

Depression and the paradox

Isaiah 62:1-5

January 17, 2016

What do Soren Kierkegaard, Princess Diana, Abraham Lincoln, and Angelina Jolie have in common? They have all suffered from depression. As have Elijah the prophet and David the king and the author of the psalm you just heard. As have I.

So if you have suffered from depression, if you are depressed, you are in good company. And I mean that quite literally. You are in good company because these are good people, people we consider strong and wise and capable and faithful. So let's be clear. Let's be very clear. Depression is not a sin. It's not a sin, but a shadow.

"Darkness is my only companion," the Hebrew psalmist wrote. Depression is a shadow, a darkness that overshadows your spirit, and not just your spirit, because when you are depressed, your body suffers, too. It is a darkness that overshadows your life as a whole, depressing you, pushing you down, weighing you down, sapping your strength, souring your disposition, taking away your joy.

So many troubles have fallen on me ... Your anger lies heavy on me, and I am crushed beneath its waves.

Depression is a shadow, a darkness, that makes it difficult to see. Everything that is true and good and beautiful is hidden from your sight, obscured by the darkness. You can't even see yourself as you really are, because what is true and good and beautiful in you is obscured by the darkness.

Depression is a deceiver, distorting your perception, telling you lies. You see everything through its darkened lens. Everything seems dim, grey, unattractive, forbidding. When you're depressed, it's not just one thing you brood about, but everything. I call it "kitchen-sinking." Your depression may be triggered by a particular event or conversation, or by nothing at all, but suddenly everything seems bad, even the things that brought you pleasure and joy just days or even moments before. You can't see the whole picture anymore, or maybe it's that you see the whole picture now through a different lens.

When you're depressed, when I'm depressed, it is often difficult to pinpoint a cause, a reason. You feel an amorphous unhappiness, a general malaise. You feel like you're trying to swim in a sea of mud, or fight your way out of a shadow that envelops you but has no shape or substance.

And so you feel helpless, powerless, trapped. You feel defeated, miserable, sad. You draw into yourself. You feel no desire or energy to do what you want to do or even what you have to do. You withdraw from life. You isolate yourself. You are alone. Depression is always lonely.

And if depression lasts, it may lead to bitterness, to ingratitude, to unfaith, casting aspersions on God, on the One who made you what you are, whether you intend to or not. Depression is not a sin, but a shadow that deprives you of the joy of life, but depression may lead to sin, if it takes away your gratitude, if it kills your compassion, if it destroys your love, if it means you don't care anymore, about yourself or about anybody else.

Depression is not a sin, but a shadow ... and a paradox.

Depression sees a gap, a contradiction, a wide chasm between things as they are and things as you want them to be, or as they could be, or as they should be. And often -- not always, but often -- you are right. There is a gap. There is a contradiction. Neither the world nor you are as they should be or could be.

This is the paradox of depression, that it does see and doesn't see.

It does see. Depression refuses to ignore the truth, the harsh realities of this life. It is perceptive, honest, and even in a way courageous. There is frequently a correlation between depression and genius. The ones who are gifted with an extraordinary ability to see reality as it is, to express reality as it is -- in art, in literature, in science, in statesmanship -- are a blessing for humanity, but are often themselves cursed. The opposite of depression is not always joy but complacency, being content not to see, choosing not to see, refusing to see.

Depression does see. And it doesn't see. You see what is true, but you find the truth too much to bear. You can't handle the truth, and so you suffer, but not because you see the truth. You suffer because you try to handle it yourself, because you don't see the whole truth. You don't see that you are not alone. You don't see the light that is shining in the darkness. You don't see the light that is shining on you. You are too focussed on the darkness. You are too focussed on yourself.

The light shines in the darkness.

*For Zion's sake I will not keep silent,
and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest,
until her vindication shines out like the dawn,
and her salvation like a burning torch.*

Isaiah brought God's message to Jerusalem, to her people who were defeated and depressed. Their name was "Forsaken." They felt alone, ignored, abandoned, abandoned by their God. Their name was "Desolate." Their home was a wasteland and their souls were a wasteland.

But God will give them a new name. They will be called "My Delight Is in Her," not ignored, not abandoned, but loved. They will be called "Married," not alone, but taken by God as a bride, loved and protected and cared for and esteemed.

They will be vindicated. They will be saved. This is what will be. It is a promise. When Isaiah spoke to them, that day had not yet come, but the promise itself was a light shining in the darkness, because they were told, “the Lord delights in you.”

The Lord delights in you.

Hear it! Taste it! Say it again and again, until you believe it, until you can see it. The Lord delights in you ... as you are, as you are. You may not delight in yourself, but the Lord delights in you.

The Lord delights in you and the Lord will rejoice over you. You do not have to manufacture your own joy. Joy comes from the Lord. You do not have to rely on your own strength. Your strength is in the Lord. You do not have to fight your own way out from under the shadow. The Lord will shine his light on you and dispel the darkness.

Depression is not a sin, but a shadow, a shadow that engulfs our lives in darkness. But this is the paradox, that sometimes we see best in the darkness. When we see the contradiction, when we recognize our frailty, when we know we are at a loss, sometimes it is then, in the midst of the darkness, that the light shines and we see God.

Pope Francis said in an Easter week homily several years ago:

At times in our life the glasses for seeing Jesus are our tears.

Our tears that are a window to our soul, to our heartbreak, to our yearning for God, to our need for the one love that can satisfy our heart's desire, the one love that can make us whole.

May you see Jesus in your tears. May God come to you in the darkness. May God shine his light upon you and hold you in his embrace. May God rejoice over you and wipe the tears from your eyes.

And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.