

## Loneliness

### Scripture

Psalm 68:1-6

May God arise, may his enemies be scattered;  
may his foes flee before him.

<sup>2</sup> May you blow them away like smoke—  
as wax melts before the fire,  
may the wicked perish before God.

<sup>3</sup> But may the righteous be glad  
and rejoice before God;  
may they be happy and joyful.

<sup>4</sup> Sing to God, sing in praise of his name,  
extol him who rides on the clouds<sup>[b]</sup>;  
rejoice before him—his name is the Lord.

<sup>5</sup> A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows,  
is God in his holy dwelling.

<sup>6</sup> God sets the lonely in families,<sup>[c]</sup>  
he leads out the prisoners with singing;  
but the rebellious live in a sun-scorched land.

Last May, America's Surgeon General warned that Americans are facing "the devastating impact of an epidemic...an epidemic of loneliness and isolation." SHALOM is our Church's "mental health" ministry, it's only two years old but we've known from the beginning that we needed to tackle "loneliness." SHALOM has had significant events where wise, knowledgeable, experienced people have shared their wisdom/knowledge/experience about Addiction/Depression/Suicide/Anxiety. Next Sunday we're having an excellent panel, after Church, on Loneliness. My sermon today is designed to set the stage, get us all thinking about, and imagine some steps out of it.

In the sermon I distinguish between two kinds of loneliness. There's the desire to be alone, to have Thoreau's "Walden Pond" solitude from time to time. But there's also the loneliness that is thrust upon us: best friends retire and move away, the death of a dear one, a new job takes you and the whole family into unfamiliar territory, a breakup among friends, lovers, family, the rudeness of others that leaves you outside the circle.

The simple truth is we all face loneliness, it's been around forever and yes, it is epidemic now, exacerbated by lots of COVID-related tangents and ubiquitous social media. Both changed how we deal with one another. We may be lonely in our own lives; or have people we care about mired in it. Depending on which we are, we have to punch our way out, or punch our way in.

Passivity, inertia are not going to help at either end of the loneliness spectrum. Since this sermon lays the groundwork for next Sunday's SHALOM event, here's my wrap-up. If we are lonely, we need to open up, reach out, try and push. If we are concerned about someone who is lonely, we need to check in, notice, invite...and push.

## SERMON

What a positive and hopeful scripture lesson for today: "May God arise...may the righteous be glad." And then the Psalm writer gives four specific descriptions of God at work. "God is a father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, God sets the lonely in families, and leads forth the prisoners in singing." (Psalms 68:1-6)

Remember, those Bible verses are 3000 years old, listing four categories of people who were barely at the fringes of society: widows, orphans, prisoners, and those who are just plain lonely; people who are overlooked, unnoticed, un-

needed, alone. God enters into that loneliness and creates a sense of family. “God sets the lonely in families,” verse 6 declares, and that’s the truth of a church at its best, of ministry at its best. And that’s why we call ourselves a “church family” – that’s our aspiration.

For a number of years, I took young people to a summer camp on the side of a mountain in Bethel, Vermont. Whatever your idea of a rustic summer camp is, this was way beyond it. And we were urban people. One year I took my daughter, perhaps seven years old, up on that mountainside. Especially at night, all manner of critters could be heard slithering beneath the floorboards and above in the eaves of our barely wooden cabin. After “lights out” the first night, we were in our cots in the cabin and my daughter says to me, “Dad, are you awake?” “Yes,” I assured her, standing guard against snakes and bears and coyotes and whatever else rural America had in store for us. “Yes, I’m awake. Don’t worry.” She was quiet for a minute or two, then asked “Dad, is your face turned toward me?” Quickly and quietly, I turned over so I could honestly say “Yes, my face is turned toward you.” With that, she slept the night peacefully.

