

Hope when it seems all hope is gone
Psalm 13; Psalm 42:2-3
September 6, 2020
Pastor Steve Richards

These past six months so much of our lives has been focused on the coronavirus and its impact on work, school, and family life. A death total approaching 200,000 that some estimate will reach somewhere between 300,000 and 500,000. As significant as this is – and I believe it is a real threat – other challenges have not disappeared. More than a year ago, we began planning for an emphasis on suicide awareness. It is one part of our Vision 2023 to be a church focused on the issues impacting youth in our community. Our youth ministry has sponsored rallies in this and other communities in an effort to raise awareness. In March we hosted an educational event for educators and parents about depression and anxiety – key causes of suicide. In June, we hosted a virtual viewing of a film followed by a discussion about teenaged depression. And today at the start of the National Suicide Awareness week, I want to talk to you about suicide.

This is an epidemic in our country. I want you to be instruments of healing and hope for those who are struggling with depression and suicidal feelings. In 2018, which is the most recent year for which we have data, 48,344 Americans died by suicide. That's 132 deaths each day, and in the state of Minnesota on average, one person dies by suicide every 12 hours. That's the number of those who completed their attempt, but the number attempting suicide is estimated to be 1.4 million persons. More women attempt suicide, but more men complete it. 70% of all suicides are by men, and the demographic with the highest percentage are middle-aged white men. The fastest growing segment are ages 15-24. In the past ten years, suicide has increased by 50%. That's what I mean by epidemic. Why is it increasing? Researchers think one of the main reasons is the decrease in socialization, which may seem odd when almost all of us are walking around with one of these. (smart phone) Everywhere I go, I see people focused on a screen, communicating with someone. The Pew Research has found that 45% of teens are on their phone almost constantly. Even when they are hanging out with others. But it's not just kids. Last fall, I remember watching a group of men in our Atrium, sitting in a circle of chairs, not talking to each other but each one focused on his phone.

A few weeks ago, I was at the Mayo Clinic for a physical. No problems; but it had been a few years since my last physical. And when my time with the doctor ended, he walked with me to the exit, and as he did, he said, "Take care of yourself. You are doing important work, life-saving work." And he described a Harvard Medical School study of 30,000 women. The largest study of its kind following women for 20 years, and he said they found that a factor that led to a longer life was church participation. Those who participated in a church had deeper relationships with others and a faith to support them in challenging times. Maybe you haven't thought of it that way but supportive relationships and faith that's the recipe for HOPE. It's what we do here.

Last week, I spoke with Cassandra Linkenmeyer, she is the Minnesota Director of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. I asked her about the warning signs for suicide. What should we be watching for, and she said, look for changes in a person: social isolation/withdrawal, unusual agitation, increase use of substances, impulsive behaviors, sadness and feelings of hopelessness, and if someone talks about taking their life take it seriously, even if you think it was a harmless comment. But she also said, sometimes there are no signs. We've included resources that you can download from the online worship page of our website. Then I asked Cassandra, what should we do if we notice someone seems suicidal? And here's her answer: [video]

Did you catch what she said? If you notice something, say something. And then point them toward resources. And I'd like to give you an important resource, would you take your phone, open your contacts and enter suicide prevention: Suicide Prevention 800-273-8255 and the text number is 741741. It may not be for you, but someone in your life may say, I feel like giving up and you can say, I have a number for you to call, and I want you to call and then call me back. I want you to be the kind of people who offer hope.

Last week, I turned to the Bible and found story after story of people for whom the pain of living was so great that they did not want to go on living. There was Moses. He led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. They crossed the Red Sea and entered the wilderness. And it didn't take long for Moses to reach a point where his life was unbearable. The people no longer wanted to follow Moses. They attacked him verbally. They ran out of food and when God provided food they didn't want to eat it. Finally Moses was so exhausted and felt so rejected that he wanted to die. In Number 11, he prayed: Lord, **I can't bear this people on my own. They're too heavy for me. If you're going to treat me like this, please kill me.** I don't think Moses was just having a bad day. He was serious. "I don't want to go on living." Or King David, the greatest king who ever lived. The one to whom God promised a Messiah. In Psalm 13, I picture David on his knees, looking to the sky with his fists raised: **How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart?** He was struggling with feelings that life was overwhelming. Life was hopeless and God seemed absent. Or there was Job. He lost his wealth, his children, his own health, his body covered with sores. His life had become so pitiful that his own wife said, "Job, just curse God and die." His best friends told him, "You must have done something horrible to deserve all this." And in chapter seven, he says, **"I prefer strangling and death, rather than this body of mine."** In story after story, we find that even those closest to God struggled and were depressed to the point where life was hopeless and they wanted life to end.

