When the Darkness Comes

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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1 Kings 19:1-6

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I’m grateful we are doing this sermon series on pressure points because, as humans, we all feel pain to varying degrees. If any one of these pains is pushed down or depressed long enough, it can lead to depression. I chose to preach on this topic because it is one I know something about.

I have to confess that I have felt anxious about it all week. It’s such an important topic and there is more to say that can be said. The risks are high because severe depression can lead to suicide, as we have recently heard a lot about in the national and local news. Mostly, I was afraid of saying the wrong thing and hurting people unknowingly as I have been hurt by the words of others when I was depressed.

Understand that depression is a unique experience; it’s not the same for everyone. However, it is worth talking about because depression is a season of darkness that impacts all of us. We will likely experience it ourselves or know someone who does.

Twenty-five years ago, I was living in Chicago. I was newly married and studying at seminary to become better equipped to continue the life of vocational ministry that I had already been engaged in for 10 years. My life was full of study, ministry, and meaningful relationships, but it was also demanding. Along with that, the cloudy and short days of winter in the Midwest led me to the realization that I had SAD or seasonal affective disorder.
I spent the winter quarter of my last year of seminary in Clinical Pastoral Education at a hospital where I was assigned to perinatal and neonatal units caring for women hospitalized with high-risk pregnancies and parents whose children were born prematurely. There were many joys when babies were born and finally went home. But there were also deaths and a lot grief. However, it was the experience of one Christian woman’s story that impacted me most. She had four children ages 8-16, and then had an unexpected pregnancy with other complications. Yet she was trusting God in the midst of all the unknowns. In the end, she died on the operating table, and three weeks later her baby died as well. I had no categories for this kind of experience. I felt so sad. I felt myself sinking into the darkness. How could this happen? Where was God? I had lots of questions but no answers.

Three months later, I graduated from seminary. Then my own life took some expected turns. For 18 months I worked as a temp, waiting for a call to a pastoral ministry. In that same time, my husband was laid off from his job, which put us under financial stress. We dealt with multiple health crises, the sudden death of an extended family member, even a burglary. And we began to grapple with the reality of infertility. Every day I would wake up with a sense of dread wondering what bad thing might happen today.

What made my experience feel even more intense is that I was surrounded by people experiencing the springtime of life as they started families and successful careers while I felt I was living in an eternal winter of cold and darkness that was impacting me emotionally, physically, relationally, and spiritually. The descent was slow and gradual, but with the help of my dear husband and others, I was finally able to accept the truth that I was severely depressed and needed help. I sought professional counseling and medical help,
eventually going on antidepressants for a short time. I was in such darkness I needed to reset the chemical imbalances that had developed to help lift the darkness and get me out of the pit of despair to level ground, where I could begin to deal with the realities of my life as they were.

I know from experience that depression is real and affects how you feel, the way you think, and how you act. It is an overwhelming experience of darkness that is as crippling as a physical illness or injury. Depression affects an estimated one in 15 adults in any given year. And one in six people will experience depression at some time in their life. Some studies show that one in three women will experience a major depressive episode in their lifetime [American Psychiatric Association]. It impacts teens and seniors and everyone in between.

I’m grateful that more and more people are opening up about their own struggles with depression. The good news is that there is hope and there is help, though there are no quick fixes. The question is: “What do we do when the darkness comes?

Elijah is the classic biblical example of someone who was depressed, and his story gives us insight. Elijah was chosen by God to call the nation of Israel back to God. In a contest on Mt. Carmel, Elijah challenges 450 prophets of Baal to a theological shoot-out saying, “I’ll call on my God. You call on Baal, and let’s see which one answers with fire from heaven.” But following the elation of this mountain-top victory, Elijah descends into the valley of defeat and despair.

Elijah demonstrates many of the classic signs of depression. While he is understandably afraid for his life, what’s interesting to note is that he doesn’t take his servant. It may be that he is hiding or withdrawing from relationships
(v. 3) because he doesn’t want to be seen in this state. He clearly has *thoughts about death* (v. 4) saying, “O Lord, take away my life for I am no better than my ancestors.” We can sense his *feelings of hopelessness, pessimism, worthless, and helplessness* about the current situation (v. 4).

Elijah seems to be burned out with *decreased energy, fatigue, and slowing down* (v. 5). But the *unusual sleeping patterns and oversleeping* (v. 5) seem to indicate that he has moved into depression. The fact that an angel comes and tells him to eat reflects a *change in his appetite or eating patterns*. (Other signs of depression include *difficulty concentrating, remembering, making decisions, restlessness, irritability, persistent physical symptoms*).

