Overcoming Fear

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Mark 51-43

June 24, 2018
We live in fearful times. Terrorist attacks, cyberterrorism, gun violence, global warming, take your pick. As an avid history reader, let me caution you here. Our time and place are no more dangerous and fearful than any other time in human history.

Here is my take on what is happening. There is a whole lot of fearmongering going on. For advertisers, politicians and news pundits alike, your fear is worth millions. People have decided they can win votes and make big money by exploiting our fears since it is an easy emotion to manipulate. I have the sneaking suspicion that fear is driving much of our current debate over illegal immigration right now.

Jesus said, “Do not fear; just believe.” Today’s story is about overcoming fear with faith.

Today’s lesson is actually two stories rolled into one. Mark likes to tell stories together to create a sandwich effect. He begins by telling a story about a man begging for Jesus’ help in healing his 12-year-old daughter. Then, he interrupts to tell a second story about a woman who receives healing from Jesus. Finally, Mark circles back to finish the first story.

Our first story centers on Jairus, a leader in the synagogue. He comes to Jesus, begging him to come and heal his critically ill daughter. Jesus agrees to go with him, accompanied by a large crowd.

In the second story, there is a woman in the crowd who has been hemorrhaging for 12 years. She has tried every doctor and miracle cure known to man, but nothing has worked.
Her bleeding makes her ceremoniously unclean. Her condition also qualifies her as an outsider in the very synagogue where Jairus is leader.

She does not want to do anything to draw attention to herself. So, she determines just to touch Jesus’ robe. Just a touch is all. No one else will ever know.

When she touches Jesus’ robe, her bleeding stops. Just like that. She knows instantly Jesus has healed her.

Jesus stops dead in his tracks and says the words she fears most, “Who touched me?” His disciples react with understandable surprise: “Master; all these people are touching you. How can you say, who touched me?”

“No,” Jesus insists. “Someone has touched me. I know it because power has gone out of me” (Luke 8:46). Somehow, Jesus is able to discriminate between an elbowing crowd and the anxious tug of faith.

This woman, who had hoped for a secret healing now steps forward, expecting condemnation. After all, condemnation is all she has ever known. Instead, Jesus commends her. “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace.”

It is gracious for Jesus to call her out this way. Otherwise, it might have taken her a long time to overcome the prejudice and scorn that has built up over the years. By not allowing her to vanish into the crowd. Jesus not only heals her illness but also heals her shame.
With this second story told, Mark reverts to finishing the first story. Jairus’ servants announce, “Jairus, your daughter is dead. Why bother the teacher any longer” (5:35). They regard Jesus as only a teacher since death marks the limits of the powers available to him.

The apparent delay on Jairus’ side proves fatal for his daughter. He must have been fuming at the time Jesus took for this woman. Why is he dawdling? I was here first. Can’t we deal with this woman’s chronic condition later?

Jesus overhears the conversation and tells Jairus, “Don’t be afraid; just believe.” “Don’t be afraid” and “just believe” both function as present imperatives. Jesus commands Jairus to stop fearing and keep believing.

What is Jairus supposed to believe? Jairus came to Jesus at the outset, believing he could heal his daughter. Now, Jesus tells him that he must go on believing. He must trust Jesus for whatever happens next.

They arrive at Jairus’ home to a house full of mourners. Jesus says cryptically, “Why are you weeping? She is not dead. She is only sleeping” (5:39). Everybody laughs. Oh sure, sleeping. Real funny, Jesus.

Jesus orders everyone out of the house except his closest disciples, Peter, James and John, as well as the girl’s parents. Jesus takes the little girl by the hand. It’s a shocking gesture, since touching a dead body was considered unclean. He says
to her in Aramaic, “Tabitha cumi” meaning, “Little girl, get up.” Immediately, she opens her eyes. Everyone is astonished. I should say so.

These two stories juxtapose each other for good reason. First, both stories are about daughters. Jesus says to the woman, “Daughter, your faith has healed you” which matches with Jairus’ daughter in the first story. Both stories also reference the number twelve. The girl in the first story is 12 years old, while the woman in the second story has been chronically ill for 12 years.

