

October 20, 2019

The Good News of Hope

Psalm 33:12-22

*"This book is impossible," writes Matt Haig in *Reasons to Stay Alive*, a biography of his personal struggles with depression and anxiety. "Thirteen years ago I knew this couldn't happen. I was going to die, you see. Or go mad. There was no way I would still be here. Sometimes I doubted I would even make the next ten minutes ... One of the key symptoms of depression is to see no hope. No future. Far from the tunnel having light at the end of it, it seems like it is blocked at both ends, and you are trapped inside it ..."*

If you have struggled with mental health, like depression, you know the sense of hopelessness Matt Haig is talking about.

If you know someone who wrestles with mental health, like depression, you have some inkling of what he is talking about.

Mental health challenges can affect anyone. People with good hair, happily married people, people who have just got a promotion, people who are Christian or Muslim or atheist, people who vote Conservative or NDP, people who can tap dance and play guitar, people who gush happiness and positivity in their social media posts – who seem to have it all together. All can struggle with their mental health.

One challenge, of course, is that mental health is hidden. You can't tell someone has depression, anxiety, is bipolar, or OCD just by looking at them or even by doing an x-ray or an MRI. People often only know someone is suffering if they tell them, and with any form of mental health that often doesn't happen – especially if you're male. Especially – unfortunately, sometimes – in church.

There's a stigma associated with mental health that we don't attach to cancer, or heart disease, or multiple sclerosis in the church. Or we compound the problem suggesting *"It's all in your head."* *"You don't have enough faith"* (my faith and my serotonin levels have nothing to do with each other). Or *"Just pray harder"* (you wouldn't tell an asthmatic suffering an asthma attack to pray harder; you would tell them to suck on their inhaler. Same thing).

Hopelessness, depression, anxiety happen – they don't always have an obvious cause. For some people there are obvious triggers. The Old Testament character, Job, lost just about everything that was important to him. Not surprisingly, he moans, *"My days are over. My hopes have disappeared. My heart's desires are broken. These men say that night is day; they claim that the darkness is light. What if I go to the grave and make my bed in darkness? What if I call the grave my father, and the maggot my mother or my sister? Where then is my hope? Can anyone find it? No, my hope will go down with me to the grave. We will rest together in the dust!"* (Job 17:11-16).

Everyone's symptoms are different: for me, I have had my struggles with panic attacks, insomnia, mental exhaustion, physical exhaustion, feeling like I can't get breathe properly, eating too much, memory problems, inability to concentrate, lack of perspective on reality and possibilities, an unexplainable sadness, wondering if you are ever going to be "well" again, speculating if you are going mad ...

Like Job, it can feel like my hopes have disappeared. I resonate with the author of Psalm 42, *"Why am I discouraged? Why is my heart so sad?"* Or with David (in words picked up by Jesus), *"My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? Why are you so far away when I groan for help?"* (Psalm 22:1).

1. The Good News of Hope: You are not alone

One in five people get mental health issues, like depression, in their lives. Twice as many women as men will suffer a serious bout of depression in their lives. Women are also more likely to seek and receive treatment for mental health problems than men.

So you don't feel so alone, there are lots of well-known people who have/do struggle with their mental health, including Buzz Aldrin, Halle Berry, Jim Carrey, Winston Churchill, David, Johnny Depp, Elijah, Carrie Fisher, Jeremiah, Job, Jonah, Handel, Anne Hathaway, Billy Joel, Angelina Jolie, Stephen King, C.S. Lewis, Abraham Lincoln, Joyce Meyer, Mozart, Isaac Newton, Gwyneth Paltrow, Princess Diana, J.K. Rowling, Charles Schulz, Brooke Shields, Charles Spurgeon, Ben Stiller, Emma Thompson, Uma Thurman, Sheila Walsh, and Catherine Zeta-Jones. So, if you struggle, you have lots of company.

In a recent interview, Christian singer, songwriter, author, and TV host, Sheila Walsh, said, *"When I was hospitalized with severe clinical depression I thought I was the only one. I didn't know of one other Christian struggling with any form of mental health. What I didn't know then was that there are thousands and thousands of men and women who love God yet are struggling alone, in silence, full of shame. This has to end. It's time to shine the brightest light into the darkest corners of the church."*

"I still take medication. I take it each day with a prayer of thanksgiving that God had made this help available to those of us who need it, but I see so much that grieves me. We, as the Church, do not handle mental health well. Because it doesn't show up on an X-Ray we doubt its validity and make those who are already suffering, suffer more. We accuse them of secret sin or lack of faith. One of the saddest conversations I've had was with a mother who showed me a picture of her beautiful twenty-five-year-old daughter. 'My daughter struggled for years with depression, but she started to work with a church that doesn't believe Christians should take medication. My daughter took her own life.'"

