

Goldmines for Growth: The Darkness of Depression
Psalm 38; I Kings 19:1-18
January 17, 2010

The overwhelming devastation that has hit the nation of Haiti is excruciating. The magnitude of loss is incomprehensible. The grief, horror, trauma, and suffering is immense. We weep in sorrow. We feel impotent in the face of such enormous destruction. We empathize with survivors, desperate to connect with loved ones, grieving the loss of everything and everyone near and dear to their hearts, anxious to find bread and water, fearful for their safety.

Once again we are reminded of the vulnerability of human life and the fragile nature of our existence. We are drawn to the resources of our faith in order to discover the hope of the Holy Presence in the midst of chaos. We recognize the need for community, both for our personal support and for the health and well-being of our larger circles of concern. Within this experience is a call to once again reexamine our values, a call to respond to desperate human need and to listen to the voice of the prophets who condemn the existence of poverty in the face of the world's plenty.

There are many messages I might offer today given the current crisis. Last fall we examined the book of Job and reinforced the belief that God is not the cause of such tragedy. Suffering is not God's way of punishing people. In no way are the Haitians to blame for this disaster. If anything, as we review the history of Haiti, the international human community bears great responsibility for the brutal history of slavery, oppression, massive debt, and poverty that has plagued that country. It is a time for prayers of lament, mourning the profound devastation and praying that God will be found in the midst of the mess. God will be found, not in the injustice of the earthquake and its destruction; rather God will be found in expressions of compassion: in the warm human touch of a relief worker; in the sharing of a piece of bread among survivors; in shared tears for the painful loss of human life; in the power of prayer; in the generous outpouring of donations from the global community. God will be found; we are called to be agents of God's compassion in whatever ways we can.

In the face of this crisis, I have elected to focus on the topic of depression, as planned for today. For even in our distance from the trauma of Haiti, through our exposure to the news coverage and our empathy for the victims, some of our experiences may be similar to depression. Hopefully there will be some insights for the living of these days.

Although we cannot impose modern psychology onto biblical narratives, we do see symptoms of depression in the lament of the Psalmist and the experience of Elijah. Elijah has been persecuted for his work as the Lord's prophet. He has had

enough and can't take anymore. He is worn out, fatigued, and angry. He is not taking care of himself. His view of reality is distorted. He is quick to blame others. Elijah feels all alone.

Elijah flees not only for self-protection, but also for escape from life itself. An angel, a messenger of God, offers Elijah a touch of compassion and nourishment for his weary body. He is led to the mountain of God for a forty day sojourn. Elijah is promised that the Lord's presence will be revealed to him. A great wind of hurricane force splits mountains and breaks rocks, but the Lord is not in the wind. Then there is an earthquake, trembling the earth beneath his feet, but the Lord is not in the earthquake. A burning fire follows, but God is not in the fire. Finally comes "a sound of sheer silence." After the rumbling storms descends a quiet hush. In the seeming absence, God speaks. God does not scold Elijah for showing his weakness. God accepts him where he is, but God persists in raising him to wholeness of heart once again. The angel provided physical sustenance. In the desolation of spirit, the voice of God whispers, reminding Elijah that he has not been abandoned. God renews the call upon Elijah, to anoint a new king, restoring meaning and purpose to his existence.

As we ask where God is in the midst of grief, devastation, and depression, we can affirm that God is there in the depths of it with us. God doesn't obliterate the darkness; rather God enters into it with us as a glimpse of light. God does not beat up those in darkness; God shares the loneliness and caresses us back to life.

In Greek, the word "resurrection" means "standing up." It assumes that one has been laid low, knocked flat on the ground. Christ enters into the pain that has knocked us off our feet. He shares that pain. He delivers us, not so much by rejecting the darkness, but by entering into the darkness with compassion, seeking what has been lost, seeking our health and well-being. In solidarity with the anguish, he bids us to "stand up," to awaken to life.

How this happens is one of the mysteries of the spiritual life. The dark feelings are not denied, but the power of goodness is placed in their midst. The goodness of praise is placed in the midst of sorrow. A note of gratitude is added to the despair. A relationship endures the loneliness. The bitter waters of the soul are sweetened to new life by allowing them to be touched by goodness and compassion. The sweetening of the bitter waters with the goodness of life gradually raises us to new life.ⁱ

The father of cellist Yo-Yo Ma spent World War II in Paris, where he lived alone in a garret throughout the German occupation. In order to restore sanity to his world, he would memorize violin pieces by Bach during the day and then at night, during blackout, he would play them alone in the dark. The sounds made by the reverberating strings held out the promise of order, hope, and beauty. Later, his son, Yo-Yo, took up the father's advice to play a Bach suite from memory

every night before going to bed. Yo-Yo Ma says, “This isn’t practicing; it’s contemplating. You’re alone with your soul.”ⁱⁱ

God is present in the midst of the darkness, in the sound of sheer silence, offering a gift of goodness in the face of bleak despair.

