

April 21st, 2024

Psalm 23 “When You Say Nothing”

A few months ago, in our “Living the Questions” Bible study, one of the commentators in the videos we watched was Helen Prejean, who is a nun from Louisiana known for her work with prisoners on death row. Someone in the group appreciated her insights and said, “Who is she?” I said, “Oh, she’s the nun that Susan Sarandon played in *Dead Man Walking*.” Nobody in the room had seen that movie! I said, “I can’t believe I haven’t shown that movie in Faith and Films. That’s on everyone’s top twenty list of movies to show at any faith and films-style discussion group.” This movie was one of the most celebrated films of 1995. Roger Ebert of the Chicago Sun-Times gave the film four stars, his highest rating, and called it “absorbing, surprising, technically superb and worth talking about for a long time afterward.” Susan Sarandon won the Academy Award for best actress that year for this film! So last Monday we watched *Dead Man Walking*. What I failed to tell folks ahead of time is that *Dead Man Walking* wasn’t exactly 1995’s “feel-good movie of the year.” We still managed to have a decent discussion on Wednesday, but I’m afraid I didn’t win any awards for starting the week on a positive note. Now here we are at the end of the week. This morning I’m at least going to have the decency to warn you that I have some things to say about an uncomfortable topic that we don’t often talk about in church. Let’s talk about mental health.

Statistically speaking, on any given day, about 8% of the general population struggles with diagnosed, treated clinical depression. This does not include those who experience situational or seasonal depression, nor does it account for those who struggle with undiagnosed or untreated depression. When you factor that in, the number jumps to 25%. That's one in four people. This discrepancy shows how much depression is stigmatized. Twenty five percent of people say that they've experienced depression, but only 8% are seeking professional help. Why? Maybe it's because the way some people were taught to deal with depression is, "don't be such a Debbie Downer." Or, "You have it so good. Your grandpa grew up in the depression and you didn't hear him complaining, did you? Just suck it up."

Here's another disturbing statistic. People born in the last six decades are ten times more likely to deal with depression than those born in the 1930s, 40s, or 50s. The highest suicide rates used to be among middle-aged men, but in the last few decades suicide rates among younger people have quadrupled. The ever-increasing pace of life has placed a burden on our human souls. We are inundated with advertisements, negative news cycles, political polarization, skyrocketing costs of housing and basic living needs, lingering effects of the COVID 19 pandemic, and we may as well throw in the increase in natural disasters. This all takes a toll on our emotional health and our interpersonal relationships. Today there are a lot of anxious and painfully sad people in our society and in our churches. They are daily

walking through what seems to be a long valley of shadows, or as the medieval poet St. John of the Cross called it, “the dark night of the soul.” I want each of you to know that you are not alone. We are in this together. You belong.

You might say, “Okay, those are some pretty startling statistics, but everyone feels blue now and then.” For sure. Feeling blue is kind of like the common cold of our human existence. It’s like a fever that comes and goes and stays either above or just below the surface of our humanity. It’s an angst that’s made even more stark when compared with the episodes of love and peace, and joy that we’ve known in life – those seasons when our life was all green pastures, overflowing cups and full tables. M. Scott Peck, author of the *The Road Less Traveled* called it out in the first three words of his book: “Life is difficult.” No doubt about that, but thankfully, in these broken and beautiful in-between places, scriptures like the 23rd Psalm are there to lead us to a better way.

I think the 23rd Psalm was one of the first “big” passages of scripture I memorized when I was a kid. John 3:16 was probably the first because it’s one of those foundational statements of the Cristian faith that we teach our kids. “God so loved the world.” How do we know this? “He gave his only begotten son.” Okay, but what does that mean? “Whosoever believeth in him shall have everlasting life.” There it is. It took me a while to understand the nuances, but it’s a pretty straightforward declaration of the nature of God

and of Jesus' purpose. Psalm 23, on the other hand, was a little harder as far as memorization goes. John 3:16 is one verse. Psalm 23 has six verses. It takes more time and thought to memorize six verses. You've got to conjure up some visuals to memorize a scripture like this. "The Lord is my shepherd." What's a shepherd? Someone who tends a flock of sheep. Okay. I can picture that. I had help from a children's picture bible that I had. There were plenty of pictures of shepherds watching over their sheep. "The Lord is *my* shepherd." Got it. Verse one committed to memory.

