

## DESPAIR AND HOPE

Psalm 130; Matthew 26: 69 – 27: 5

I hadn't seen or heard from her in two months... a member of the congregation, deeply invested, involved, creative and engaged... but suddenly, it seemed to me, she had disappeared. I tried to get in touch. Nothing. Her daughter wouldn't disclose much to me either. "She's ill" she would say and kept the details vague. And then... contact. Her voice was distant and monotone. She told me she was beginning to feel better. She also wanted to come in and speak with me.

When we met, she disclosed to me what the "illness" she had suffered from was really about. It was clinical depression. She was on medication, but during the winter months, it could get out of control. When I asked her to tell me more, she described it to me in greater detail. It would come in waves, she said, not so much like a tidal wave which can feel overwhelming, but more like rising waters. First, you're trying to stand as tall as you can on your feet, then your tippy toes, then you're wading in deeper water, and then, you go under...

And going under isn't the kind of experience that causes you to panic and flail your arms and legs. It's more like a state of seeing yourself drowning from a distance, disconnected from yourself. And the scariest thing is: you just don't care. It's as if your heart and soul have been cut out and left on the side while your life is slowly ebbing away. You stop feeling anything. People speak to you and it doesn't matter. Whether you're awake or asleep, it doesn't matter. Whether your eating or drinking or forgetting to do it, it doesn't matter. You lose all taste for life, for anything. If your life ended you wouldn't care. What other people would feel if you disappeared, it doesn't matter. Whether standing, sitting or lying down, you disconnect from all else and everyone else. It's like you're carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders and yet floating in a vast emptiness.

Wow, how awful. I thanked her for sharing with me and we prayed together a prayer of thanksgiving, thanksgiving that she had begun to emerge out of this state of living death, to embrace life again, to find connection again, to begin to feel faith, hope and love again.

But you know, in subsequent conversations, we also talked about the difference between depression like she had and what's called: despair. The Philosopher Kierkegaard describes

despair as “a sickness unto death.” Despair is a sadness and a grief that feels the sadness and the grief. Someone who is suffering clinical depression can stop feeling altogether. In place of emotion there is numbness. It’s hard to know what to do other than taking care of a person’s basic needs to ensure they are supported medically, that they are safe and that they are held in love until the night passes and daylight begins to emerge.

Someone in despair, on the other hand, is also crying out for hope. They’re crying out because they’re feeling the pain and the loss. Despair is the cry of a hungry child. Despair is the cry of a mother having to bury her child after a bomb has fallen and killed indiscriminately. Someone suffering clinical depression doesn’t care if death comes. Someone in despair, on the other hand, is desperate for relief from emotional pain and grief. While we have a sense of how to care for those in depression, how do we engage despair when we’re caught in its grip ourselves?

Well, despair is what the psalmist is expressing in our scripture reading: “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!” What has caused the psalmist to be suffering despair? We don’t know. Is it war and the loss that has come to him through war? Is it abuse from his enemies? Is it something else? What is it that can cause despair in you and me?... It may not be one thing in particular. It may be a series of things happening, one after another. Sometimes it’s big and it’s obvious. Other times, it’s not clear how we have fallen into the pit we find ourselves in.

But what do we do about it? The psalmist cries out about it. He composes a psalm as a prayer to God. The words also give language to a whole community so that despair can be shared and expressed collectively. Isolation is overcome. And all of these actions are integral to building up hope against despair: “I wait for the Lord, my soul waits and in his word I hope... O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem.” God’s presence is felt again when a pathway is opened up; when the death of despair is overcome by the resurrection of new hope.

So, how is a pathway from death to resurrection, from despair to hope, opened up? How does the Psalmist find his way out? How do we? Well, any pathway from death to resurrection, from despair to hope, has to involve what psychologists, philosophers and theologians call: agency. Agency means choice. The Psalmist becomes an agent of change. He is empowered somehow to claim responsibility for his life and makes some important choices – choices to engage his despair, choices to engage God and others in community, choices to seek ways to express his pain, his fear and his loss, choices to open up space within himself for hope to find him and fill him with creative expression and thinking.