Depression is especially devastating when we believe there is no hope, that we will not get better, that others will be better off without me. Sometimes a person reaches for a permanent solution, when the problem is temporary. Life may seem hopeless, but it's not. It may seem people will be better off, but the family is never better off. As hopeless as one's life may seem, there is always hope. Moses wanted his life to end, but God didn't answer that prayer. Instead, Moses would lead the people for another 30 years and arrive at the top of Mt. Nebo where he looked across the Jordan River and was able to see the Promised Land. There was hope after all. Or King David – who went on to say in Psalm 13: **I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the LORD's praise, for he has been good to me.** Or Job, who will not give up on God and at the end of the story we are told: **After this, Job lived 140 years; he saw four generations of his children. Then Job died, old and satisfied.** Some of the greatest moments come after the darkest time of life. There is always hope.

Here's where faith kicks in. Faith is so much more than a feeling. It is knowing hope even when we are not feeling hope. In Psalm 13, David said, "I can't see God, but I trust God is there." When his pain was at its worst, Job said, "I know that my redeemer lives and I will see him." When we are not feeling the hope, hear the words of 1 John 4:4 **greater is the one who is in me than the one who is in the world.** But knowing by itself is not enough. We need other people. When we get depressed, we withdraw from others and focus inward which only feeds our depression. It's why I think everyone needs a Faith Group. It's like these cups. (three cups of varying heights) Each cup represents a person and each person has a different capacity for the stress and the darkness in their lives. So when the darkness comes, we can't handle it all – not alone. The expression: God never gives us more than we can handle. First of all, that

sentence is not found in the Bible – and second of all, if it were true, there would be no suicide. What we need are other people to come alongside us and suddenly our capacity increases. A faith group is a small group of people who come alongside each other each week to offer support and to pray and to grow together. And I have yet to meet the person who didn't need that.

We need people to help us along the way. That's the story of Kevin Hines. At the age of 19, he went to the Golden Gate Bridge, prepared to jump over the bridge. In his mind he was thinking three things: If someone will just smile at me I won't jump. If someone will look at me and say, "Are you okay?" I won't jump. If someone will ask, "Do you need help," I won't jump. He went to the Golden Gate Bridge, hoping someone would do one of those things so he wouldn't jump, and when he got there this is what happened. [video]

If only someone had smiled. If only someone had asked. After worship, I usually stand by the entrance and greet people as they leave worship. One Sunday a couple years ago, I greeted a man whom I knew was struggling with some things in his life, and as I shook his hand I said, "I hope God will bless you this week." He smiled slightly and then walked toward his car, but a few moments later I noticed he was back in line waiting to talk to me. He said, "Did you really mean what you said that God could bless me this week?" Yes, I reply, I believe that God is always ready to bless us. If you'd like, we could talk about that this week. And then I suggested he come to my office on Tuesday. When he arrived on Tuesday, he told me that he had planned to take his life on Sunday evening – and in his plan, his body would never be found. He would simply disappear. But, he said, when you said God would bless me – that got my attention and when you said we could meet today, it gave me a reason to live. We talked for a while and I gave him the phone number that I shared with you this morning. Just the fact that I greeted him that Sunday changed the course of his life.

Some of you listening today may be tortured by thoughts and emotions and circumstances, and you want to quit. Maybe you've even prayed to quit. Hear this: You are not alone. Some of the greatest people in the Bible struggled. Your struggles do not define you. There is always hope. There are hundreds of people who will hear this message – people who can notice each other, who can say, "Are you okay? Are you thinking about hurting yourself?" We can be the people who are committed to caring for other people. The apostle Paul wrote to people who were under persecution from within and from forces outside themselves – and in the eighth chapter of Romans, he wrote words that I encourage you to memorize: **I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.** You can count on that. There is always HOPE.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of September 6, 2020

Weekly Prayer: God of mercy, when we feel that we are drowning in hardships, disappointment or pain, remind us of your presence. When we are thrashing through the jungle of despair, speak to us of your love. When poisonous feelings of shame haunt us, lift us up so that we might face the world with hope. When we are weary from the struggle, strengthen us with the power of your Spirit. Remind us that your love will never let go of us. Amen.