"I shall not want." That means I don't need to worry about anything. It's all taken care of. My basic needs are met. Kids need to hear that. There. Two down. On to the next sentence. "He maketh me to lie down in green pastures." Yeah, that's a good thing to do. Not so good when you've got grass seed allergies, but still. It's a nice thing to visualize and helps me move on to the next verse. "He leadeth me beside still waters." I can picture that too. Not like the ocean. Not like a river. It's like a lake. Smooth and still. "He restoreth my soul." There's where I had to stop and think. What *is* a soul anyway? What does it mean to have my soul restored? My mom restores old beat-up looking furniture. She strips the paint off, sands it down, stains it and puts a coat of finish on it, then it looks better. That one was tricky, and it took me a lot longer to understand.

"Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil." When you're a kid, it's easy to

imagine what it looks or feels like to walk through a scary place. I remember thinking that the valley of the shadow of death must be like walking through the woods in the *Wizard of Oz* where Dorothy met the Tin Man and the Cowardly Lion. There were a lot of shadows and strange noises in that place. Maybe that's what "the valley of the shadow of death" was like. But the Psalm said there's no reason to fear because "thou," meaning God, "art with me." Better yet, the Lord has a handy-dandy rod and staff to take care of any evil things that might jump out at me in those shadowy places. When I was older, I started to develop a better understanding of what a soul is and that walking through the valley of the shadow of death is often more of an internal feeling than an external feeling. That became much clearer when I eventually had to come to terms with my own depression. And let me tell you, that's complicated when you're a clergy person.

I was reading the results of a Duke University study on depression among clergy. Remember how I said that 8% of the general population deals with some kind of depression? According to Duke, 11% of clergy deal with clinical depression. And to be fair, this is true for all people who are in "helping professions" which includes counselors, therapists, nurses, doctors, social workers, chaplains, psychiatrists, first responders, and teachers just to name a few. Then, if you go to a church like ours where the priesthood of all believers is lifted up as one of the major tenants of the faith that complicates things even more. We believe that everyone in the church is part of the ministry

which means we all fall under this category of being “helpers.” Yeah, but that means we’re the ones who are supposed to have it all together, right? Maybe that’s part of the problem. We think we’re supposed to keep it together, which adds a layer of anxiety to the depression we often feel. If we’re called to care for those who are struggling, how in the world are we going to minister to someone else when we’re dealing with our own struggles?

This is where the 23rd Psalm has been very helpful. When I get overwhelmed with the brokenness of the world, this scripture has proven to be effective not only for me but for those I care for as a pastor. “He restores my soul.” I think I’m starting to understand that verse better. It’s a reminder of the promises that we who follow Christ can lay claim to. But there are times when even the words and wisdom of scripture can lose their influence. Yes, we can and should commit the 23rd Psalm to memory, but sometimes the pain and weariness we encounter in other people is so deep that the most powerful thing we can provide is presence. Sometimes telling people what to believe or how to behave, although well intentioned, is misplaced, and the best teaching and the most important words are those we leave unspoken. At breakfast the other day, Bill and I were talking about how interesting it is that the Good Shepherd brings all this poetic, profound, and enfolding comfort with no words ever spoken. Think about it. The Lord in this psalm says nothing. However, the Lord does make me lie down, and the Lord does lead me, and the Lord is with me. The Lord brings

comfort. The Lord prepares and anoints. The Lord dwells with me.

If you are one of the fortunate ones this morning who are not wrestling with or feeling wrestled down by depression or anxiety, that's awesome. I will guarantee you, however, that there is someone in your family or circle of friends who is. It's important for us to know that God is aware and that the Good Shepherd is there and is with those sheep who feel lost – with those who are having a hard time keeping up with the ones who are walking through the deep valleys. Beliefs and behaviors rarely heal hearts. Belonging, however, does. And that is why I again say, “You are not alone. We are in this together. You belong.” God's assurance is that goodness and mercy follows us wherever we go.