I love this passage because it not only reveals how God dealt with Elijah’s depression. It also gives us direction on what can be done when the darkness comes.

Notice first that God doesn’t say, “Get ahold of yourself. Pull yourself together. Don’t think like that. It’s all in your head. Just have faith. Be grateful. Just do something. Don’t be weak; be strong.” God doesn’t preach to Elijah or put him down. God recognizes Elijah was experiencing a season of darkness, so God was patient, kind, understanding, and empathetic. He cares for him in ways he can’t care for himself.

Before God does anything else, he helps Elijah to recover his physical strength and well-being. He sent an angel to attend to Elijah’s physical body by giving him food and water and allowing him to sleep and rest. Elijah received these gifts of grace.

Elijah’s story reveals that when the darkness comes, we need to take care of our physical bodies. Again, what I am
about to suggest may not be helpful to someone who is severely depressed and who needs medication to reset chemical imbalances or counseling to process traumatic experiences. But for those who are mildly or moderately depressed, there are things we can do to take care of our physical bodies. We can eat nourishing foods, drink sufficient amounts of water, get enough sleep, exercise regularly, live within limits, and practice healthy rhythms of work and rest.

Because of my SAD and experience with severe depression, these are practices that are a part of my Rule of Life or Spiritual Growth Plan. But I confess this past year got me off track. As many of you know, the past year was a stressful one for my family as we dealt with grief, health crises, and other personal and professional stresses. In the winter, I felt tired and worn out. Because of my SAD, a dip in the winter is not unusual, but it felt heavier than previous years due to the stress.

I knew I had neglected some of these self-care practices in the midst of all that was going on. So in February, I knew I needed to set my intention to make some different choices. Because I had been eating more comfort food than I should, I chose to go on a detox diet for three months fasting from sugar, wheat, dairy, and all processed food. I recommitted to exercising regularly and to sitting in front of my light box at least an hour a day while I spent time in silence and solitude with the Lord. I pulled away from the everyday routine and demands of life to go on a silence and solitude retreat. Like Elijah, I needed time to find rest, recover, and find renewal.

I know from experience that it is hard to begin to make changes like that; it takes time, energy, and intentionality to practice self-care. But I do know that within a month of
living into these self-care practices, I began to have more energy.

One of my favorite quotes is from Parker Palmer: “Self-care is never a selfish act—it is simply good stewardship of the only gift I have, the gift I was put on earth to offer others.”

Elijah’s depression wasn’t just impacting his body. He was overcome with negative emotions of fear (v. 3), guilt (v. 4), resentment (v. 4), anger (v. 19), loneliness, (v. 10), and anxiety (v. 11). It’s understandable that all of these intense emotions might lead to depression. But notice how God asks, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” And then He gives him time to respond. I love how Elijah pours out all his inner feelings (vs. 10-11).

When the darkness comes, we need to process our emotions with God in prayer. God was not shocked by Elijah's complaints. He let Elijah vent his pent-up emotions without criticizing him or condemning him. When we are depressed that's exactly what you need to do—take it to the Lord in prayer.

During the period of my depression, my strong emotions were difficult for me to face or to talk about with others. Even though I logically knew God already was aware of how I felt, it was hard to name these feelings to Him. During that time, I read Phillip Yancey’s book Disappointment with God. This quote really spoke to me: “You can say anything to God. Throw at Him your grief, your anger, your doubt, your bitterness, your betrayal, your disappointment—He can absorb them all. As often as not, spiritual giants of the Bible are shown contending with God. They prefer to go away limping, like Jacob, rather than shut God out. In this respect, the Bible prefigures a tenet of modern psychology: you can’t
really deny your feelings or make them disappear, so you might as well express them. God can deal with every human response save one. He cannot abide the response I fall back on instinctively: an attempt to ignore Him or treat Him as though He does not exist.”

I am so grateful for the many psalms that model, teach, and train us how to pray our strong emotions. I memorized many psalms in times of darkness such as Psalm 62 which says, “Trust in Him at all times, O people. Pour out your hearts before Him. God is a refuge for us” (v. 8).

