

Sermon for the Third Sunday After The Epiphany: Matthew 4:12-23

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This morning, I'm going to do something a little unusual for my sermon. I'm gonna get a little dark. I've written some hard to digest things before, and I've taken us to some depths not often plumbed in this particular medium, but I don't think we've really done *dark* dark. Some of y'all know that I've had my share of run-ins with depression. I take meds, see a therapist and a psychiatrist, and turn readily to my support system. I say all that as a kind of caveat. I'm not telling you about this so you can fix it or go home and fret about your rector. I'm telling you about this because it's real life, and we don't talk about it enough. Mental health has a whole slew of bizarre stigmas attached to it. It's scary and it can be lonely and for reasons I don't fully understand, it can be embarrassing or even shame-filled. A lot of that is our society's baggage foisted onto us by generations of stiff-upper-lip types. And a lot of that is our own baggage carried for decades. And a lot of that is the mental health stuff itself turning its own nasty tricks.

My first attempt at therapy was way back in high school, and it didn't take. But that was my own fault. I felt this growing emptiness underneath a social butterfly exterior, and it was no fun. It wasn't dangerous, but it wasn't rainbows and lollipops either. So I went to a counselor. Now, I come from a family of high achievers, so I approached those sessions like maybe I could win at therapy if I just did it right, and the way I thought was "right" involved trying to trick my therapist into thinking everything was good and if he was really worth the shingles on his wall, he'd see through it all to the unspoken things and magically know what to do. As you might imagine, it did not work. Instead, after a couple of sessions, he just said, "from what you're saying, it sounds like everything's fine, so we probably don't need to meet anymore." See? I knew I could win. But let me tell you, the prize was no great reward.

It took a very long time for me to return to therapy, but when I did, I was in desperate need. So much of my life was good on paper. I had a million reasons to be happy, or at least content, or at least not heavy all the time. My job was great, the people I worked with were great, the town I lived in was great, my dogs were great, my marriage was great, my friends were great. My family was tough, especially with a bunch of weird health issues and a couple of deaths piling up through the ranks. And there was this global pandemic thing. And the country I lived in was showing itself to be a different place from what I'd known it to be, or at least thought it to be. Still, everything else was good so I should have been happy. But through all the years and all the happinesses and all the achievements and all the loves and all the joys, there was this dark shadow somewhere just outside my peripheral vision.

There's an icon of St. Peter mourning after the cock crowed for the third time and the realization of his betrayal set in. Sitting with his chin resting in his hand, his face is twisted in heavy grief and regret. And just behind him, there's a hole in the scenery. Maybe it's a tomb yet-to-be-filled? Or the abyss leaning in a little too close? When I saw that for the first time, I knew Peter's weight. Years before, he'd arrived on the scene with Jesus excited to fish for people, and now he'd turned his back on all they stood for. Now, I did not feel like this growing abyss behind me meant I'd betrayed Jesus, I don't want to give that impression at all. I just mention that scene because it so fully encapsulated everything I felt beneath the jovial masks: some misery with an even more miserable abyss growing behind me. There was small comfort in knowing even a saint had been there before, but that did not make the darkness go away. A few more tragedies, innumerable sleepless nights in which, as the psalmist says, "my bed was stained with tears," and I found that abyss had grown larger and closer, much, much closer. I prayed, of course, and I sat in those pews, sometimes in prayer, sometimes just there, sometimes not really there at all. And I talked out loud and whispered and wept. And sometimes I just sat, hoping that God could make sense of what was happening without having to speak the words. That kept me

grounded, that kept my center in faith, but you know what it didn't do? It did not make the depression go away. Thank God for telemedicine, and thank God for tiny micrograms of salts tailored at just the right balance to set things right, or at least to set things right-er.

I wanted to talk about this today because of Isaiah, who says those in anguish will no longer be in gloom and those who walked in darkness now rejoice. I love this passage, and given some of the things I've mentioned, I treasure that the word gloom even shows up in our scriptures. But, and this is kind of an important but, depression does not show up in scriptures. There's heaviness, there's darkness, there's even hopelessness. But the modern psychological concept of depression does not show up in these ancient texts. We might be able to pick out things that look like it, but in doing so, we back-project our sensibilities onto a world and a people that didn't think about this thing in this way.

There's another problem, too, and that's the tendency of many modern Christians to wrap up all kinds of things in the mental health arena with aspects of our faith. Is it depression, as my therapist says, or do I have a demon, as my mother once said? Is it a problem involving serotonin, or do I just need to pray more? Or worse, is it a sign that I clearly don't have enough faith, because people with enough faith don't get sick, and people who've seen the light walk no longer in darkness? If nothing else, I want to make it abundantly clear that your faith is a vital part of your life, but if you have even an inkling of a growing and dark depression, odds are it's not because you don't love God enough. And odds are you'll be better served scheduling an appointment with a therapist than with a priest.

But, and this is also kind of an important but, that doesn't mean the church is ceding this world to therapists altogether. Some of us just know that we have tools suitable for some jobs while other professions have other tools suited for other jobs. Mental health crises need your faith as much as they demand everything else of you. Isaiah may have seen a great light, but sometimes it takes a world full of solace and strength along with those milligrams of salts to feel the warmth of God again. Your faith, my faith is a tool, but it is not the only one available. Please, my lovely people of God, please know there is no shame here, no blame, no judgment, no reason to fear or be embarrassed if that abyss grows behind you, too. Light has dawned, but that does not mean night never comes again. It will, but when it does, we are here, all of us, to guide you. Many more of us have sat in that darkness than you know, and here we are still. It's no demon, it's no character flaw, it's just life. Lives of darkness and light, despair and hope, isolation and solace and exhaustion and strength and a constant love radiating even when we can't feel it or can't appreciate it. All that is here, all that is in all of us.

"There will be no gloom for those who were in anguish?" Maybe, but when the darkness overwhelms, and the light seems to shine everywhere but on you, know this. We can't prescribe you much of anything, but we can sit in that darkness with you. You are not broken if the gloom persists. I can't promise healing or a way out, but I can promise love. And a sympathetic ear. And an open heart. And a well-worn seat about halfway back on the left that's real good at holding the abyss just a tiny bit at bay.