Chapel Hill, N.C., March 2010, Issue 411, p.5.

<sup>3</sup> Edward Welsh, *Depression – A Stubborn Darkness*.

But even then, suffering did not stop for Christians, or anyone else. To live, to grow, to love, is to suffer. I think Gautama Buddha was spot on – life *is* suffering. That’s not all it is, but it is that.

And “the symbol of a suffering God,” remarks Elizabeth Johnson in her book *She Who Is*, “...signals that the mystery of God is...in solidarity with us when we suffer,” and further, that “the presence of divine compassion as companion to the pain transforms suffering, not mitigating its evil but bringing an inexplicable consolation and comfort.”<sup>4</sup>

One of those consolations for those of us who follow Jesus is that, understood through him, suffering can be redemptive, have meaning, purpose, even offer a sort of hard-won gift. Welsh examines some of the potential gifts and lessons of depression, how God may be working through it. Not, however, without first carefully and thoroughly outlining the spectrum of practical interventions available.

Never underestimate the power of exercise, eating right and getting enough sleep, for example. Or the helpfulness of various forms of therapy, or, where indicated, of chemical intervention. Service to others can often slow a spiraling perspective, notes Welsh. Prayer, meditation and other spiritual practices can deepen one’s sense of connection to God. Community, especially a community of faith, can circle the wagons and hold the truth for the one unable to access or perceive it for themselves.

Anyone suffering depression should explore all these available options to mitigate the condition.

But after all sensible interventions have been exhausted, suggests Welsh, there is more still for a seeker to mine from depression’s wrenching depths. Spiritual qualities

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<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is*, p. 267, (2). Quoted in *The Breviary*, p.447.

such as patience. Humility. Forgiveness, especially self-forgiveness. Surrender. Surrender to the moment, surrender to our fundamental helplessness, surrender to our utter dependence on God.

Perhaps depression is one of God's ways of convincing us that we can never know God solely through our own efforts.

For surely you have imagined, as I have, that with enough hard work, enough good choices, enough right action, you can achieve your personal goal of centeredness or goodness or faithfulness or healing or wholeness or whatever else you want to call salvation.

Tim Farrington suggests that "it's only when our own efforts fail that can we can fully be open to the grace of God. And this is a gift," he says. "A liberation. But that doesn't mean it's fun."

In fact, regardless of what it may yield, that kind of surrender is so unfun and fearsome that many of us will go to great lengths to avoid it.

And so continues the suffering of depression. Of blame and shame, anxiety and worry, resentment and bitterness, and all the other inescapable challenges to the human heart that beat and bruise, but also polish and shine, it, like a revolving rock in the lapidary of life. To be sure, there are steps we can take to address these life-stealing emotions, ways practically to take responsibility, to intervene, to *exercise* our faith. There are things we can do about the state of our spirit. But finally we are dependent on God to reach through our suffering and redeem it. For the light that shines in the darkness, the light that darkness cannot overcome, is not finally the light of our insight, understanding or devotion, but the light of Jesus Christ.

I do not know why life is set up in such a way that the deeper route to knowing God is through suffering. I do not know how God reaches into our darkest nights and delivers dawn. I do not know what is the nature of resurrection that it is invariably preceded by death. I often wish the whole cosmic arrangement were less complicated, less harsh; demanded less work, less courage, less surrender, of us.

In his sixth Narnia book, called The Silver Chair, British writer C.S. Lewis describes the tense, precarious meeting between another Jill and Aslan the Lion, Lewis's Christ figure. Having traveled a considerable distance in both haste and angst, Jill suddenly spies a refreshing stream, beside which lounges the ferocious, frightening Aslan.

"Are you not thirsty?" says the Lion.

"I'm *dying* of thirst," says Jill.

"Then drink," says the Lion.

"May I – could I – would you mind going away while I do?" says Jill.

The Lion answers this only by a look and a very low growl. And as Jill gazes at its motionless bulk, she realizes that she might as well have asked the whole mountain to move aside for her convenience. The delicious rippling noise of the stream is driving her nearly frantic.

"Will you promise not to – do anything to me, if I do come?" said Jill

"I make no promise," says the Lion.

Jill is so thirsty now that, without noticing it, she has come a step nearer.

"Do you eat girls?" she asks.

"I have swallowed up girls and boys, women and men, kings and emperors, cities and realms," says the Lion. It doesn't say this as if it were boasting, nor as if it were sorry, nor as if it were angry. It just says it.

"I daren't come and drink," says Jill

“Then you will die of thirst,” says the Lion.

“Oh dear!” says Jill, coming another step nearer. “I suppose I must go and look for another stream then.”

Says the Lion, “There is no other stream.”

There is no other stream. There is no other light. There is no other source or force or power through which we can be freed from whatever shapes us, drives us, imprisons us, than the sometimes inviting, often frightening, and always transformative mystery of Jesus Christ.

As we prepare for his death, and for ours, during this Lenten season, we have looked boldly in the face of life-draining emotions that cut us off from ourselves, each other and God. We have learned that there are things we can do about the state of our spirit, and there are things that only God can do.

Recall Edgar Boggs’ poem-prayer, ‘What I hear Christ Saying:’

“I love you and I accept you, just as you are, right now, even as I loved you before you knew me. Yet, you hold attitudes and tendencies which keep you from being fully human, and bar you from the enjoyment of the purpose for which you were created.

And so, because I want these good things for you, I am going to love you through a process of change. It may take only a short while; it may take many years. It may take all eternity. No matter, for I will never abandon the task.

Together, says Christ, we will overcome those obstacles which threaten the freedom I have given you.

To the glory of God. Amen.