Second, both stories are about belief or faith acting as its synonym. Jesus says to Jairus, “Do not fear; just believe.” Jesus says to this unnamed woman, “Daughter, your faith has healed you.” Jesus could heal these people without any faith or belief on their part but evidently, Jesus desires some measure of reciprocity on their side.

Third, while these two people could not have been more different, both come to Jesus because of their extreme need. On the surface, these two people could not be more different. Jairus is socially prominent, a leader in the synagogue. This woman is anonymous, ostracized from the very temple where Jairus is leader. Yet, both come to Jesus desperate for a cure.

I identify with these two people. I come to Jesus, desperate at times. Heal this person. Help my children. Save me from this predicament. Yet the answer doesn’t always come when and where I expect it. To all who wait like Jairus, pay attention to this story. I have not forgotten
you. The journey I began with you, I will finish. “Do not fear; just believe.”

“Do not fear” is a common directive from Jesus. He tells Peter when he walks on water, “Do not fear. It is I. Do not be afraid” (Matthew 14:27). He says to a crowd of people, worn down with worry, “Do not fear, little flock. It is the Father’s will to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32). He says to his disciples, “Do not fear those who kill the body but those who kill the soul” (Matthew 10:28). He says to the women at the empty tomb, “Do not be afraid. Go to Galilee and there you will see me.” (Matthew 28:10). If God raises the dead, what have we to fear?

When it comes to fear, it is important to discriminate normal, God-given fears from excessive, illogical fears. If I am sitting at a picnic table and a bear joins me for lunch, I am going to be afraid. My fears would be justified. Encountering a bear in the wild is a dangerous prospect. Yet, suppose I go to the zoo, see a bear and become afraid. Such fear would be excessive and illogical. There is little reason for being afraid of a bear in a zoo.

Phobia is the clinical name for exaggerated, illogical fears. There are at least 500 phobias common enough to have a name.

I titled this sermon Overcoming Fear. Overcome fear with faith. Do not fear; only believe. I came upon an article
written by Oprah Winfrey this week. Her message about overcoming fear is entirely one of self-determination and improvement. She urged her readers not to let fear block their paths. She applied her religion of positive thinking to the problems posed by fear.

Her approach contrasts sharply with a sermon I read by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He preached it in a Berlin church in 1933 during a time of considerable unrest in Germany, just 15 days before Hitler became Chancellor. Bonhoeffer concludes his sermon, “Jesus alone is Lord over fear; it knows him as its master; it gives way to him alone. So, look to Christ when you are afraid.”

Let’s see, the power of positive thinking to block fear or look to Christ when you are afraid. I’m going with Bonhoeffer. Jesus is Lord over fear.

So what difference does this sermon make in my life? I have three questions for your consideration as we focus on practical application.

First question. What do you fear? You may be saying to yourself, I don’t fear anything. You may not call it fear, but there are things that trigger anxiety and panic in you. Fear about the future. Fear about the well-being of someone in your family. Fear about a difficult conversation that you need to have with someone. Fear about your health. Fear
about your job. Fear about dying. It is important for us to confront our fears head-on.

Second question. Does what you watch add to your fear or lessen them? There is plenty of research to substantiate that substantial amounts of screen time lowers self-esteem and increases anxiety. Some of you really need to unplug. Your adverse reaction to this suggestion may tell you how attached you are to your electronic devices.

Third question. When in your week do you give God your undivided attention? Last Sunday, I talked about 11 Pressure Points that have deep impact on us. Our reaction to these pressure points shapes our behaviors, whether for good or ill. We want you to give serious attention this summer to what God says to you through His Word. Let me take you back to the card we distributed in worship last Sunday. You will find this card in your pew racks. You can also access it online.

Take the first pressure point regarding fear. Negative emotions like fear rob us of God’s best. Our memory verse from Isaiah addresses this matter of fear. “Do not fear, for I am with you. Do not be afraid, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you by my righteous right hand” (41:10).

