

"Dealing with Depression"
Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary Year C
June 20, 2010
Text: 1 Kings 19:9-14
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There are different kinds of depression and different causes for them, but for the purposes of this sermon, I want to define rather narrowly the kind of depression I'm talking about. I am not talking about *clinical* depression, the kind of depression that only can be treated with counseling and medication. What I am talking about is *situational* depression, a depression that comes about as a response to a specific set of circumstances or difficulties. It is the depression that we tend to have in times of crisis or transition. It may come in the face of a tragedy, or, in Elijah's case, even immediately following some major accomplishment in our lives. It is how we feel when we find ourselves suddenly overwhelmed by events and their demands on our lives.

So as I read the lectionary passage from 1 Kings for this morning, it looks to me like Elijah, the great prophet of the Lord, is suffering from the kind of depression I am talking about. Look at what Elijah says to God. The prophet's words reveal his loneliness, his feeling of abandonment, his frustration. In the beginning of the chapter from

which this passage comes, Elijah asks God to be allowed to die. He is feeling sorry for himself, feeling worthless, useless, of no value whatsoever. He just wants to end it all. That sounds like situational depression to me.

I think it helps to understand Elijah's emotional state by recalling briefly what has happened in his life and ministry right before this episode of it. The story we are looking at this morning comes immediately following Elijah's tremendous triumph over the priests of Baal on Mt. Carmel, where God has dramatically displayed the superiority of his power. In a sense, the miraculous demonstration that takes place on the mountaintop only makes matters worse, because the incident prompts the angry Queen Jezebel to put a contract out on Elijah.

The prophet had been on the mountaintop, but coming down from it to face again the harsh realities of life may have driven him to depression. He comes down from the mountain to face a situation even more difficult than before. Has that ever happened to you? Have you gotten depressed immediately following a big event in your life? How did you feel on the day after the prom, the day after graduation from college, when the honeymoon was over, after the baby finally came, when you got that promotion you had been hoping for, after you moved

into the new house you built, when the last child moved away from home, or when retirement finally arrived?

Elijah becomes depressed, and is it any wonder? Wouldn't you be? I would. One thing I appreciate about the Bible is that it tells the story of real people in real situations. It doesn't pull any punches or gloss over how life is. Elijah's life has its ups and downs like our lives, and the way God responds to Elijah in his depression gives us, I think, some suggestions on how we, with God's help, can deal with the situational depression we face from time to time. There are four suggestions I think this passage is pointing us to.

First, the way to deal with depression is not to attempt an escape from the situation you are facing and its difficulties. I think it is interesting and certainly not accidental that the question God asks Elijah is, "What are you doing *here?*" We know why he is there. He is on the run, trying his best to get away from the wrath of wicked Queen Jezebel, who, as we saw last week, has no trouble at all killing anyone who gets in her way. Elijah finds out, though, that you can run, but you can't hide, especially from problems; they have a way of catching up with you. There isn't really any escape from whatever situation you are facing and the difficulties that are associated with it.

There are all sorts of ways of trying to escape problematic situations. Suicide is one, but there are others. Some people try

drinking, some try drugs, some try denial, some even try to escape through religion. But the question that comes to us when we are depressed, especially if we are trying to escape from the situation that is causing us to be depressed, is the one that comes to Elijah, "What are you doing *here*? Being *here* (the place of escape) isn't the answer. Being *here* isn't going to help you deal with your problems. Being *here* is no solution." Depression is never helped by trying to escape from the difficulties we are facing.

Second, the way to deal with depression is not to spend an inordinate amount of time dwelling on the situation you are facing and its difficulties. When I get depressed about something, this is where I get stuck. I mull over the situation, the problem, the difficulty for what seems like an eternity. I talk about it, hash it over and then rehash it, analyze it, sort through all its dimensions, inspect it and dissect it. I get to the point where I can discuss in the most miniscule detail whatever difficult situation I am facing.

