

Telling Secrets: Depression

Today we are dipping into part of the Elijah narrative. The Bible doesn't talk much about the psychological health of people. It is almost dangerous to speculate about the well-being of characters in the Bible's narrative. In our second reading today, however, the Bible gives a strong sense that Elijah is deeply discouraged...depressed even. Ahab is king of Israel. He has introduced the worship of the storm god, Baal, to the people. Elijah is God's prophet, sent to bring the people back to the worship of the one true God. Our passage begins just after Elijah has received a message from Queen Jezebel that she is going to end his life. Elijah is afraid and flees for his life. Listen now to God's word from I Kings 19:4-8

Elijah abruptly enters the biblical narrative in I Kings 17, with no introduction, other than that he is a Tishbite. Up to this point, everything Elijah has done has been touched by the very power of God. He predicted a three-year drought- and it came, just as he said. God provided for Elijah in the drought with bread brought to him by ravens. Then God brought him to the home of a widow and her son, in a place called Zarephath, where the widow's meager supply of oil and meal never ran out while she supplied Elijah the nourishment he needed. There, by the power of God, Elijah even raised the widow's son from the dead! And if that was not enough, Elijah engages in a high stakes contest with the biggest false God of the day, the storm god Baal, and wins easily.

You may remember the story: On Mt Carmel, in front of all the people of Israel, Two sacrifices are prepared, one to Baal and one to the Lord God. Elijah challenges the priests of Baal: "Let's prove which God is real once and for all. Let us call upon by our respective Gods to ignite these sacrifices." Of course, Baal does nothing...because Baal is nothing. Yahweh sends fire from heaven that not only devours the meat and the wood, but also the stones and the water that Elijah has poured on the sacrifice to up the ante. It was a complete defeat of Baal. The people of Israel who had been limping between following Baal and following Yahweh now cry: "Yahweh, he is God. Yahweh, he indeed is God."

Elijah has every reason to be on top of the world. His ministry has been blessed. He is the most famous prophet in Israel. The power of God working through Elijah has done marvelous things and God has provided for him every step of the way. By any measure, Elijah is a success. If he lived today, he might be on the cover of Time Magazine as Person of the Year.

And yet...and yet when we get to chapter 19, everything changes. Queen Jezebel is livid that Elijah has humiliated Baal and killed her prophets. She wants him dead.

Upon hearing this news, one might expect Elijah's blood pressure to shoot up. You might think he would start praying and planning and gathering his resources to meet the challenge.

But no... Instead he falls into a very deep pit of despair. In an instant, he is overwhelmed with fear. He flees for his life, leaving friends and his servant behind. He runs as fast and as far as he can into the wilderness until he collapses in the scanty shade of a solitary broom tree. Before falling into an exhausted sleep, he tells God, "I've had enough. I am worthless. I have nothing to offer. I don't want to go on living. Go ahead and kill me." In that moment, under that solitary broom tree, Elijah remembers no help in ages past and can see no hope for years to come.

How in the world can this happen? How can a person go from Mt Carmel and one of the most spectacular victories in Scripture, to being so depressed he'd rather die than go on living? What happened?

Scripture does not tell us... and so it is hard to say just what happened inside Elijah... but we can say this; We all know it DOES happen, don't we? We've seen it in the lives of people we know. We may have experienced it in our own lives. Outwardly, a person's life...our life... looks fine...great even... the picture of success...and then despair and depression invade our very being and take over, dislodging everything good.

Surveys conducted by The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 2020 found anxiety disorder and depressive disorder in adults on the rise at significant rates. ⁱ A 2019 national study found that "one in three HS students and 1/2 of female students reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, an overall increase of 40% from 2009- ⁱⁱ and this was before the pandemic! We may not always understand the how's and why's of depression, but we know it happens. We know it is real.

For some, depression lasts a season. For others it is a lifetime struggle. Depression does not look the same for everyone.

Some people with depression can't get out of bed, some can.

Some can't eat, some can.

Some self-harm, some don't.

Some are suicidal, some aren't.

Some take medication, some don't. ⁱⁱⁱ

Depression is a disorder that involves being in a low mood nearly all the time, or losing interest or enjoyment in almost everything. People with depression typically feel sad, empty, and hopeless...

Our tendency is to want to know what's wrong so we can fix it, so we can help the person pull herself out the sadness and emptiness they feel.

"Look at how much you have to be grateful for. It's a beautiful day, go out and smell the roses!" But that's not how deep depression works. Depression is not a choice.

As Quaker author and teacher Parker Palmer, who has had his own bouts of depression himself, shares: “Such comments just make the depressed person feel worse. You know intellectually that all that is true but you can’t feel any of that in your body.”^{iv}

If you have not suffered from depression, it can be difficult to understand. Listen to how some people who suffer from depression have described it:

“Depression is a monster. It feels like there is a consistent weight on top of you. “

“It’s like eternally grieving for something and never quite being sure what that something is.”

“It is a deep and paralyzing darkness brooding within, a darkness without dawn...”

“Depression is a slower way of being dead.”^v
Friends, Depression is an illness, not a choice.

There is still, even in 2022, shame around depression. We don’t talk about it much. Too often we feel people should be able to pull themselves out of it. Sometimes people believe that if only they had more faith, they would not be depressed. Neither is true.