Monday, September 7

Scripture: Psalm 147:1-5; Matthew 5:1-4

Praise the LORD! Because it is good to sing praise to our God! Because it is a pleasure to make beautiful praise! The LORD rebuilds Jerusalem, gathering up Israel's exiles. God heals the brokenhearted and bandages their wounds. God counts the stars by number, giving each one a name. Our Lord is great and so strong! God's knowledge can't be grasped!

Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up a mountain. He sat down and his disciples came to him. He taught them, saying: "Happy are people who are hopeless, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs. Happy are people who grieve, because they will be made glad."

If you or someone you care about has suicidal feelings, please seek help. Reach the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (800) 273-8255, the Crisis Text Line (text to 741741) or a pastor at Messiah 763-473-6968.

Observation: Based on a single verse (like Psalm 147:1), some people say a "true" Christian can only feel "praise." But if we, or someone we care about, is hurting deeply, that often just deepens the despair. Psalm 147 spoke after Israel's exile in Babylon (see verse 2). And verse 3 said, not that God's people were never sad, but that God tenderly cares for the brokenhearted and wounded. In the first two of his famous "Beatitudes" (from the Latin *beatus*, "blessed") Jesus named hopelessness and grief as part of human life. But he offered God's good news to the hopeless and grieving.

Application: Jesus would have used the Aramaic phrase "O, the blessedness of..." in the Beatitudes. It meant much more than circumstance-based human happiness. In his commentary, William Barclay wrote, "'No one,' said Jesus, 'will take your joy from you' (John 16:22). The Beatitudes speak of that joy which seeks us through our pain, that joy which sorrow and loss, and pain and grief, are powerless to touch, that joy which shines through tears, and which nothing in life or death can take away." When, if ever, has God given you that deep inner trust? How can you daily build a bond with God that makes that good news an unshakeable part of your life?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I want the kind of rock-solid blessedness you offer me. Shape my heart to value what you value, to rejoice in the eternal life you give. Amen.

Tuesday, September 8

Scripture: Lamentations 3:16-26

He crushed my teeth into the gravel; he pressed me down into the ashes. I've rejected peace; I've forgotten what is good. I thought: My future is gone, as well as my hope from the LORD. The memory of my suffering and homelessness is bitterness and poison. I can't help but remember and am depressed. I call all this to mind—therefore, I will wait. Certainly the faithful love of the LORD hasn't ended; certainly God's compassion isn't through! They are renewed every morning. Great is your faithfulness. I think: The LORD is my portion! Therefore, I'll wait for him. The LORD is good to those who hope in him, to the person who seeks him. It's good to wait in silence for the LORD's deliverance.

Put these key numbers in your phone or where you can easily find them: the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (800) 273-8255, the Crisis Text Line (text to 741741), Messiah Church (763) 473-6968.

Observation: In 586 B.C., Babylon's army destroyed Jerusalem and exiled many leading citizens. (You can read about Jerusalem's fall in 2 Kings 25:1-21). Lamentations recorded the

anguish of an Israelite (maybe the prophet Jeremiah) left behind in Judah. The writer of Lamentations couldn't see any human hope for the future (verse 18) and had to deal with "suffering and homelessness" (verse 19) in the present.

Application: The Common English Bible renders one of the great words of the Old Testament, the Hebrew word, *hesed*, in verse 22, as "the faithful love of the LORD (Yahweh)." Other English translations use expressions like "steadfast love" or "unfailing love." The writer somehow trusted in God's unending love even in the rubble of a burned, ruined city, no doubt with unburied bodies still in the streets. How have you been able to hold to God's steadfast, unfailing love even in your worst times? How do you start your day as you come awake? Make a morning habit of expressing gratitude to God for this day's gift of life, even when it's a hard day.

Prayer: Creator God, thank you for the gift of this new day. Whatever trials or hardships I may face today, let the morning light remind me that your mercies are ever-present with me. Amen.