I think Elijah was the same way. The Lord asks him two different times, "What are you doing here?" and Elijah's answer is the same both times, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." It's like he has rehearsed this speech

a hundred times, and he probably had in his own mind. Elijah, like me, has the problem down. He knows just exactly what he is dealing with. The thing is, though, he can't quit talking about the problem. He beats it to death.

We, too, can get stuck spending an inordinate amount of time dwelling on the situation and its difficulties, sometimes because *we want to hang onto the feelings associated with our depression*. Look at Elijah. I think he wants to feel lonely and has worked hard to put himself in the position to feel that way and remain there. It's the same with us. When we get depressed, oftentimes we dwell on whatever situation we are facing, because by doing so, we can hang onto the feelings associated with our depression. We can stay hurt, angry, frustrated, rejected, betrayed, abandoned, victimized all the time.

Why do we want to hang onto those negative feelings? Because for many of us, *those negative feelings are familiar and comfortable*. They feel normal. And we would rather have a familiar *negative* feeling than an unfamiliar *positive* one. Let me repeat that: We would rather have a familiar negative feeling than an unfamiliar positive one. What is it that Shirley MacLaine's character, Ouiser Boudreaux, says in *Steel Magnolias*? ". . . I've just been in a bad mood for thirty years." But the way to deal with depression is not to spend an inordinate

amount of time dwelling on the situation you are facing and its difficulties.

Third, **the way to deal with depression is not to attempt to find an easy answer or a quick solution to the situation you are facing and its difficulties.** One of the bad side effects, I think, of living in a fast food world, is that we want our problems taken care of in the time it takes to get a happy meal at McDonald's. We like quick fixes. I think Elijah is looking for an easy answer or a quick solution to the situation he is facing. He wants God to take care of it for him. And why not? After all, God had done some pretty neat stuff up on Mt. Carmel, and so he had proven he has the ability to take care of problems and deal with situations.

But in his own way, I think God is trying to tell Elijah and us that there is not an easy answer or a quick solution for everything. I think this story shows us that God is not going to *blow* your problems away, because he is not in the wind. God is not going to *bury* your problems, because he is not in the earthquake. God is not going to *burn up* your problems, because he is not in the fire. Hear this, please. With respect to the situation you are facing and its difficulties, *God is there with you and for you, but not necessarily to take the problems away.* He is in the still small voice asking the questions and providing the

resources that will help you do the hard work necessary to deal with whatever situation you are facing.

Finally, **the way to deal with depression is to take the steps necessary, with God's help, to discover a sense of meaning and purpose for living in the midst of the situation you are facing and its difficulties.** God helps Elijah deal with his depression. God helps the prophet face the situation and its difficulties. How does God help Elijah in this story? He gives him a new job to do, a new mission to accomplish. He also provides for him a successor, an apprentice prophet to assist him. In other words, by giving Elijah these things—a new task and an associate to help him accomplish it—God provides the prophet with the resources he needs to work through his depression.

I think this is how God helps us deal with our depression. God does not want us to try to run from it; he does not want us to dwell on it; he does not want us to hunt for easy answers for it. God wants us to trust him to help us discover new meaning and new purpose. It is my contention that a sense of meaning and purpose will take care of almost any situational depression we might face, because *it is nearly impossible to be depressed when your life is full of meaning and purpose.* Let me repeat that: it is nearly impossible to be depressed when your life is full of meaning and purpose.

God wants you to have a life that is meaningful and fulfilling. What will it take for you to have such a life? I don't know. It is different for every person. One thing I can tell you is this: it probably will involve some changes, though, a change of attitude and a change of behavior. But in each and every case—working sometimes through psychologists or counselors, sometimes through ministers, sometimes through close friends and family members, and always through our own thoughts and feelings—God is a part of the process of finding the sense of meaning and purpose we need in order to cope with whatever situation we are facing without becoming depressed.

I would like to pray for none of us to become depressed. I would prefer that none of us have to face the kinds of difficult situations that tend to push us into depression. But I know better. What I can and do pray is that with God's help, we deal with our times of depression appropriately by trusting in God to ask the questions and provide the resources we need to find meaning and purpose for living.