

Psalm 88

1 ^[a] ^[b]

O LORD, the God who saves me,
day and night I cry out before you.

2 May my prayer come before you;
turn your ear to my cry.

3 For my soul is full of trouble
and my life draws near the grave. ^[c]

4 I am counted among those who go down to the pit;
I am like a man without strength.

5 I am set apart with the dead,
like the slain who lie in the grave,
whom you remember no more,
who are cut off from your care.

6 You have put me in the lowest pit,
in the darkest depths.

7 Your wrath lies heavily upon me;
you have overwhelmed me with all your waves.

8 You have taken from me my closest friends
and have made me repulsive to them.
I am confined and cannot escape;

9 my eyes are dim with grief.
I call to you, O LORD, every day;
I spread out my hands to you.

10 Do you show your wonders to the dead?
Do those who are dead rise up and praise you?

11 Is your love declared in the grave,
your faithfulness in Destruction ^[d] ?

12 Are your wonders known in the place of darkness,
or your righteous deeds in the land of oblivion?

13 But I cry to you for help, O LORD;
in the morning my prayer comes before you.

14 Why, O LORD, do you reject me
and hide your face from me?

15 From my youth I have been afflicted and close to death;
I have suffered your terrors and am in despair.

16 Your wrath has swept over me;
your terrors have destroyed me.

17 All day long they surround me like a flood;
they have completely engulfed me.

18 You have taken my companions and loved ones from me;
the darkness is my closest friend.

Psalm 88
Calvin CRC, Grand Rapids, MI;
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Cindy Holtrop

Prayer for illumination: God of light, shine your Word of truth, light, and love in our darkness. Help us to see Jesus and to come to him. Amen.

Who is your closest friend? Who would you tell first if you discovered you were **pregnant?** If you had a **car accident?** If your life was **falling apart?** Who could you call **at 2 a.m. in case of an emergency?** **Who is your closest friend?**

Psalm 88 ends with this haunting line: Darkness is my closest friend. Imagine being alone in your car on a **rural road on a dark cloudy night.** No radio. No cell phone. **Only the darkness.** Its **cold impersonal cloak envelops** you and threatens to smother you.

Psalm 88 is a lament; the poet's **deeply honest and open complaint before God** about his situation in life and above all—**God's absence.** All the other psalms of lament begin with complaint and **wind their way to praise.** But this psalm begins with the **darkness of complaint and ends with resignation and a heavy sigh: "Darkness is my closest friend.**

This psalm is for **realists and not optimists.** If you are **uncomfortable with anger,** pain, complaining to God, and **taking the sugar coating off your faith,** you will **not likely mark this psalm in your Bible.** **But if you have experienced** some of the harsh realities in life, **if you have ever felt abandoned by God and by friends,** you will understand the pain of this psalm. (slow) You will understand the **real tension between heartache and hope, between pain and piety, between futility and faith.**

Through the lens of Psalm 88, this morning we will grow in our understanding of what it means to **struggle with mental health,** what it means to **walk alongside those who have a brain disease, or mental illness,** and **what it means to wrestle with God in these situations.** We can't accomplish that in great depth, but perhaps we can **build awareness, affirm faith in the midst of suffering,** and give **permission to speak** about mental illness without **shameful whispering and the pain of silence.** Let me say first, that a psychiatric illness is not always disabling. It may be something like dealing with arthritis or diabetes. Sometimes it may be temporarily disabling, and for some it may profoundly impact their daily life.

First, let's think about mental health on a continuum. Just as some people are more physically healthy than others, some people are blessed with mental health—perhaps all their lives. But just as a **young athlete** can be struck with leukemia, a young person or an adult could suddenly develop schizophrenia, bi-polar disorder, depression, or any of a number of **psychiatric illnesses.** Perhaps a crisis happens, and suddenly a person experiences long-term grief and depression.

Psalm 88 could be sung by many people who struggle with mental illness because so often they feel desperately alone. People who are depressed especially understand the complaint of this psalm. They feel abandoned by God and by friends. They feel different than other people. They're misunderstood by others. **They may feel near death itself.** The poet of Psalm 88 groans, **"You have caused my companions to shun me; you have made me a thing of horror to them. I am shut in so that I cannot escape;"** (vs. 8).