Wednesday, September 9

Scripture: Psalm 31:9-12, 17-24

Have mercy on me, LORD, because I'm depressed. My vision fails because of my grief, as do my spirit and my body. My life is consumed with sadness; my years are consumed with groaning. Strength fails me because of my suffering; my bones dry up. I'm a joke to all my enemies, still worse to my neighbors. I scare my friends, and whoever sees me in the street runs away! I am forgotten, like I'm dead, completely out of mind; I am like a piece of pottery, destroyed.

LORD, don't let me be put to shame because I have cried out to you. Let the wicked be put to shame; let them be silenced in death's domain! Let their lying lips be shut up whenever they speak arrogantly against the righteous with pride and contempt! How great is the goodness that you've reserved for those who honor you, that you commit to those who take refuge in you—in the sight of everyone! You hide them in the shelter of your wings, safe from human scheming. You conceal them in a shelter, safe from accusing tongues. Bless the LORD, because he has wondrously revealed his faithful love to me when I was like a city under siege! When I was panicked, I said, "I'm cut off from your eyes!" But you heard my request for mercy when I cried out to you for help. All you who are faithful, love the LORD! The LORD protects those who are loyal, but he pays the proud back to the fullest degree. All you who wait for the LORD, be strong and let your heart take courage.

The need for resources like the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (800) 273-8255, and the Crisis Text Line (text to 741741) hardly ever comes "out of the blue." [Click here](#) to access a family discussion guide to help better equip your family to identify and share emotional experiences with each other.

Observation: Over 50 of the 150 psalms were laments, like this one—Hebrew poems voicing some type of fear or sadness. This psalm included depression, limited vision, humiliation, anger at foes, and panic. None of those emotions are a reason to give up on life—they're just part of being human. The psalmist faced his awful feelings by staunchly trusting a God bigger than he was. (If you have time, read Psalm 107, noting the repeated idea that "God saved them from their desperate circumstances.")

Application: In verse 17, the psalmist prayed, “Lord, don’t let me be put to shame.” What internal messages, perhaps under the pressure of external events or other people’s words, trigger your feelings of shame? How can you build an identity as God’s beloved child that can limit shame’s destructive effects on your life? (This is hard work and may require help from a trained counselor or spiritual director.)

Prayer: Lord God, like the psalmist, I want your kind of honest strength. Teach and guide me in building my trust in you as I respond to your calling. Amen.

Thursday, September 10

Scripture: Isaiah 40:26-31

Look up at the sky and consider: Who created these? The one who brings out their attendants one by one, summoning each of them by name. Because of God’s great strength and mighty power, not one is missing. Why do you say, Jacob, and declare, Israel, “My way is hidden from the LORD, my God ignores my predicament”? Don’t you know? Haven’t you heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth. He doesn’t grow tired or weary. His understanding is beyond human reach, giving power to the tired and reviving the exhausted. Youths will become tired and weary, young men will certainly stumble; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength; they will fly up on wings like eagles; they will run and not be tired; they will walk and not be weary.

Before or beyond the crisis moments in which you need help from the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (800) 273-8255, the Crisis Text Line (text to 741741) or Messiah Church pastoral care (763) 473-6968, there is usually longer-term care needed. Your pastors can refer you to a trained counselor or spiritual director.

Observation: After long years of exile, Israelites now faced a hard, wearying trip on foot from Babylon to Israel. It was tempting for them to think God didn’t see their hardships. The prophet pointed his readers to their God, who created everything, and whose understanding is beyond human reach. He invited them (and us) to trust when we don’t understand. Trust allows us to “hope in the Lord” for renewed strength, and through faith to “fly up on wings like eagles,” to “walk and not be weary.”

Application: Few feelings are lonelier than the sense that you are alone in your problems and must face them with no support or help. Can you recall times when you have felt like the Israelites in Isaiah 40:27: “My way is hidden from the Lord; my God ignores my predicament”? Are there areas of your life today that feel that way to you? In what ways can you reconnect with the Creator who “doesn’t grow tired or weary” of caring for you? How can trusting, really trusting, in a God who’s vastly wiser than you, renew your strength by setting you free from the exhausting, depressing need to know all the answers right now?