There are all kinds of loneliness in the world around us. Sometimes we even want it, need it, look for it, pay extra for it. You’ve just boarded an airplane, the seat next to you is empty. You may have the row all to yourself, you’re thinking. But people are still coming down the aisle, holding their boarding pass, looking for their seat and you’re praying – yes, literally praying – that they’ll walk on by and leave you alone. Heavenly.

But there are times in life when it’s not enough to have people around you, or somebody nearby. You need to know that their “face is turned toward you.” That you are truly linked together. You are not alone, and you don’t wish to be.

You know the creation story from the Books of Genesis in the Bible – the story of Adam and Eve. God “creates Adam from the dirt of the earth, forms him,” the Bible tells us, “Then breathes the breath the life into him and Adam becomes a living being” (Genesis 2:7). And it’s nice. Perfect. Paradise. What more could you want?

Well, according to the Bible, God realizes that something is missing. God actually says “It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.” Which is why God’s next step of creation, God’s final masterpiece of

creation, is Eve, the first woman, a partner in paradise. A “suitable helper” ...so that Adam won’t be “alone.” (Genesis 2:18)

The rest of human history, the rest of civilization, the rest of anthropology and sociology and psychology and romance novels and westerns and film noir and rom coms from TV shows like “Friends” and “Cheers” to movies like “Barbie” and Don Quixote to every pop song has been the search for a “suitable helper” to stave off being “alone.”

Truth is, there’s an upside and a downside to being alone. On the upside we often treasure “alone time, downtime, me time, quiet time.” We’ll even say, “I need my space.” I shouldn’t admit this but when Alida and I go away to Europe, about day 4 or 5 I’ll say to Alida, “you need as Alida day.” That sounds so noble, and sacrificial and sensitive. “Yes, Alida. You go off, do your own. Thing, leave me behind. I’ll be OK.” Of course, Alida knows that’s really a cover for a “David Day,” when I’m left alone, to find a coffee house, sit for hours, writing, happy as can be.

So, we have our Alida Day/David Day routine. But that’s a far cry from being abandoned, forgotten, left behind, ignored, outlived, not needed. Or put it this way: it’s one thing to like playing “solitaire.” It’s quite another to be in “solitary confinement.” Jesus embraced his “alone time,” he sought it out, he found it, he used it and he always emerged strengthened by it. At the end of a busy, hectic crowded day, crowded schedule, crowded with people, he would go off to a mountain to pray, showing up the next morning ready to roll.

The night before he was crucified, he went off by himself. To gather his thoughts, take stock, and pray. And therefore, faced that next awful day with conviction. When Jesus stunned everybody by “walking in water,” he had been off by himself, only to reappear with greater wonder than before.

It’s right, it’s healthy to treasure those “alone times.” Indeed, as we saw in our Bible Study on Thursday, Jesus began his public ministry AFTER he spent 40 days, alone, in the wilderness, fasting...AND tempted by the Devil.

You know, Lent begins in three weeks and Lent is fashioned after Jesus’ “alone time.” Lent is 40 days. Lent is a time of self-sacrifice. Lent is a time of deepening awareness, as it was for Jesus. Jesus’ 40 day “alone time” is a great example of alone-time’s upside and downside. He is persistently confronted by the Devil, with the Devil tempting him, testing him, daring him, challenging him.

But he was also sustained by angels. Loneliness can do that. You can find your inner demons. You can find your guardian angels.

Loneliness is a phenomenon, and a diagnosis that is very much with us nowadays. Maybe there's more of it. Maybe we're just more aware of it. Maybe we realize its downside more than ever.

I do know if you google loneliness, you get all sorts of quotes about being lonely. One link was "451 quotes about loneliness" and several a bit awkwardly, were titled "Sad quotes about loneliness." Perhaps I'm mistaken, but I'm not sure a lonely person needs sad quotes. By the way, there were some good quotes. May I?

"Loneliness is the hunger of the heart." (Mother Teresa)

"Loneliness is the poverty of the soul." (Sarton) a bit harsh, I think.

"Loneliness is the space between you and the people you want to be close to." (That's rather profound, I think and accurate to our human nature for belonging.