Mental illness is not out there. People with mental illness sit in our congregations. Today if there are **15 people** in your row, **three people may have** some form of psychiatric illness in their lifetime. The person may be a child with low grade depression, a teenager with suicidal thoughts, or anorexia nervosa, an adult with agoraphobia or dementia.

Some of you know one or more of these issues intimately because you live with it yourself, or because you know someone who does. Any physical or mental illness or disability can be **isolating**. If you struggle with mental health, perhaps you don't have the **energy to be around people**. You feel **different**. What will people think of me if they knew about my illness? **You fear the stigma and the whispers of shame. /////**

Friends in Christ, **let's not keep the suffering of mental illness in the closet. Let's welcome and walk with people and families as a community of faith.**

Throughout my life, I have experienced bouts of depression. I have said, **"Darkness is my closest friend."** **The most recent depression lasted for 3 years and took one year for me to recover.** I felt abandoned by God, isolated, without hope, and without a sense of the future. I wondered if I would ever get well. I wondered if I would ever preach again. **I slowly did recover and I am deeply grateful.** But the **reality** is that because of my brain chemistry, I may **experience times of depression in the future.**

Psalms 88 is for anyone who's experienced the darkness of depression or other isolating events. But it is not the final answer.

Remember being alone in the dark in the car? You think you're all alone. The dome light comes on and you're aware of a presence. **Christ is sitting beside you.** Though you may not see him or feel him in the darkness, **Christ is present with you. Jesus in his humanity understands.** He was **abandoned.** He was **rejected.** He cried out, **"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"** **Jesus is our closest friend when we are in the darkness.** You can carry your experience of the darkness, the craziness, the fragility of mental health, and of life, to Jesus.

At times, when the sun shone through the darkness, what comforted me and gave me strength was grabbing hold of this one certain thing: there is someone who understands the darkness; there is someone who is present in the darkness.

That is the truth. But here is the tension. Even though Jesus is our closest friend, the one who knows and understands, there are times **when I don't believe or understand, or feel any of that.** I want to affirm the reality of that perception and those feelings. **Sometimes God does seem and feel absent. My family, friends, and my faith family and I prayed for 3 years that my depression would lift. But God seemed silent.** I often cried out, **"Lord, how long? Lord, please heal me!"**

Kathryn Greene McCreight, an Episcopal priest and a professor at Yale, writes about her wrestling with God and bipolar disorder in her book: *Darkness is My Only Companion: A Christian Response to Mental Illness.* She speaks of this as the **hiddenness of God.** Sunsets, mountains and newborn babies reveal something of the love and grandeur of God. **But our suffering sometimes hides the face of God, and we don't feel him or experience him with us. ///** But even the **hiddenness of God reveals something about him.** Though I cannot see him or feel him, **my faith tells me that God is still present.** And sometimes, the faith of others needs to **carry those experiencing the darkness.**

As a hospital chaplain where I see a great deal of pain and tragedy, people often ask, "Why is God doing this to me? Is God trying to punish me? What is God trying to tell me?" A pastor once told me, **"When people ask me about the why of suffering, I will not**

and cannot try to explain it.” The **psalmists often struggled with similar questions and accusations.** While suffering continues to remain a mystery, as New Testament believers, we read these Old Testament passages with Easter eyes: **Jesus drank the cup of wrath empty on the cross and declared it is finished.** And so God may **disciple the believer in suffering, but he does not punish us.**

That does not negate our need to complain to God. One-third of the psalms are laments. Crying out to God with your complaints in difficult times is evidence of faith, not a lack of faith. I picture a toddler in God’s arms wrestling, struggling, and complaining—all the while being held. “God, I don’t like this. I don’t understand why. When will my life move forward again?” Because God holds me, loves me, and will not let me go, I can be **brutally honest with God. ////**

We can be honest with God, but now, can we be honest with one another? Do we need to appear to be a **heroic Christian who triumphs over every adversity and in every adversity?** If I only try a little harder, have a little more faith, then I won’t be depressed, I won’t hear voices, I won’t forget things. **People with mental illness can torture themselves with such heroic Christian thoughts. And sometimes well-meaning people inflict the pain.** They say things like: **“Just keep praying. God doesn’t give you more than you can handle. I was depressed once and I eventually got over it.”** I am suspicious of their understanding and their faith. We wouldn’t say the same thing to a diabetic, someone with cancer, or heart disease. If a person’s kidney can be ill, a person’s brain can also be ill or have a disorder that affects his thinking, her mood, behavior and personality.

