

**Don't Worry. Be Happy.**

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I haven't been effective in preaching from the lectionary. Still, I affirm the discipline—I *need* the discipline; so, occasionally I try again. Beginning today, my intention is to use the lectionary at least through the summer. We'll see how long that lasts. In case you're not aware, the Lectionary is a three-year cycle of Scriptures that include most of the Bible. Each week there are readings from the Psalms, the Old Testament, the Gospels and the Epistles. The readings follow the liturgical seasons. Today's Psalm is Psalm 42:

As a deer longs for flowing streams,  
so my soul longs for you, O God.  
<sup>2</sup> My soul thirsts for God,  
for the living God.  
When shall I come and behold  
the face of God?  
<sup>3</sup> My tears have been my food  
day and night,  
while people say to me continually,  
“Where is your God?”  
<sup>4</sup> These things I remember,  
as I pour out my soul:  
how I went with the throng,<sup>(a)</sup>  
and led them in procession to the house of God,  
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,  
a multitude keeping festival.  
<sup>5</sup> Why are you cast down, O my soul,  
and why are you disquieted within me?  
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,  
my help <sup>6</sup> and my God.  
My soul is cast down within me;  
therefore I remember you  
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,  
from Mount Mizar.  
<sup>7</sup> Deep calls to deep  
at the thunder of your cataracts;  
all your waves and your billows  
have gone over me.  
<sup>8</sup> By day the LORD commands his steadfast love,

and at night his song is with me,  
a prayer to the God of my life.  
9 I say to God, my rock,  
“Why have you forgotten me?  
Why must I walk about mournfully  
because the enemy oppresses me?”  
10 As with a deadly wound in my body,  
my adversaries taunt me,  
while they say to me continually,  
“Where is your God?”  
11 Why are you cast down, O my soul,  
and why are you disquieted within me?  
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,  
my help and my God.  
Which did you hear in this Psalm:

*“Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?”*

Or, did you hear:

*“Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.”*

Recently, The National Survey on Drug Use and Health<sup>i</sup> surveyed over 600,000 American youth and young adults, and the results are startling.

- From 2009 to 2017, major depression among 20-21-year-olds more than doubled, rising from 7 percent to 15 percent.
- Depression surged 69 percent among 16-17-year-olds.
- Serious psychological distress, which includes feelings of anxiety and hopelessness, jumped 71 percent among 18-25-year-olds from 2008 to 2017.
- Twice as many 22-23-year-olds attempted suicide in 2017 compared with 2008, and 55 percent more had suicidal thoughts. The increases were more pronounced among girls and young women.
- By 2017, one out of five 12-17-year-old girls had experienced major depression in the previous year.<sup>ii</sup>

Another study suggests Americans in general are increasingly unhappy:

“Our happiness, or what researchers refer to as “subjective well-being,” is down across the nation, according to a detailed study by the Gallup Organization. The survey of more than 2.5 million Americans examined how people feel in their day-to-day lives across key dimensions of well-being, including physical health and wellness; having supportive personal and family relationships; financial and economic security; having a sense of

purpose; and connection to one's community.

"From 2016 to 2017, America saw its largest year-over-year drop in well-being in the 10 years that Gallup has tracked this data. Furthermore, 21 states registered absolute declines in their levels of well-being, and not a single state showed a statistically significant improvement in 2017."

Clinical Depression is almost epidemic in our culture today. I don't know, maybe you're more selective in choosing your Facebook friends; but I have about 300 FB friends, and every day I see posts that reek of depression and anxiety—people crying out in pain and fear and anger and despair; and data confirms the average age of those who suffer from it is getting younger every year.

And this may surprise you: I'm in a couple of clergy groups on Facebook: *Disciple Clergy*, for one; another is called: "Things They Didn't Teach Me In Seminary." Studies support my observation that the ratio of anxiety and depression is stronger among clergy than in the general population.

So, along comes the Lectionary for this week: The Psalm that I read earlier; the story in I Kings—Elijah, having rid the planet of 450 priests of Baal, and in the process embarrassing King Ahab's wife, Jezebel, who was their sponsor. Jezebel puts out a contract on him, and he's running for his life. Out in the dessert he sits down under a broom tree and whines, "It is enough! Now take away my life, for I am no better than me fathers." Depressing stuff.

The Gospel lesson is from Luke: the story about Jesus casting demons out of a man into a herd of pigs. And I read about the Irish priest and exorcist who is overwhelmed by an increase in demonic activity. He's begging his bishop for help.

I'm getting depressed just talking about all the depression! What's going on?

Well, first of all understand that clinical depression is not an emotional condition. It's not about attitude; it's not about being sad. Sadness isn't always a symptom. Clinical depression is a medical condition with physical, neurological, and biochemical involvement. It's fairly easily treated—for those who will stay with the treatment; but it's not something you just "buck up and get over."