Katherine Hepburn hits the nail on the head, she said "The only thing worse than being alone is being with people who make you feel alone."

All these quotes recognize that all of us, want to share some significant life with others outside our personal space. If I can tweak God just a bit, God was right. "It is not good to be alone," to which I add especially when it is imposed on us.

That's why I like the next quote so much, by the great French writer, Balzac.

Balzac became my favorite French writer when, somehow, I sat in his private chair, at his private desk in his private house museum in Paris, and the guard smiled at me. Balzac also, to my envy, drank 40 cups of coffee each day. Between sips he said, listen to this quote carefully, Balzac said, "solitude is fine...but you need someone to tell that solitude is fine." Most of the other "loneliness" google searches were about today's epidemic of loneliness. Not "alone time," not personal space, not privacy or solitude or quiet. But the lack of life around you when you'd really like some life around you. Friendship. Sounds. Conversation. Being noticed. Welcomed. Invited. That there's a "face turned toward you."

Loneliness is a two-way challenge for each of us. If we are lonely, how do we break through the walls that keep us out, and away, and alone? And, if we

care about someone who seems lonely, how do we break through whatever walls keep them alone?

And there are walls. Perhaps the most puzzling aspect of loneliness is the sheer abundance of people all around. When I lived in New York City people were always talking about being lonely...in a city of 8 million people. How's that possible?! Or being lonely...in a school of 4000 students. Or being lonely...in an office that employs 300 people. Or being lonely...on a team with 15 teammates. Or being lonely...at church with 1000 members. How can we have an "epidemic of loneliness?" Because, as I said earlier, loneliness is a feeling, not a fact. It has nothing to do with numbers, population density, activity options.

For a lot of us, I bet all this talk of loneliness conjures up walking into your school cafeteria when you were in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade, 7<sup>th</sup> grade, or high school and no one looks up and no one invites you to sit at their table and there are 400 kids in the cafeteria. But you feel alone. You ARE alone. And there are only two good options. You have to break through the very imaginary very real wall between you, and that table of classmates, OR – someone at that table has to look up, see you, and choose to break through the very imaginary very real wall between that table of classmates, and you.

I close with a couple of quick stories. MY first, or second, year here as your pastor, a famous Indian Hindu female guru came to New York City, rented out Madison Square Garden, filled it with 15,000 people and spent the full day hugging people, one by one. Just a hug. Not a teach-in, preaching, counseling, just a hug. I thought that was really cool, so the next Sunday right here, I preached about it and after church, as people greeted me, I gave every person a kiss. A Hershey's chocolate kiss.

In fact, just on Monday we were in Washington, D.C. It was freezing out, windy, slushy, but I still went out walking at 6am. I'm bundled up unbearably, gigantic wool cap, wool coat, wool scarf, humongous mittens. I looked like a lost, helpless, poor old soul. Suddenly, this young man makes a beeline straight at me, arms raised, "Can I give you a hug?" he says. And as we hug, I see his buddy take a photo. I'm now in some viral Tik Tok video, but I'll admit this – I got warm, my step quickened, and I smiled.

My other story is from 15 years ago. I had both my knees replaced, quite grumpily, I might add. Five days in the hospital, two weeks in a nursing home. Before that ordeal I announced to the church, in person, out loud, and in writing, crystal clear: No Visitors. I wanted NO visitors. No flowers. Nothing. I didn't want anybody to see me with matted hair and those hospital pajamas opened at the back and the little rubberized socks and hospital breath in a drug addled "Twilight Zone." Leave. Me. Alone. I could not have been clearer. So that first Sunday in the Lord Chamberlain Nursing Home, around noon, in walks Mike Howard, carrying the altar flowers. And I can say this with 100% honesty, never in my whole life have I been happier to see somebody. Mike knew that God was right, "It is not good for people to be alone." We can't be afraid to push, or, like God, to create something new, something suitable, someone whose "face is turned toward you."