Churches should be the most honest place in town, where we can come with all our issues and shared brokenness – I hope! In the words of one modern day prophet, *"The church is God saying, 'I'm throwing a banquet and all these mismatched, messed up people are invited.'* Be encouraged. You are not alone in your suffering. Statistically one in five of us in this room have (or will have) mental health struggles. Join the club!

2. The Good News of Hope: People

When you do struggle with your mental health, the temptation is to withdraw from people. To isolate yourself. To pull back from others. As much as possible, don't do that – stay connected.

Here are some of things that I've learned personally or from people I know:

1. Get the professional help you need. It's okay to not be okay and get help!
2. Spend time with those you love – family, friends, community, church. Other people are (literally) life-savers.
3. Get active – physical exercise, hobbies, reading, writing all help – doing things that don't necessarily require brain power, but get your system going.
4. Care for others – visiting, compassion, reaching out to others helps us see the bigger world and helps us move past our own "stuckness."

If you know someone who is struggling with their mental health, reach out to them.

1. Know that you are needed and appreciated, even if it doesn't seem like it.
2. Listen. Don't know what to say? Often it helps if you just keep quiet 😊.
3. Never say things like "Pull yourself together" or "Just cheer up".
4. Mental health is a struggle. Things may be said that aren't meant. Don't take things personally any more than you'd take someone with arthritis personally.
5. Educate yourself about mental health.
6. Be patient. People get better. But it can take time. There's no magic pill.

3. The Good News of Hope: God

Sheila Walsh comments, *"In my life I have a choice. I can sit with my depression and look at Jesus or I can sit with Jesus and look at my depression. What I mean by that is I can focus on what's broken and wonder where God is or I can sit in the companionship of Christ who suffered for us and worship him in the middle of the mess. That gives my pain meaning and context. The Psalmist David wrote, 'The Lord is close to the brokenhearted; he rescues those whose spirits are crushed' (Psalm 34:18). God doesn't run from us when we're hurt and in despair; he moves close.*

"Until we see Jesus face to face, we'll live with brokenness and yet we look to the day that John saw in his Revelation, 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever.'"

The distinctive good news for us, as people of God is that: **God created us.** God created and sustains this incredible world. And He lovingly created and sustains each one of us as well. We are His beloved children. That is who we are. Psalm 139.

God loves us. Through Jesus, God has suffered for us, empathizes with us, and

destroys the power of sin and darkness, so we might have life, be forgiven, have hope. *"We put our hope in the Lord. He is our help and our shield. In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name. Let your unfailing love surround us, Lord, for our hope is in you alone"*(Psalm 33:20-22).

God is with us. We are never alone. He never abandons us. Through the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit, God is always with us. *"I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord"*(Romans 8:38-39).

God is our stronghold in the fiercest storms. Our lives and identities are fundamentally and profoundly shaped by the reality of God's presence and power, not by the lies that our mental health may tell us. Depression lies. Depression makes us think things that are wrong. God, and His Word, help us reset our anchor based on who God created us to be and who He says we are.

We need to remember that God is bigger than our mental health. He is bigger, grander, and more powerful than any storm that can buffet us. He is the God of resurrection who has overcome every form of oppression and death. He is the God of certain hope.

Psalm 23, following Psalm 22 (*"My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"*) reads

*The Lord is my shepherd; I have all that I need.
He lets me rest in green meadows; he leads me beside peaceful streams.
He renews my strength.
He guides me along right paths, bringing honor to his name.
Even when I walk through the darkest valley,
I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me.
Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me.
You prepare a feast for me in the presence of my enemies.
You honor me by anointing my head with oil.
My cup overflows with blessings.
Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life,
and I will live in the house of the Lord forever.*

This is the certain hope in which we face life. This is God's rock-solid promise. And here in the church, in this community of wildly different people, all saved by grace, I hope we can talk honestly and openly about our struggles and the hope we have in Jesus. There is light at the end of the tunnel ... God's light, God's people, God's hope.

BENEDICTION

"I pray that God, the source of hope, will fill you completely with joy and peace because you trust in him. Then you will overflow with confident hope through the power of the Holy Spirit" (Romans 15:13).