Secondly, untreated clinical depression effects work, sleep, appetite, and is a major factor in relational dysfunction, suicide, and domestic violence.

As much as you may want to, you can't rescue someone from depression or fix the problem for them. You're not to blame and you're not responsible for their happiness (or lack thereof). While you can offer love and support, ultimately recovery is in the hands of the depressed person and his or her medical team.

That doesn't mean we're helpless in the face of loved ones with depression. We love them and we want to help. The best way for us to help is not to nag them

to get help. The best way for us—not for medical professionals—the best way for us to help is simply to be present and to listen. An effective conversation might begin: “I’m concerned; you seem troubled. Can I help?” And then, just listen.

The first response you get probably will be denial: “I’m OK.” Just keep expressing your loving support and keep listening. In all my training and practice through 59 years of ministry, the most effective skill of any helping profession is listening. I can’t overstate that. Not that it’s a cure-all, and it certainly isn’t quick; but over time it is far and away more effective than any kind of confrontive or advising or coercive approach. For one thing it builds trust in a relationship.

But all of that is beyond the scope of the pulpit. Just know that there are ways you can participate in the healing process when a loved one is depressed. And know also that, for the Christian, the texts in today’s lectionary are unanimous about one thing: there is hope in God.

There’s another trend that has developed alongside the increase in depression and stress-related health issues. I’ve mentioned it many times, and have expressed concern and feelings of helplessness. That trend is for people born since the mid-1960s to leave the church or simply to never get involved.

This week it hit me: a question: “Are the two trends are related?” Is there the possibility that the abandonment of Christian community is related to the increase of stress and depression? Is it possible that “spiritual-but-not-religious” is a doorway to spiritual isolation and despair? I don’t know. I have no data either way, but it is undeniable that the two movements emerged pretty much at the same time. I can’t help but believe a lot of stress and depression is the result of putting one’s hope in the wrong place. The Psalmist writes, “Hope is in God.” And I think that hope—that longing—is a part of what drives that spiritual exodus from organized religion.

For as long as I’ve been alive, the church’s response has been to drag those people in and preach at them—or, if they won’t come, to talk about them and talk about why they should be here.

Last week I suggested that God is calling us—has always called Christians—to go to them. I suggested the motion is outward—toward them; rather than toward us.

Yes, they’re hungry, and there is food on this table. Remember Jesus’ parable of the great banquet? The invitations were sent, but people didn’t show up. They sent excuses, instead. So, the master of the house sent his servants out; told them to go, and bring them in. I think that principle still stands.

What may be different—what we may need to change—is our approach to “bringing them in.” For many generations the approach has been: “We’ve got the

answers to your problems, so come to us, and we'll put you on the right path." I don't know; as I consider the recent history of the church, it seems to me that we've still answering the questions we brought on our own spiritual journeys; but, but nobody's asking those questions anymore.

Cut to the chase: our evangelism ministry in this moment of history is not so much to the drunks and addicts and pimps—although there is much ministry to be done among that population—but to those who have felt turned away and cast aside by the church... those who may be trying out faith for the first time, but, like the Ethiopian eunuch in last week's story, have no one to guide them... people who are just wondering if there is a place in the church for them... people who just need a fresh start, a helping hand... or people just about ready to give up.

Matthew writes: *"Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. <sup>36</sup> When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."* (MATTHEW 9:35-36 NRSV)

And when we go—when we are "out amongst them"—I am coming to believe that, instead of "telling our story to them," the task of evangelism today is for us to listen to their story.

In doing that—in hearing the questions they're asking—we may discover that we don't know all the answers. We may discover a new thirst—a new longing to know God's presence

And then, it's not so much a matter of "bringing them in." Instead, we find ourselves coming with them, together:

*As a deer longs for flowing streams,  
so my soul longs for you, O God.  
<sup>2</sup> My soul thirsts for God,  
for the living God.*

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<sup>i</sup> <https://nsduhweb.rti.org/respweb/homepage.cfm>

<sup>ii</sup> [https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2019/june/staggering-increase-in-mental-health-issues-among-young-adu.html?utm\\_source=yourlectionary&utm\\_medium=Newsletter&utm\\_term=29120996&utm\\_content=655654017&utm\\_campaign=email&utm\\_source=yourlectionary&utm\\_medium=Newsletter&utm\\_campaign=2013&utm\\_term=29120996&utm\\_content=655654017](https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2019/june/staggering-increase-in-mental-health-issues-among-young-adu.html?utm_source=yourlectionary&utm_medium=Newsletter&utm_term=29120996&utm_content=655654017&utm_campaign=email&utm_source=yourlectionary&utm_medium=Newsletter&utm_campaign=2013&utm_term=29120996&utm_content=655654017)