It’s reassuring to know that I am not the first nor last to feel depression. God longs for us to pour out our hearts to Him in prayer—whatever we may be feeling. God has even given us laments to help us complain. Psalm 13 gives words to our feelings in seasons of darkness:

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?  
How long will you hide your face from me?  
How long must I bear pain in my soul,  
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?  
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? (Psalm 13:1-2)

Not only do the psalms give us words to pray, but they turn our thoughts toward God. Again, during my period of clinical depression, this seemed impossible because I needed medication. However, once the depression lifted some, I was able to turn to God. When the darkness comes, we need to focus our minds on God and the truth of His word. When we are depressed, our feelings can overwhelm us and distort our thinking. Like Elijah, we can believe we are alone, that life is futile, that things will never get better. This is when we need to focus on the truth: “God is light and in him there is
no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). Jesus himself said, “I am the light of the world.”

In Psalm 119:105 we read: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” I have learned that even when I am feeling despair, if I meditate on His word that brings light to the darkness. I memorized Psalm 139 thirty years ago and call various phrases to mind regularly:

If I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,’
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you. (Psalm 139:11-12)

Psalms 42-43 have a wonderful phrase that is repeated three times:

Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God.

Praying, meditating, or claiming these verses may not change our feelings immediately, but they do remind us that God is with us and He is the source of our help and strength. Hebrews 6:19 says, “We have this hope, as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.” The Spirit used the Word of God to give me this assurance deep in my soul that He would hold me fast and see me through the storm. He was working in me, for me, and through me in ways I could see and even more ways that I could not see. That leads to the next point.

When the darkness comes, we need to wait for God. Most of us would like spectacular answers or signs from God like Elijah had on Mt. Carmel, but in this passage “the Lord was
not in the wind...or the earthquake...or the fire. but in the sound of sheer silence.” It is as if God was saying “just because I have not spoken to you as I have in days gone by, doesn’t mean I am not here.” Though God was silent, He was not absent.

This is a picture of a magnet on my refrigerator. The words were found on the wall of a basement in Germany following World War II: I believe in the sun, even when it is not shining. I believe in love, even when I can’t feel it. I believe in God, even when He is silent.

In my experience of depression, I felt God was absent. I felt alone as if there was no one else who could help me. I waited and wondered when God would say something, or do something to change things. It wasn’t until years later looking back that I recognized the presence and power of God at work in my life in that season of winter and darkness. He did change things. He changed me and deepened my faith and trust in Him and experience of intimacy with Him.

I’m not saying the depression was good. It wasn’t. It needed to be dealt with in many and varied ways. But I learned through my experience that God is good, and loving, and present, and powerful and always at work—even in the messiest of circumstances. It was after that season that I really came to believe deep in my heart and mind and soul
the words of Romans 8:38-39: “I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Again, this my experience; it is not the same for everyone.

In the passage after the silence, the Lord asks a second time, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” Elijah’s answer is the same. Even the manifestation of divine presence has not shifted Elijah’s emotions or perspective. He still believes he is the only one who was still faithful and that everything is up to him.

God tells Elijah to go and return to his life and ministry as there is work to be done, a new king to anoint, and a new ministry partner, Elisha, to train. We don’t know when Elijah began to feel better, but we do know he did return and ultimately closed out his ministry in a blaze of glory.

Elijah’s story reminds us that when the darkness comes, we are to keep going as God directs. Of course we want our feelings and circumstances to change, and we want direction for the long term. But sometimes we just have to keep going.

I couldn’t help but think of the character Dory from the movie Finding Nemo. She is seeking to help her friend find his lost son, Nemo. They encounter many difficulties along the way. At one point she says, “When life gets you down, do you know what you have got to do? Just keep swimming, swimming, swimming.”

We have to accept that life is hard and the way is difficult, but there is a way forward. Life is messy. We will encounter circumstances we do not want and would never choose. Depression is real and debilitating. But by the grace of God
and power of the Spirit we can take one step and one day at a time to move forward.

Having said that, I knew when I was depressed that I couldn’t stay involved or engaged in everything I had been doing. We have to discern what is essential and what is not. I had to let go of some responsibilities and realign my priorities. We live differently in the winter of life. Adjusting my mindset and expectations of myself was necessary but not automatic.

While depression leads to feelings of isolation, it’s important to resist the temptation to go it alone. We need to find life-giving relationships. It was hard to accept that many of my friends would not be able to support me during this season of darkness. But there were people who could sit with me, listen to me, and cry with me—my husband, a few friends, a counselor, a doctor, and eventually a spiritual director who helped me. I was not alone. Life-giving relationships are essential and serve as light in the darkness.

Though there is so much more that could be said, let me reiterate that depression is real and needs to be taken seriously and handled sensitively. Though it is painful, it is also treatable. There is hope and help. You are not alone. God is present and working, and others can come alongside you and care for you. When the darkness comes, reach for the light.