We have identified five Psalms about fear for you to read and reflect:

 Psalm 121—“The Lord watches over your life.”
 Psalm 56—“When I am afraid, I put my trust in you.”
 Psalm 27—“The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear?”
 Psalm 46—“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.”
 Psalm 91—“You will not fear the terror of the night or the arrow that flies by day.”
 “Do not fear; only believe.” Overcome fear with faith.
You are God’s Personal Concern

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. David S. Jordan-Haas
Philippians 4:6-7

July 1, 2018
DERECHO (de-re-cho). A derecho is a fast-moving, very intense, dangerous weather pattern. It often unleashes damaging winds and sky-splitting thunderstorms. For most of us, the derecho comes and goes—we take precautions, we hold tight. It can be a little unnerving, even frightening, but soon the derecho is over and we get on with the tasks at hand. For most of us, this is how anxiety happens in our day-to-day lives. It comes and goes; there’ll be an event or circumstance that prompts some anxious moments, but we “weather” it; it soon passes by—it’s gone.

But there are those around us, even right here next to us this morning—you, me, a loved one, a co-worker, a friend—there are those around us where the anxiety, when it hits, is felt far more intensely. The anxiety is very “stormy,” even paralyzing for some of us. Last month, early evening on Monday, May 14th, a derecho whipped-up out of the Shenandoah Valley. It was on a direct path towards Northern Virginia, rapidly accelerating at up to 70 mph! The heavens were spitting out hail, pelting rain; there were winds like tornados! It was crazy, scary for many of us; crazy-scary for me, in the car, driving home from church at about 6:08pm that evening!

That same evening, at Bonnie and Al Grouge’s home, an enormous, towering oak tree was literally ripped up out of the earth and thrown down. That tree was over 33 inches in diameter, with a 12-foot-deep-n-wide “root-ball.” That derecho threw that tree down, tearing apart the yard, crushing the driveway. It was instantly destructive; ask Al and Bonnie—they’re still living the trauma of it.
Some of us live with anxiety so much more acutely—what I call the “derecho of anxiety.” It can be persistent, even all-consuming. Someone close to me, whom I love dearly, describes her anxiety as “like a life constantly lived in a fox hole.” It’s like a constant derecho thundering through her life, wrecking her body, pelting her soul. It’s like living her life as if in a “war-zone,” on the lookout for the next danger warning sign or the next threat up ahead—mentally, relationally, emotionally. This anxiety is often not rational, but it’s real.

Do you know that the word for “worry” originates from an Anglo-Saxon word that means “to strangle or choke”? Anxiety can literally leave us gasping for air. Anxiety steals our breath, it saps our energy (Bruce Goettsche’s Sermon, 8/11/14).

Right now, before we go any further, let’s breathe; may we pause and pray, as we get ready to center-down, just for a little while, on this topic today. Let’s pray: *Father, in Your Presence, You know who I am right now, with all my stuff, all my strengths, all my weaknesses. Father, You know everyone here, who each of us is—all our mess, our strengths, our weaknesses. You care personally and lovingly for each one of us. You call us Your treasured son, Your precious daughter. God, we belong to you; all our days, all our circumstances are in Your Mighty Hands. We together entrust ourselves to You—our anxious thoughts, hearts, our bodies, our minds—in Your mercy and grace!* Amen.

In the last five years, anxiety has overtaken depression (the sermon topic for next Sunday) as the most common mental-health challenge in the US, for both men and women. Sadly,
however, anxiety is seen as a less-serious challenge; and because it’s so common among us, anxiety is often dismissed or ignored. One out of every three teenagers, one out of every three adults, struggle with frequent anxiety (NIMH, NY Times 10/11/17). Those who live with anxiety—young or old, it doesn’t matter—they are often “silent sufferers.” They are overlooked or mistaken for being shy, withdrawn; or that they have so-perfected certain coping strategies to help mask and manage their interior stress.

Our memory verse this week is the Psalmist describing his own anxious heart: Psalm 61, first two verses, the New Living Translation: “O God, listen to my cry! Hear my prayer! From the ends of the earth, I cry to you for help when my heart is overwhelmed.” Anxiety can “overwhelm” our bodies, our minds, our hearts.