But how does the Psalmist achieve such agency? How can we? Let me offer a few points.

First, in his book: *The Road to character*, David Brooks writes about Viktor Frankl. Frankl is a famous Psychiatrist who suffered through the Holocaust and survived. Following the war he wrote a book: *Man's Search for Meaning*. While many around him in the concentration camps were completely defeated by their despair, Frankl found a way through. How did he do it? According to Frankl, you need to figure out what things you can change about life from what you cannot. There's much about life that happens and will happen to you. How you respond, however, is a choice you can make when you understand and accept that you can make it. You can face life as a passive victim or you can find a way to respond as if it's a test. You can pass the test by making positive choices that become inner victories.

In circumstances of suffering, it's easy to feel dehumanized and defeated, and this then leads to a loss of meaning, purpose and joy. Against this, Frankl argues, you can develop what he calls an "inner hold" by refusing to allow the action of others or circumstances you cannot control, to determine the ultimate purpose and meaning of your life. Life has thrown you into a certain situation. Something is expected of you. There is a larger purpose to your life and what you're going through can serve such a purpose. But you need to choose openness to that larger purpose. Whether it's choosing to live for the sake of others you love, for the sake of their memory, for the sake of God or a larger good or the future, whatever it is, it is possible. In Frankl's words: life "ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets before the individual." A larger purpose is achieved through daily choices sometimes moment by moment. How we engage others, how faithfully we perform our tasks, our daily rituals, our small acts of kindness... We are serving a larger goodness and we hold on to that even as life is battering us.

Now, some of us may feel this is all too easy for Frankl to say. And yet, Frankl speaks and writes this way as one who has lived the horror of mass genocide and survived to tell about it. If he says it's possible, it must be. The question is: are we inspired by his example and that of others to claim the agency of choice and responsibility for our own lives however things have come to be and may come to be?

And this brings us to our gospel reading. There is Peter and there is Judas. Both of them are disciples of Jesus. Both of them betray Jesus. Judas does it by selling Jesus out and Peter does it by abandoning Jesus and denying he even knows him. They carry not only guilt but shame. They fall into serious despair as Jesus is arrested, tortured and inevitably crucified.

So how do they respond to their despair? How do they respond to their moral failure, their bad choices and the shame they carry as a result? Judas dies by suicide. He can't change what's happened although he tries to give the money back. It's too late. All hope is lost. He sees no way out of his guilt and shame but death. Very sad.

Peter, on the other hand, takes a different route. He reaches out to the mercy of God which Jesus had always taught and embodied on the cross. Such mercy allows Peter space to confront his faithlessness, cowardice and shame. He seeks forgiveness and opens himself to a love that will not let him go. He becomes a powerful leader of the church himself. His path also leads him into a new humility in character as the false arrogance and confidence he had before is obliterated. He demonstrates a new kind of courage to be real and honest rather than pretending he's something he's not. This somehow makes him more courageous even though he himself will eventually suffer a fate like Jesus. Peter chooses life. God above him, beside him and within him empowers him in a new direction after the old direction was a failure. Becoming more genuinely humble and honest will build in him true strength of character whenever real threat and tragedy strikes.

The choice for hope in the face of despair that Peter is empowered to make is beautifully and powerfully captured, I believe, in the picture on our bulletin cover. In the very midst of chaos and destruction, there is the laughter and delight of children because a father chooses to give them joy and find joy in their joy. This is a choice in the face of the chaos and destruction all around him. His love for his children propels him to engage despair with a choice for hope.

That's the lesson Peter learns. That's what Frankl learns and writes about. That's what the Psalmist is seeking for. That's what you and I are being challenged and inspired to build up in ourselves as life has happened and will keep happening. Choosing hope in the face of despair, choosing trust in a larger goodness in the face of fear, choosing life in the face of the pull of death... May God above, God beside and God within inspire and empower us... Amen.

Let us pray: Come to us, O God, above, beside and within... inspire and empower us to choose life in the face of death each and every day, each and every moment we are alive... Amen.