One woman shared her affirmation of God’s presence in this way. She wrote, “Contemplative spirituality taught me that the Holy One is never absent. He is, however, silent. Eventually I learned that while I may want a God who hugs me, who protects me from pain, who delivers what I need at any given moment, what I get is a silent God who turns things upside down, transforms pain, and can redeem even the worst situations. God is not going to fix my depression. But he didn’t cause it either. And he stays with me through it, loving me anyway. I have learned that even when I feel empty, even when I can’t sense it, Love is there. And it’s not up to me. He is there no matter what I do or how I feel.”ⁱⁱⁱ

This woman hints at one of the preoccupations of contemporary society: we want to fix things. We want a cure. Given our advanced medical technology, we expect that medical professionals should have a fix for everything under the sun. Pop a pill, take a shot, cure this disease. Parker Palmer says, “Our culture wants to turn mysteries into puzzles to be explained or problems to be solved, because maintaining the illusion that we can ‘straighten things out’ makes us feel powerful. Yet mysteries never yield to solutions or fixes—and when we pretend that they do, life becomes not only more banal but also more hopeless, because the fixes never work.”^{iv}

Rather than being anxious for a fix, Palmer suggests that we embrace the mystery of depression, probing the experience, waiting, watching, listening, suffering, and gathering whatever self-knowledge emerges. That knowledge of the heart will lead us to our true self.

In his book, *Let Your Life Speak*, Parker Palmer shares the image that helped him eventually reclaim his life. After hours of careful listening, his therapist said, “You seem to look upon depression as the hand of an enemy trying to crush you. Do you think you could see it instead as the hand of a friend, pressing you down to ground on which it is safe to stand?”

In reflection Parker realized that he had been living an ungrounded life. As an intellectual, he lived more in his head, apart from his body. He had lots of knowledge about God, but less experience of God. An inflated ego led him to think more of himself than was warranted in order to mask his fear of failure. He lived by a distorted ethic, by images of who he ought to be rather than by insight into this own reality, into what was true, possible, and life-giving for him.

He came to understand that, “Depression was, indeed, the hand of a friend trying to press me down to ground on which it was safe to stand—the ground of

my own truth, my own nature, with its complex mix of limits and gifts, liabilities and assets, darkness and light.”^v

Depression is not so much a problem to be solved or a puzzle to be explained. It is a mystery to be lived, uncovering the layers of truth lying deep within.

Depression is part of the human condition for many. Over 20 million Americans suffer from it, over 10% of the population. At some point in our lives, 10-25% of women and 5-12% of men will experience clinical depression. It comes in many forms. Some are primarily genetic or biochemical and will respond only to drugs. Some forms are primarily situational and will respond to inner work that leads to self-knowledge, choices, and change. Some forms lie in between. It is important to seek professional guidance in moving through depression, whether it be therapy or medication or a combination. Spirituality is but one source in restoring the true self to wholeness.

If you experience depression or know someone who is, I want to lift up three things that are helpful in the journey through the depths. What people who are depressed need from others is a quiet and respectful presence, a willingness to be beside the one who suffers. It is impossible for us to fully experience another person’s mystery. Our attempts to identify with another or to encourage them to “snap out of it” are not helpful. What they need is someone to be present in their pain without trying to “fix” it. Standing at the edge of someone’s misery makes us feel useless and powerless, which is exactly how a depressed person feels. The ministry of presence is oftentimes more powerful than the words we feel compelled to utter. If we say anything, it is best simply to mirror the condition of the other, “I can sense your struggle today,” or “It feels like you are stronger.”

Persons who are depressed need from themselves a gentle, abiding tenderness toward their inner battled self while it gropes its way toward healing. Lower your expectations; you don’t have to be a superhero. Notice and express gratitude for the smallest things: a crumb of kindness, a positive feeling, an encounter with beauty, or the ability to accomplish the simplest task. Be gentle with yourself: take a walk, eat nutritiously, meet a friend for coffee. Allow the community of faith to tenderly embrace you, whether it be in prayer or with the respectful presence of a few friends in the faith.

Finally, allow God to speak to you in prayer. Too frequently we clutter our prayer time with words, when what we need most is silence in order to hear the voice of God in “the sound of sheer silence.” Barbara Crafton says, “We pray as if it were all up to us, when in fact, almost none of it is. We pray as if we were giving God treatment plans to follow, as if nothing could possibly work out well if we weren’t there to plan it. We imagine that we must ‘know what to pray for’ in

advance, and that we cannot pray if we don't...Prayer isn't like placing an order at a pizza parlor."^{vi}

Focusing on our breathing is a way to center us in God's presence. Using a holy word, such as Jesus or peace, quiets our racing mind and calls our attention to God's presence. The most powerful form of prayer is often getting ourselves out of the way and being still in the emptiness, allowing God to be present with us in our pain, even without a word, simply with a comforting embrace. In that crucible of calm, we may hear that still small voice, "Be still, and know that I am God."

Take heart, my friends, for even in the emptiness, in the silence, in the darkness, in the chaos, God is present. Christ shares our pain, entering into its deep mystery, uncovering its layers of truth and raising us to new life. The community of faith is called to suffer with those who suffer and to carry them into the presence of God on the wings of prayer. Even in the midst of the darkness, the light of God's love in Christ still shines. Thanks be to God.

ⁱ Robert Corin Morris, *Wrestling with Grace: A Spirituality for the Rough Edges of Daily Life* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2003), p. 110.

ⁱⁱ Philip Yancey, *First Things*, February 2009. Quoted by Mark Ramsey, "Belonging," *Journal for Preachers*, Advent 2009, p. 22.

ⁱⁱⁱ Barbara C. Crafton, *Jesus Wept: When Faith & Depression Meet* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), p. 84.

^{iv} Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), p. 60.

^v *Ibid*, pp. 66-67.

^{vi} Crafton, *ibid*, pp. 112-113.

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