How are we going to pay the mortgage this month? Am I saving enough for retirement? I pressed SEND and now I wish I hadn’t. What will they think of my outfit over dinner at the Club tonight? Will I or someone I love get cancer? Will I be a good father? Will my child make friends; will my child get into a good college; will my child land a good job? Is this plane going to be safe enough to fly in this thunderstorm? “Hear my prayer, God! …. I cry out to You for help when my heart is overwhelmed” (Psalm 61:1-2).

Now, to those among us, who live in the fox hole, or with the derechos of anxiety, I want to share this: There are really good resources to consider, such as working with a
counselor, combined with consistent physical activity, or anxiety medication, or a support group. Anxiety is a real crucible for many of us; there are resources. This is also where Renewing Prayer can be supportive. This is where intentional time spent with one of our trained, confidential Stephen Ministers can be helpful. Let Pastor Glenda know or let me know if you want to access these healing ministries at VPC.

Now, with the time remaining, I want to go to Scripture and offer some practicals. I offer two hopeful “remedies” for anxiety: One, get out of yourself and get into God; and two, get out of yourself and get into Community. Get into God; Get into Community.

1. Get out of yourself and Get into God. Number one: Get out of yourself and get into God. You and I have a choice. We can worry or we can trust the Trustworthy One. When I feel anxious about any number of circumstances, big ones or small ones, I ask myself, “Am I trying to control something here, or can I trust God with this particular problem?” Am I controlling, or am I trusting? To be honest, perhaps it’s a little of both.

“Don’t be anxious about anything;” Paul writes, “instead, pray about everything; tell God your needs and don’t forget to thank God for His answers” (Philippians 4:6-7, The Living Bible). There’s the choice: do I grab hold of my anxious thought, chew on it, and keep it to myself, or do I trust God with that thought and then give it to God in prayer? Have you heard of this little saying, “I can’t; God can; so I think I’ll let Him!”

Paul was nearly beaten to death; he was deserted by friends. He was imprisoned, confined to a dark dungeon,
alone and mistreated. I think we could say that Paul ought to have lived a pretty “anxiety-riddled life.” But he chose not to. Instead, Paul declares with joy, “I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am” (v.11). Paul constantly chose to let go of any control he might have had over any circumstance, and to give it to God.

Choose to get out of yourself, and instead get into prayer. Choose to get to God, the Trustworthy One. I don’t mean to over-simplify the challenges of anxiety here; managing anxiety is not simply a matter of making a simple choice. Yet, there is the core question to ask yourself, “what can you control in this, or not; and Who can I trust with this? The Trustworthy One?

There’s Paul and then there’s Peter. Peter urges us (5:6-7): “Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God…Cast all your anxiety on God, because God cares for you.” Here is J.B. Phillips’ take on this truth: “Throw the whole weight of your anxieties upon Jesus—unload all your cares on Him—for you are God’s personal concern.” We can worry, yes; we will worry; and we can trust the Trustworthy One (Calm My Anxious Heart, Linda Dillow, p.132). You are God’s personal concern.

The Scottish pastor, whom Clyde Staples Lewis said was his most treasured mentor, George MacDonald, wrote this just for us this morning: “It has been well said that no
(person) ever sank under the burden of the day. It’s when tomorrow’s burden is added to the burden of today that the weight is more than (one) can bear. Never load yourselves on (with this extra weight), my friends. If you find yourselves so (weighed-down), at least remember this: it is your own doing, not God’s. God begs you to leave the future to Him and to mind (only) the present (today)” (Annals of a Quiet Neighborhood, p.203).

Get into God; get into prayer, wherever prayer happens for you, in your living room recliner, your prayer closet; out walking the dog, or even mowing the lawn! Wherever, get into God, into prayer. “I can’t, God can, so I think I’ll let Him!”

2. Get out of yourself and Get into Community.

Number two: Get out of yourself and get into community. Back to Philippians (4:13): “I can do everything through Christ who strengthens me.” The crucified, risen Christ has poured into you His very own Spirit. Through His Spirit Jesus has given you His Strength. Jesus is strengthening you to face your anxious moments, with Him! You are strong with Christ alongside you! You are strong in Christ with community upholding you!

