

Day 26: Sunday, Introduction of Depression

God Carries Us

“The Lord is near to the to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.”—Psalm 34:18

Characterized by feelings of emptiness, intense sadness and hopelessness, the depression stage of grief gives us the impression that it will last forever. In this stage people withdraw from life and live as if they are in a fog. We find no good reason to get out of bed in the morning, no desire to do the things that once gave us joy. Our body feels heavy and lethargic, and life itself feels pointless.

For someone coming to terms with their own death, this depressive stage creates space for the sorrow of loss and allows the one who is dying to more easily reach a place of acceptance. People attending to those who are dying do well to sit with the sadness, express empathy and care, and avoid saying things like “Don’t be sad.” Kübler-Ross writes that visitors who try to interfere with this depressive stage – people who try to cheer up the dying person – actually hinder the person’s emotional process.

Depression as a stage of grief should be understood as a normal and necessary emotional stage in our journey of accepting and learning to cope with loss. Feeling sad – even overwhelmingly sad – is a natural reaction to a deeply painful loss. But people shouldn’t feel ashamed to seek help for depression. Counseling coupled with antidepressant medication can help people through this stage. In *On Grief and Grieving*, Kübler-Ross and Kessler affirm that antidepressants do not inhibit the processing of grief and can serve as helpful support by putting a floor in the bottomless feeling of despair.

Prayer: God, hold our grief in your loving embrace. Carry us when the weight of loss grows too heavy. Amen.

Teri

Day 27: Monday

Giving Ourselves Grace

“The truth will make you free.”—John 8:32

I began serving in a new call one November a few years back — a time always flooded with new excitement, new people and a steep learning curve. I was eager to meet the moment with Holy Spirit-filled energy, imagination, intelligence and love.

But this time was different. On the very first day of the call, my mom died of cancer.

I fell to the floor and wept.

Eventually, sometime during that first day without my mom, I did something I would never have counseled: I tried to put myself together and find the wherewithal to be present, energized and ready to go for this new call, especially on the cusp of Advent!

Fortunately, God’s grace intervened in the form of an email from a member of the church’s pastor nominating committee.

“Bobby,” he wrote. “Be easy on yourself and when you feel ‘off’ on a day and you can’t explain it, just give yourself some grace, will ya? Take care of yourself, lean on your family and we will be here for you guys now and in the future.”

No need to push through. No need to rally.

It was an invitation to *just be* — and it felt like a massive weight being removed. I slumped over and allowed myself to feel the sorrow, slowness and uncertainty — and also the freedom that came from being honest with myself.

The next day I found the energy to get some preaching coverage for my first Sundays with the church.

The situation was not how I imagined beginning a new call, but to this day I give great thanks for a church community

that knew how to honor grief's timeline, even if it meant setting aside the flood of anticipation for a flood of tears.

Prayer: God of all truth and love, thank you for calling me just as I am, in every season of life. May your grace renew me and transform me and show me the ways I can extend this same grace to another today. Amen.

Bobby

Day 28: Tuesday

The Ministry of Presence

"The Word became flesh and lived among us."—John 1:14

Journey's "Don't Stop Believin'" was going strong over the speakers, and the inviting aroma of freshly roasted beans filled the crowded coffee shop that morning. "Here!" I said, waving to a young man I was scheduled to meet for the first time. "Let me get you a drink!"

He sauntered over. "I'm fine," he flatly replied and then stared at the ground.

Technically, we were there to have a career coaching conversation, but that topic was clearly not on the table. Finally, he glanced at me and said, "I gotta be honest. I don't think I should be here. I got a lot going on." He looked shell-shocked.

"Look, forget the coaching conversation," I said. "Instead, if you're up for it, I'd welcome hearing more about you and your story. Human to human—nothing more."

"Yeah, okay," he said. And he shared. Often his energy was muted. Occasionally a brief spark of life shone through. Mainly, his sentences trailed off.

I'd like to tell you that we ended the conversation feeling mutually grateful and newly enthused. But that is not how depression works. There are no Journey riffs, coffee shop kicks or perfect conversation partners who can jolt someone out of depression's unrelenting drag.

For those of us in it, often the best we can do is risk saying "yeah, okay" to those who offer their presence (certainly including the presence of a therapist). Because the fundamental road to healing is known through a truth that sits at the center of our faith: The Word became flesh and lived among us.

Jesus heals and transforms us by . . . dwelling. Abiding.

Being with and for us.

For as long as it takes. And then some. Until we all are raised.

Prayer: Loving God, thank you for the people who have been your presence of love, faithfulness and light in my life. Show me where and how I can be that same presence for others. In Christ's holy name, I pray. Amen.

Bobby

Day 29: Wednesday

The "Dull Sorrow" of Grief

"God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them."—1 John 4:16

After her younger brother died of AIDS-related causes, Marie Howe struggled to write the poetry that had earned her a career teaching at St. Lawrence College as well as four books, numerous awards, honors and fellowships.

Howe's poetry always speaks to me. She has a way of stringing words together about death and life, grief and loss, that are bodily and just right. In her poem "Menses," she described her melancholy as "a sure dull sorrow, / and a sense of skittering on the very / edge of things."