If we are friends of Jesus, then how can we be friends with people who experience mental illness, and friends with people who love someone with a mental illness? Remember these three words, **Listen, Accept and Pray.**

Henry Nouwen says we need “poverty of heart,” and “poverty of mind.” Rather than assuming **I am rich with insight to offer and the ability to fix things, I must assume that I am poor. Instead of being a teacher when I help, I am the student.** This will help us deeply listen.

I often pray for elephant ears and use these three words: **“Help me understand; help me understand what it is like to have a child in the hospital. What is it like to know you have cancer? What is it like to lose a spouse?”** Even though I know what it is like to **lose a father, I don’t know what it is like for this person to lose her father, or his spouse.**

What can the person experiencing a mental illness teach us so that we can understand and love them more profoundly? Let them tell their story. Gently ask questions **because you love them, have a relationship with them, and want to understand**—not because you are nosy. **Ask, what can I do that would be helpful or supportive? Let them be the experts.** And if you are the one with the illness, **find someone you trust and feel safe with, someone that can transform your experience of the illness.**

Secondly, accept them. Mental illness still bears a stigma in our society and in the Christian community. **Accept the person and where he is at. Don’t define her by her illness. He or she is a person with schizophrenia, with Alzheimer’s or autism, but he is not his disease. Celebrate and use her gifts and strengths. Catch yourself when you have a thought that stigmatizes someone who has a mental illness or any disability. God’s name is on them.**

I'd like to say a word too about people with mental illness that does not heal. People with a chronic mental illness often lose contact with friends and family. And sometimes family and friends abandon the person. It is difficult sometimes to be in relationship with a person with mental illness. Sometime ago I performed a memorial service for a woman who lived in an adult foster care facility for persons with mental illnesses. Her illness began while she was in college. She had a Dutch name. As we gathered at the funeral home, only staff and residents remembered her. There were no family, no friends, no church family present. How might the family and church family empowered one another to be an **abiding presence** throughout this woman's life?

The temptation is to be judgmental, critical, and impatient. If only this person would try harder, if only she didn't think this way, then she would be free of her mental illness. **Psychiatric illnesses are complex and not easy to treat, and they're not easy to cope with.**

Listen to us. Accept us. And finally, pray for us. Even though I was an elder in the church, a leader in a ministry organization, **I did not hide my illness of depression.** It might have been more comfortable, but it only would have **increased my isolation and eventually the shame. It humbled me to ask my church family to pray for me. Many people prayed for me daily. They prayed for me when I could not pray. Never underestimate the power of a card, a prayer, a phone call or visit. The impulse you feel may be God's perfect timing.**

When you pray with someone, a **powerful way to be with them is to lament.** "God, we don't understand why my friend hears voices and struggles with harmful thoughts. She is in such agony and we cry out to you for her health and wellbeing. Hear our prayer, O God, hear us."

When I could not pray, I used the psalms of lament and songs. Psalm 30 gives voice to my deepest despair **and** to my trust in God. **One friend said to me when I was in deep despair, "Cindy, we will carry the hope for you." That is the power of living in Christian community. We live in relationship with Jesus Christ, and through Christ, we live in relationship with one another.**

Dear friends, the suffering of mental illness and other tragedies is real. But Jesus is our friend, and he is present in the darkness. As friends of Jesus, we are called to be present with others, and we are called to carry them to Jesus.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, be a friend to all who are hurting, to all who long to be close to you, and to all who long for someone to love and listen to them. Bless the friends of Jesus present here as they risk being open, as they risk loving in new ways. In Jesus' name, Amen.