Here’s the thing: Jesus loves you enough to give you a community. Jesus loves you enough to give you a family of faith. He gives you brothers and sisters, who are here to share, together, in the burdens of life. Get into Community. Jesus does not want you to be alone or isolated when anxious times come. Jesus doesn’t want you to get snared by the whispering lies of the Accuser (Satan)—that you ought to be ashamed of yourself; that you’re weak; that you’re an unworthy, unlovable mess; that you’re anxious because you’re not praying enough, or don’t have enough faith! In the name of Jesus, these are all lies. You are God’s personal
concern; you are His precious son—you are His precious daughter. God cares for you! You are God’s personal concern. That’s truth!

A remedy for anxiety? Enjoy Christian friendships around the table, around a meal—this morning at the Summer Breakfast, over a dinner this summer, or a 4th of July Picnic. Get into a community of spiritual friends. Trust them with your burdens; trust them in your vulnerabilities; trust them in your brokenness, which we all have. Get out with one of your spiritual companions and do something with them—an outreach event, a music concert, a hike, a cup of coffee and meaningful conversation. Get out of yourself and get into community.

And, then, there’s Him. Specifically, Jesus has a specific word for you when you are on the brink of a passing anxiety or an overwhelming anxiety. It doesn’t matter—all anxiety is real! Jesus says, “Come, come, I can see you are at the precipice; you are weary; I can see you are carrying something really overwhelming. I’ll meet you as you come to me, I’ll give you rest. Whatever fix you’re in, I promise to be humble and gentle for you. Rest your soul in me. And with me I will help you make your life lighter” (Matthew 11:28-30).

Closing Prayer:

Lord, we bring our anxiety to You—our passing anxiety, our overwhelming anxiety. Thank you for the living promise that, by Your mercy, we may unload the whole weight of our anxieties on You—that You are with us, and that we are Your very personal concern. Thank you that, through it all, in it all, You come to us humble and gentle—to give us rest, to lighten our lives, even now as we come to the Table of Love which You have prepared for us. Amen.
When the Darkness Comes

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Glenda Simpkins Hoffman
1 Kings 19:1-6

July 8, 2018
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 is 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.
Stress

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Matthew 11:28-30

July 15, 2018
Aesop’s Fables is a collection of 700 fables credited to a Greek slave and storyteller named Aesop dating back to the 6th century BC. These fables function much like short stories to impart a moral lesson.

In one such fable, a man from Athens watches Aesop play marbles with children. The man regards playing games with children a frivolous activity and chides Aesop for doing so. Aesop responds by removing the strings from his musical instrument and placing it on the ground. He asks the man whether he can solve the riddle of the unstrung bow. The man cannot explain the riddle. Aesop explains the riddle this way, “If you keep a bow strung tight, it will eventually break.”

Go back to my earlier conversation with our children about guitar strings. If you tighten guitar strings too much, they will break. If you keep your life strung tight all the time, you will break also. This is what too much stress will do to us.

We are talking about Pressure Points this summer. In previous Sundays, we examined the pressures associated with fear, anxiety and depression. Stress is next in our series of Pressure Points. There is good stress and bad stress. I will come back to this thought later in this sermon.

There are all sorts of remedies put forward to reduce stress—breathing techniques, aromatherapy, reducing caffeine intake or taking oil supplements. While these practices are good as far as they go, I prefer Jesus’ remedy for reducing stress: “Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28).
“Come to me,” Jesus says. Christianity at its core is a relationship with the person of Jesus. Not “do this” or “do that” but “Come to me.” “Come to me all who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest.”

With regard to this matter of burden, the two stories in chapter 12 that follow Jesus’ invitation are addressed to religious leaders called Pharisees. Both stories deal with the petty legalism of the Pharisees that grew up around Sabbath-keeping. The first is a story about plucking grain from the field on the Sabbath (12:1-8). The second concerns a sheep that has fallen into a pit on the Sabbath that requires rescue (12:9-14). God creates Sabbath for our rest and renewal, yet these Pharisees have turned it into a burden with all its accompanying rules and regulations. Later in Matthew, we read that the Pharisees, “tie up heavy burdens and put them on people’s shoulders yet refuse to lift a finger to help them” (23:4).

