

September 26<sup>th</sup>, 2010  
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## **“The Black Dog & the White Dove” Depression & Faith**

Scripture from Psalm 139

What a wonderful weekend last week with Ruth Graham and friends! It was truly amazing to see just about all of the Christian churches in Brockville worshipping God under one roof. Frankly, to me, it was miraculous and a definite sign of the presence of God. It was not because we agree on doctrine or theology or have the same beliefs that we were able to come together -- it was the power of the Holy Spirit, who softened our differences and highlighted our commonality, along with the theme of brokenness which came wrapped in a blanket of grace. Ruth's message is that we all have life-controlling issues, whether we are struggling with one or we are caring for someone who is, and with God's help in safe and grace-filled churches and small groups we can find support and healing.

When we were deciding which workshops to have them bring to the conference, the topic of depression was the one that seemed to top the list for our organizers. So many are affected by depression that the chances are good that either you have struggled with it or know someone who is. This morning I want to lift up the topic of depression and how it relates to our faith.

The title of my sermon is: *The Black Dog and the White Dove*. Sir Winston Churchill struggled with depression and he referred to it as his “black dog”. Why a black dog? It seems to have to do with the fact that his depression was very familiar to him and could to a certain extent be tamed or kept at bay, but at the same time it kept trying to master and dominate him.

Here are a few other famous names of those who struggle or who have struggled with depression: Lady Diana, Jim Carrey, Harrison Ford, T.S. Elliot, John Denver, Romeo Dallaire, Leonard Cohen, JK Rowling, Mark Twain, Terry Bradshaw, Mike Wallace, Sheila Rogers and the list goes on and on and on. Dr. Don Miles who was here for the conference said that at any given time approximately 10% of the population is struggling with a bout of depression. Incidents of depression spike for teenagers and seniors. There are essentially 2 forms of depression: Situational and Ongoing or Clinical. Situational speaks for itself. When you lose a job or go through a divorce or someone close to you dies you are more likely to experience depression. Over the course of a lifetime pretty much everyone experiences some form of situational depression; and some are more prone or afflicted by it than others. Ongoing or Clinical depression is aggravated by difficult life situations but there is a biological predisposition, a chemical imbalance in the brain, it tends to cycle through life and episodes are longer lasting and deeper. Ongoing / Clinical depression definitely requires medication. Situational depression, depending on the duration and the depth, might require medication as well. It's important to note that men and women often have different symptoms of depression. Men are often more irritable and perhaps angry. So it's not just the feelings of emptiness and sadness and low energy and lack of appetite and lack of interest in hobbies that used to interest you that are symptoms of depression. Men are also more likely to self-medicate with alcohol. Sometimes a person becomes an alcoholic or drug addict because of an underlying depression that was never properly diagnosed or treated.

Depression is brutal. It takes the joy out of life, the energy out of life, wrecks relationships and careers and as we all know too well, depression can kill.

Depression is hard on so many aspects of life, but it is especially very hard on faith, and that's what I want to spend some time on today. It is harder to experience God when you are depressed. It doesn't seem fair that when we most need to feel God's presence, we are least able to feel it. Depression makes it hard to feel God's love and to sense that God is there. Some mistakenly believe if they just had more faith the depression wouldn't happen, or that the fact that they can't feel God is an indication that their faith is weak. It's simply not true. You can't say, “If I had more faith, I wouldn't be depressed.” Some of the most faithful, close-to-God people have experienced great depressions.

There are plenty of examples of depression in the Bible. King David, Job, Jonah, Jeremiah, Elijah all experienced depression.

Many of the great saints of Christianity have suffered with this illness. The reformer, Martin Luther, fought with depression on and off through his entire life. In 1527 Luther wrote, "For more than a week I was close to the gates of death and hell. I trembled in all my members. Christ was wholly lost . . . The content of the depressions was always the same: the loss of faith that God is good and that He is good to me."

It is also clear that Mother Theresa suffered with this illness. In a letter she wrote to a spiritual confidant, the Rev. Michael van der Peet, that was made public a year or two ago, she said: "Jesus has a very special love for you, [But] as for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great, that I look and do not see, — Listen and do not hear — the tongue moves [in prayer] but does not speak . . . I

want you to pray for me — that I let Him have [a] free hand." When talking about her spiritual life she talks about the "dryness," the "darkness", "loneliness and "torture" that she was going through.

The famous preacher Charles Spurgeon, whom God used to light the "fires" of the 19th century revival movement in England, struggled so severely with depression that he was forced to be absent from his pulpit for two to three months a year. In 1866 he told his congregation of his struggle saying: "I am the subject of depressions of spirit so fearful that I hope none of you ever get to such extremes of wretchedness as I go through."