Prayer: Lord God, when you and your love feel absent from my life, help me trust you and cling to hope. Remind me of what I too easily forget—that you love, value and care for me. Amen.

Friday, September 11

Scripture: Matthew 26:36-38; Hebrews 4:14-16

Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane. He said to the disciples, “Stay here while I go and pray over there.” When he took Peter and Zebedee’s two sons, he began to

feel sad and anxious. Then he said to them, “I’m very sad. It’s as if I’m dying. Stay here and keep alert with me.”

Also, let’s hold on to the confession since we have a great high priest who passed through the heavens, who is Jesus, God’s Son; because we don’t have a high priest who can’t sympathize with our weaknesses but instead one who was tempted in every way that we are, except without sin. Finally, let’s draw near to the throne of favor with confidence so that we can receive mercy and find grace when we need help.

Did you know? Messiah’s web site includes a page you can reach at www.messiahchurch.org/lets-talk-teens/. It includes a presentation made at Messiah in March on depression and suicide awareness. It also includes mental health resources available in the community.

Observation: When we are hurting, it’s easy to think “no one understands how I feel.” Often, we extend that thought to God. How could the all-powerful ruler of the universe have any clue about how powerless, how helpless, how hopeless I feel? But we find that Jesus, as he faced the cross, experienced the depths of human darkness and helplessness as fully as any of us ever will. He does understand—he lived the experience himself.

Application: About Matthew’s painful portrayal of Jesus’ garden agony, N. T. Wright wrote, “When we ourselves find the ground giving way beneath our feet, as sooner or later we shall, Gethsemane is where to go. That is where we find that the Lord of the world, the one to whom is now committed all authority (Matthew 28:18), has been there before us.” (*Matthew for Everyone*, part 2, p.161) In his humanity, Jesus’ feelings led him to say, “It’s as if I’m dying.” How can that help you trust that he knows firsthand whatever you are going through when the ground gives way beneath your feet?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, in my darkest moments, help me remember you agonizing alone in the darkness of the garden. With my heart linked to yours, remind me that I am never alone in the darkness. Amen.

Saturday, September 12

Scripture: Psalm 46:1-7

God is our refuge and strength, a help always near in times of great trouble. That’s why we won’t be afraid when the world falls apart, when the mountains crumble into the center of the sea, when its waters roar and rage, when the mountains shake because of its surging waves. *Selah*. There is a river whose streams gladden God’s city, the holiest dwelling of the Most High. God is in that city. It will never crumble. God will help it when morning dawns. Nations roar; kingdoms crumble. God utters his voice; the earth melts. The LORD of heavenly forces is with us! The God of Jacob is our place of safety. *Selah*

One last time (please take this seriously): If you or someone you care about has suicidal feelings, seek help. Reach the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (800) 273-8255, the Crisis Text Line (text to 741741) or Messiah Church pastors (763) 473-6968.

Observation: Hurricanes, tornados, earthquakes and wildfires make us painfully aware that what we call solid ground can, in fact, fall apart. But most of us feel a much greater daily impact from health problems, broken relationships, financial crises, and deadly accidents. Individual and family “worlds” fall apart regularly. How can you hold things together when your world is

falling apart? By yourself, it's hard – maybe even impossible. That's why, repeatedly, even lament psalms turned to this assurance: "God is our refuge and strength, a help always near in times of great trouble."

Application: Verse 4 might sound like a travel guide until we realize that no river flows through the earthly city of Jerusalem. "God's city" wasn't one limited earthly location—it was an image of God's caring for all of God's people. The river pointed back to creation (Genesis 2:10) and forward to God's ultimate victory (Revelation 22:1-3). What have you found that helps you let the river of God's steadfast love pour energy, comfort and power into your life? How can you ground your spiritual life firmly in the world of this psalm, where "God is in that city. It will never crumble" and "God will help... when morning dawns"?

Prayer: Lord God, when my heart fills with joy, please receive my praise (Psalm 100). When I'm in the darkest valley and my heart breaks, please be ever near me (Psalm 23). When I'm anxious and afraid, please protect and cover me with your wings (Psalm 91:1-6). When I stumble, please forgive and restore me (Psalm 51). When I'm angry at your perceived neglect, please remind me to trust your *hesed*, your steadfast love (Psalm 13). Amen.