Jesus continues, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:29-30). A yoke is a harness for two animals used in plowing and pulling heavy loads. What a sweet invitation. Jesus invites us to become yoked together with him. He claims that his yoke is easy and his burden is light. Easy is a word in the Greek that means well-fitted. His yoke fits us well.

It seems contradictory for Jesus to tell people already weary and burdened with life to take on a new yoke and
burden as the way to find rest. Yet, Jesus’ yoke does not add to our burden. He lessens them.

I said earlier, there is good stress and bad stress. Not all stress is bad for us. Some stress is actually good for us.

I came across a new word this week—eustress. The prefix “eu” equates to something good and beneficial. Good stress motivates us to achieve goals and meet new challenges. Some of life’s greatest joys are stressful in a good way—getting married, having a baby, starting a new job or going to college.

Distress is a word that expresses negative, harmful stress. It is a word that literally means to pull apart. Distress creates long-term anxiety. It saps our mental capacities and puts our health at serious risk. Our goal this morning is to seek remedies for the bad kind of stress.

So what difference does this sermon make in my life? Two applications come to mind this morning.

First application: Take steps to de-stress your life. Some stress is self-induced. We create stress. We bring it on ourselves. We are the ones who choose to keep insanely busy schedules. We are the ones who make our lives needlessly complex. We are the ones who shuttle kids from one skill-enhancing activity to the next.

We hear a lot these days about the dangers associated with secondhand smoke. What about the dangers associated with secondhand stress?
Dr. Ellen Galinsky has conducted extensive research on stress in families. Some years ago, she did a thorough study with a thousand youth ranging in age from 8-18. She asked students, “If you were granted one wish to change the way your mother’s or father’s work affects you, what would that wish be?”

You might have expected their wish would have something to do with parents spending more time with their children. Actually, the number one wish children had for their parents was wanting them to become less tired and less stressed. I repeat, children and youth wanted their parents to become less stressed and less tired. Find out what it is stressing you and take steps to reduce it.

I have one practical suggestion on how you can de-stress your life. Take seriously the biblical invitation to practice Sabbath-keeping. God does not intend us to work 24/7. The biblical principle at the very least is 24/6.

God models Sabbath rest in the story of creation. We read, “In six days the Lord God made the heavens and the earth. On the seventh day, he rested and was refreshed” (Exodus 31:17). God rested on the seventh day and was refreshed. God built rest into the very fabric of human life. Rest has wonderfully restorative properties. God created Sabbath for our benefit. Keeping the Sabbath was never intended to add to our burden. Jesus
said, “The Sabbath was made for man not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27).

Take Jesus up on His offer to come to Him.

It reminds me of a story about a man walking down the road with a heavy burden on his back. A farmer comes along with a horse and wagon. The farmer invites the man to ride in his wagon. The man gladly obliges and climbs into the wagon, yet insists on keeping the heavy load on his shoulders. The farmer asks the man why he doesn’t lay down his burden in the wagon. The man tells the farmer he does not want to burden the horse any more than it is already burdened.

The moral to the story is that the burden is the same to the horse, whether the man keeps it on his shoulders or lays it down in the wagon. You can insist on carrying your own burden or lay it down with Jesus. Take Jesus up on his offer to come to him.

Earlier in worship, you heard a number of new, contemporary songs our children learned in Vacation Bible School. One of the songs they learned, ’Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus, is an old song made new. Louisa Stead wrote
this hymn in 1800, nearly 140 years ago. It was the only hymn she ever wrote. It also originated from personal tragedy in her life. We will first sing the hymn in the original style it was written. Then we will sing it a second time in the upbeat manner our children learned in Vacation Bible School this week.

’Tis so sweet to trust in Jesus,
Just to take him at his Word.
Just to rest upon His promise,
Just to know, “Thus saith the Lord.”

I’m so glad I learned to trust Him,
Precious Jesus, Savior, Friend.
And I know that He is with me,
Will be with me to the end.

Take Jesus up on His offer to come to Him.