I imagine this same "dull sorrow" overcoming her after her brother's death. Howe needed to write, to create, to find her way through the grief. But depression kept her stuck. In an NPR interview with Terry Gross, she said she eventually

decided to quit trying and just began writing her brother a letter. What came was the poem “What the Living Do”: “Johnny, the kitchen sink has been clogged for days, some utensil probably fell down there. / And the Drano won’t work but smells dangerous, and the crusty dishes have piled up / waiting for the plumber I still haven’t called.”

Her brother was 11 years younger than her, but they were very close. She often referred to him as her spiritual teacher. Howe described his death to Gross as a loss so terrible it changed her life. She didn’t know how to keep living. The crusty dishes pile up. A bag of groceries breaks in her arms, dropping all its contents in the street. She spills coffee down her shirt. All this she reports to John in her poem: her inability to get anything right. Her inability to live. But then, at the end of the poem, she catches her reflection in a shop window and is suddenly “gripped by a cherishing so deep.”

Eventually, Howe said to Gross, you find a way. You just find a way to keep living.

Prayer: For all those struggling to live today, O God, we pray that they are gripped by your deep cherishing. Amen.

Teri

Day 30: Thursday

The Gift of Vulnerable Friendship

“A friend loves at all times, and kinsfolk are born to share adversity.”—Proverbs 17:17

“We call this ‘Stick Season,’” a coaching client said, glancing out her window during our Zoom session.

She had just shared about the end of her seven-year business, a difficult and weighty chapter. Turning her laptop to show me her view, she revealed a snowy forest scattered with bare sticks and fallen leaves.

I expected her to lament how bleak it all felt. Winter, after all, would be an easy metaphor to describe the emptiness that had felt so real for her in recent months.

But her next words surprised me.

“I think Stick Season is becoming one of my favorite times of year,” she said.

“Really?” I asked.

“It’s the only time I can see through everything,” she explained. “I can finally see the horizon. It feels less claustrophobic. Open. Fresh. Even free.”

“Are you talking about what you see out your window or how you are feeling about where you are with your business ending?”

“Both,” she said, and smiled.

How was it that the personal landscape she once would have described as heavy, barren and empty was now clear, fresh and free?

In a word? Community.

In recent weeks, she had taken small but intentional steps to invite people back into her life.

Nothing dramatic.

Nothing instant.

But through their presence, things shifted. The desolation gave way to new lightness and a fresh, inviting horizon.

Prayer: Loving God, help us see the barren and heavy realities through the lens of your resurrection hope. And grant us the courage to offer and receive the gift of vulnerable friendship. In Christ’s holy name, we pray. Amen.

Bobby

Day 31: Friday

Refusing to Be Consoled

“Thus says the Lord: A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more.” — Jeremiah 31:15

I appreciate that Rachel refuses to be consoled in the book of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah describes the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonian Empire. The city is destroyed; the people are killed and taken into exile. Even in Jeremiah, chapter 31, one of few chapters that contains prophecies of restoration and hope, we hear Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted, for “they are no more.”

The Gospel writer Matthew takes up this text again in chapter 2 to describe the massacre of the innocents, when King Herod kills all the boys in Bethlehem younger than two years, trying to get rid of the one “born king of the Jews.” Here again, through the distraught and bereaved women of Bethlehem who cry out for their children, Rachel weeps.

I appreciate that Rachel refuses to be consoled. In a culture that doesn’t know what to do with grief, that is impatient for us to get over it and be “okay” again, perhaps there is something holy about being inconsolable. Someone has been lost. Something has been broken. Who or what was lost deserves the attention of our sorrow and tears. Rachel will move through her grief, eventually. But now is the time to weep.

Prayer: God who weeps when those who weep, do not leave us or abandon us. When we are beyond consolation, be with us in our tears. Amen.

Ginna

Day 32: Saturday

Complain in Faith to God

“Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which was brought upon me, which the Lord inflicted on the day of his fierce anger.” — Lamentations 1:12

In her book *A is for Alabaster: 52 Reflections on the Stories of Scripture*, Anna Carter Florence writes that our spiritual ancestors would be shocked at modern American knee-jerk responses to grief: avoid, suppress and soothe. The Hebrew people tended their grief with the spiritual response of lament. Florence commends to her readers the practice of lamentation.

To lament is to publicly declare our sorrow in the presence of God and the community. It is to complain, in faith, to God. It is to acknowledge our suffering and call upon those around us to bear witness to it.

In deepest grief, I can identify with the author of Lamentations: “Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow.” But I have been taught that to express such sentiments is bad manners; it’s feeling sorry for myself. Maybe you learned that growing up as well.

In contrast, the ancient Hebrews taught their children how to lament. Florence calls lament one of the least-tapped spiritual resources available to us for our life of faith. If we seek guidance in our practice of lamentation, the first place to look might be the biblical book that bears its name.

“Lament needs some kind of structure,” Florence writes, “a rhythm we can enter into, a holding vessel like the community itself — to gently guide us toward speech and God, when the wilderness of grief has taken both.” Complaining in faith to God is neither whining nor a failure of gratitude. It is a tradition of our spiritual ancestors and a commitment to honesty in our relationship with God.

Prayer: God, I trust you to listen as I pour myself out in sorrow. (Take a few minutes to journal or speak aloud to God about what is breaking your heart.)

Ginna