Andrew Solomon is a writer and clinical Psychologist who has written and spoken extensively about depression. In the late 1990’s he came out about his own struggle with depression. He said his friends were concerned that it was really hard on him to be public about his depression. “Do people talk to you differently now?” they asked. He said “Yes, they do. Now people come up to me and tell me about their own depression or that of a family member. I have come to believe that depression is a family secret everyone has.” And that secrecy, he says, adds to the burden of depression and makes it even harder.^{vi}

There has been some progress since the 90’s, but I’m not sure how much. This sermon series is entitled Telling Secrets. It is our prayer that we can become a community in which secrets and burdens can be safely shared and all can get the support they need.

I am grateful to those who have helped destigmatize depression by sharing their stories. They can also give us insights into how we can be a community that supports those who are suffering- because it is not always obvious what we can do. I talked with a high school classmate this week whose son first exhibited signs of depression at 16 years old. I asked her what she wanted people to understand about depression, and especially depression in teens.

She said, “Depression is a liar. It will convince you have no friends and no skills or talents, no reason to live. It turns your mind against you so that you think you are not worthy, that you are a burden, that you are unlovable.” And teens are particularly susceptible to this. It is hard to get through those lies, she said. She urges parents and friends, not to ignore signs of depression in teens. If they are down day after day, if they

are irritable with almost everyone all the time, if they withdraw from things they used to love, talk it over with their doctor.

She also wants people to understand that depression consumes all your energy. Don't expect the person to ask for help. Family and friends have to be proactive. Text, call, bring cookies, sit and watch a movie. Even if the person is not responding to you, presence is important. It has the capacity to snap someone out of a critical moment. Do not underestimate the value of your presence. Tragically, this did not save her son. He died by suicide at the age of 24 but it has helped others so she continues to plea, "Don't give up."

Parker Palmer shared about one friend who particularly helped him when he was in the depths of depression. This friend, a Quaker elder, would come every afternoon at about 4 pm and massage his feet. He hardly ever said anything, except a brief word, like "I can feel your struggle today," or father down the road, "I feel you're a little stronger at this moment, and I'm glad for that. He would give no advice. He would simply report, from time to time, what he was intuiting about my condition."

Parker continues:

What he did mainly for me, of course, was to be willing to be present to me in my suffering...it became, for me, a metaphor of the kind of community we need to extent to people who are suffering in this way, which is a community that is neither invasive of the mystery nor evasive of the suffering but is willing to hold people in a space, a sacred space of relationship, where somehow this person who is on the dark side of the moon can get a little confidence that they can come around to the other side." ^{vii}

This little snippet of the story of Elijah we read today is a gift. It affirms what we know to be true- That exhaustion is real. Despair is real. Depression is real. It also tells us that the gifts of God are real!

In the pit of despair and depression, Elijah asks God to take his life. Instead, God's angel brings life. God offers just the basics- a cake on hot stones and some water, a visitation that says, "You are not alone." God sees Elijah in all his brokenness and does not look away, rather he stays with him. The angel comes to Elijah twice, encouraging Elijah to get up and take nourishment. In the strength of that nourishment and companionship, Elijah takes a 40-day journey to Mt Horeb where he crawls into a cave and sleeps.

Elijah is still suffering. He laments to God that he is all alone- forgetting the throngs of people at Mt Carmel...forgetting the God who has accompanied him.... Depression is a liar.... He can't even bring himself to stand at the mouth of the cave when told the Lord is about to pass by...until, that is, he recognizes the presence of God in the sound of sheer silence.

Friends, we worship a God who understands that the journey is hard, a God who did not choose to be distant but journeyed to earth to be among us, to suffer with us, to share our journey. We worship a God who understands... and will never let us go.

Elijah, like each one of us, “is held by hands tender and sensitive enough to hold the broken pieces of his life for as long as it took; and then gently put them back together with the glue of grace.”^{viii} And when that wholeness, that healing, does not take place on this side of eternity, we trust this to be true:

That neither life nor death,
nor depression nor suicide,
nor anything else in all creation
will be able to separate us from the love of God
in Christ Jesus our Lord.^{ix} Amen.

ⁱ JAMA Network Forum April 6, 2021

ⁱⁱ Children Action Alliance article March 24, 2022

ⁱⁱⁱ adapted from *Some people with depression...* by Alli Brosh.

^{iv} Parker Palmer, *On Being* with Krista Tippett, <https://onbeing.org/programs/the-soul-in-depression/#transcript/>

^v These quotes on depression are taken from a variety of sources: John Swinton: *Finding Jesus in the Storm: The Spiritual Lives of Christians with Mental Health Challenges*; William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020. chapters 4 & 5. *Theocast: Depression* <https://theocast.org/depression-transcript/> May 20, 2020. Rev. Dr. Ron S Cole-Turner, *Praying with Someone with Depression*, Pittsburgh Seminary blog <https://www.pts.edu/blog/praying-depression/> May, 17, 2022. Andrew Solomon TED talk, “Depression, The Secret We Share” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-eBUcBfkVCo/>

^{vi} Andrew Solomon TED talk

^{vii} Parker Palmer

^{viii} Scott Hoetz, The Center for Excellence in Preaching

^{ix} adapted from Romans 8:38-39