We could go on and on citing examples of faithful individuals who have wrestled with this form of illness: John Bunyan, J. B. Phillips, even Rick Warren. Mature Christians can and do suffer from depression. Christianity does not equal happiness. We say this time and time again from the pulpit: when you decide to follow Jesus you are not guaranteed an easy life. What is guaranteed is that you will never be alone.

There are some things we can do to help us through times of depression. First of all, recognize when you need to get onto medication. Tom Burton gave a powerful sermon two Sunday's ago at the evening service, which I believe we will soon have on the web site and on the back tables. His message was about his struggle with depression and the fact that he for a long time just didn't recognize or realize that he needed to be on medication. It takes about 3 weeks for the medication to kick in and often people wait too late.

In AA they use the acronym H.A.L.T. (hungry, angry, lonely, tired). Alcoholics need to watch that combination because when you're hungry, angry, lonely and tired you are way more vulnerable to a relapse. The truth is we are all more vulnerable to depression when we let our bodies run down. Recognize when you are pushing yourself too hard, not getting enough sleep, and eating junk food. There is no question that the physical affects the mental. Getting outside and sitting or better yet walking near the river can do so much good.

Don't isolate yourself. When we get depressed and discouraged, the first thing we tend to do is get alone and that is usually the WORST thing we can do. You see, loneliness is one of the greatest contributors to depression. When we draw into a shell and cut ourselves off from others we naturally begin to feast on self-pity. Hebrews 10:25 encourages us to "Consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together". God didn't design us to live like hermits in a cave. Life works best for us when we live in friendship and fellowship and community with others. That's why the church, the body of Christ, is so very important, because that is where we are drawn together in love and mutual encouragement. We're meant to be a part of one another's lives. I encourage you to join a Living Free group which is starting this week.

Along with being with others it also helps a lot to be doing something. If you find yourself getting down and have nothing to do, come to the church & Danny will give you a mop or Cathie will give you something to photocopy. Martin Luther would agree with this treatment. "A good way to exorcize the Devil," he maintained, "was to harness the horses and spread manure on the fields." In other words, get to work! Do something productive and you will feel productive, because doing affects feeling.

A psychiatrist, Dr. Carl Menninger once gave a lecture on mental health and was answering questions from the audience. Someone said, "Dr. Menninger, what would you advise a person to do if that person felt a nervous breakdown coming on?" Most people thought he would say, "Go see a psychiatrist immediately," but he didn't. To their astonishment, Dr. Meninger replied, "Lock up your house, go across the railroad tracks, find somebody in need, and help that person." To overcome discouragement, "Don't focus on yourself, get involved in the lives of other people." It's not just enough to be with others. One of the greatest things you can do to help your depression is to **act & reach out to others.**

Last Sunday when Ruth Graham preached, she talked about how after her last divorce her brother Franklin encouraged her to come to Rwanda and help with Samaritans Purse. She didn't feel like going. I suspect she didn't feel like doing anything, but Franklin kept encouraging her and so she went. Do you remember her talking about this? She said it almost as an aside, that while she was there she picked up body parts and cleaned blood stains as well as doing the mundane and typical chores of cleaning toilets and doing dishes. But she said it really helped her. It's hard to imagine how being in a place where there is so much despair could help someone stuck in their own despair, but when we focus on the needs of others, our own needs fade into the background. So sometimes the best thing you can do when you are really down is go and help someone else. Contact Bernadette and volunteer for our Thanksgiving Community dinner. There is always such a wonderful feeling at that event. Always it is healing to take the focus off yourself and put it on God.

I recognize that for some of you, when you are in a deep depression, these helpful tips are utterly impossible.

If you struggle with depression, here is what I want you to hear clearly and write down and paste where you always see it: **even if you forget God, God will not forget you.** Isaiah 49:15-16 says:

"Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me."

We are not alone, no matter how alone we might feel. As the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm says: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me”. Psalm 139 reminds us that there is nowhere we can go where God is not.

*“Where can I go from your spirit?  
Or where can I flee from your presence?  
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;  
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.  
If I take the wings of the morning  
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,  
even there your hand shall lead me,  
and your right hand shall hold me fast.  
If I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me,  
and the light around me become night’,  
even the darkness is not dark to you;  
the night is as bright as the day,  
for darkness is as light to you.”*

I love the second part of verse 18: “When I awake, I am still with thee.” That’s the verse my mother put on her mother’s gravestone: “When I awake, I am still with thee”.

You are not alone through it and you won’t be alone when you get through it. Depression is so very painful for those going through it and for those watching and caring for another going through it. But no matter how deep the pit, no matter how dark the tunnel, God is there. You are loved and you are not alone.

Thanks be to God. Amen.