1 Kings 19:1-10; Psalm 42:1-11

*“Is There Anyone With Me In this Pit?”* A Sermon on Mental Health

It seems like it’s been a month ago that the big tree next door to Patrick and Sarah Wagoner’s house just half a block from the Church started turning its leaves. It is by far the earliest tree to change its colors – as a sign of fall ...and then winter. The long, dark nights of winter. I felt SAD all over, just knowing winter is coming. SAD – stands for Seasonal Affective Disorder, a depression due to lack of sunlight. I imagine there are others who experience the sadness of winter.

I’ve been reading recently about mental health issues and mental disorders. There are a lot of mental illnesses that effect our families: manic-depression or bi-polar disorder; anxiety disorders; panic attacks; phobias; depression; schizophrenia; eating disorders; substance abuse; hallucinations or delusions; ADHD (Attention Deficit / Hyperactivity Disorder); impulse control disorders; PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder); dementia, or obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Statistics – Did you know that half of all lifetime cases of mental illness begin by age 14, and that despite effective treatments, there are long delays – sometimes decades – between the first onset of symptoms and when people finally seek treatment?

Bi-polar Disorder is a serious disorder of the brain, with about 2.3 million American adults suffering in a given year. It’s a disorder within the brain. It’s not the person’s fault or a flaw that they can shake off!

Nearly 5% or about 2.7 million children are reported by their parents to suffer from definite or severe emotional or behavioral difficulties, problems that may interfere with their family life, their ability to learn, and their formation of friendships. These difficulties can persist throughout a child’s development and lead to lifelong disabilities.

Four of the ten leading causes of *disability* in the country are mental disorders – major depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and obsessive-compulsive disorder.

35 million Americans suffer from depression severe enough to warrant treatment at some time in their lives. Millions of others turn to self medicate with alcohol and drugs.

Depressed feelings cause some people to turn away from God. But others, like David of the Old Testament, use those dark times to “hope in God,” remembering His goodness!

Defined – Mental Health is defined as “a physical dysfunction of the brain that causes the inability to think or feel or act in a person’s normal manner. Outside of a miracle, an individual doesn’t get out of bed in the morning and speak away high cholesterol; and in the same way, we cannot pray away mental illness. There are treatment procedures for physical problems of the body (whether we’re talking about the heart, the bloodstream, the lungs or cancer) – and there are treatments for the unseen illnesses of the brain. Mental and physical health should be treated as equal.”

“There’s no shame when any other organ in your body fails, so why do we feel shame if our brain is broken?” – Rick Warren

Without consciously knowing it when it happens, the brain has the power to isolate you, cause you to cease to be a productive member of society, and shorten your life-span. Mental illness is not a choice, but the good news is that it’s treatable. In many cases mental disorders are caused by genetics or hormonal or chemical imbalances. If you know someone affected by mental illness, it’s a disorder that usually affects the whole family.

Sarah’s Story [*Unanswered;* by Jeremiah Johnston; pg. 102-103]:

Sarah didn’t fit the typical stereotype of what a person struggling with a mental illness is supposed to look like. She came from a healthy Christian family. Her parents and four siblings are committed to their faith in Jesus Christ, active in their church. Sarah is talented, educated, articulate, and from the outside you’d never guess she struggles with anything.

Her life with depression began with a diagnosis with Type 1 Juvenile Diabetes. Her health spiraled into anxiety, depression and ultimately, a paralyzing eating disorder. [Research shows that eating disorders are the most fatal of all mental illnesses.]

Sarah: I never realized I was depressed, I never even thought of depression, probably because no one ever talked about it! None of my teachers, no sermons from my pastors, or my youth group leaders; and my parents never talked with me about it.

Sarah's mental illness caused her to feel like she had no control over her body. She would force herself to look in the mirror, which caused her to cry and become angry with God. “How could God curse me with this dysfunctional, disgusting body?” Sarah thought. Going to church only made things worse. When the congregation stood to sing, she was so embarrassed by her body that she wasn't able to worship. She didn’t want anyone to see her. Sarah even refused to take communion, obsessed with counting every single calorie. Her mental illness made her feel like such a failure as a Christian.

Sarah's eating disorder (and all the associated depression and anxiety) consumed her thoughts and exhausted her! I lost connection with all of my friends; I pushed everyone away, broke up with my boyfriend, lost faith in God, and I was taken away from a job I loved. I had prayed to God for help, but felt like He hadn't heard me. I never got better, no matter how hard I prayed. I was sick of praying about it.

An intervention by Sarah's parents and psychiatrist saved her life. Her participation as a patient in a treatment center began her road to recovery as she began the healing process from the inside out.

Sarah: Once my brain was properly nourished, I realized that it was not my fault; my anxiety, depression, mental illness and eating disorder did not make me a bad person, or a failure as a Christian. I had a medical condition and I needed professional help! I can't help but wonder, if I had learned about depression, anxiety, and mental disorders growing up, maybe I would have seen red flags sooner and asked for help. But how could I seek help for a problem I didn't know I had?

Sarah: Recovery from my eating disorder, anxiety, and depression is a long-term battle. There is no silver bullet. Many days I do not feel like fighting my disordered thoughts, it is exhausting! But, I know God loves me enough to send His Son to die for me. Remembering this helps me want to love myself! If I can't do it for me, I can do it for Him.

Sarah finished an interview with a powerful thought: Opening up and sharing about my mental illnesses has been such a huge part of my recovery. Hiding my depression, anxiety, and eating disorder gave these illnesses so much power over me. But I am no longer a slave to my eating disorder – and with God's strength, I can walk upright and free!

One of the lasting things I hear about mental disorders from Sarah is how we misper­ceive or misunderstand what is true or real – even about our own bodies, when it comes to looking at ourselves! I’ve known that depression lies to us! Mental illness is serious stuff and needs to be treated. You can’t just snap out of it!

Many people hear the message that depression or mental illness is a spiritual problem, a sin problem. But that’s not right! Unconfessed sin can be a factor, but there are medical and biological factors that are more likely to contribute to your depression, as well as some tough life issues you’ve experienced. It’s not a bad thing – it’s not weakness – to ask for help!

We wouldn’t think twice about seeing our doctor if we suffered an accident and broke a bone in our leg! We wouldn’t think twice about following our doctor’s instructions if we had a lung condition or thyroid malady. The brain is just another organ that is susceptible to disease!

We find many examples of mental disorders in the Bible among God’s people! Today we’re reading from one of the Psalms and as you follow along with the reading, I want you to identify words or phrases that hint at the sadness or depression of the writer.

[READING Psalm 42:1-11 (NLT)]

1 As the deer longs for streams of water,

so *I long for You*, O God.

2 I thirst for God, the living God.

*When can I go and stand before Him?*

3 Day and night *I have only tears for food*,

while *my enemies continually taunt me*, saying,

“Where is this God of yours?”

4 *My heart is breaking* as I remember *how it used to be*:

I walked among the crowds of worshipers,

leading a great procession to the house of God,

singing for joy and giving thanks

amid the sound of a great celebration!

5 Why am I *discouraged*? Why is my heart so *sad*?

I will put my hope in God!

I will praise Him again— my Savior and 6 my God!

Now I am deeply *discouraged*, but I will remember You

— even from distant Mount Hermon,

the source of the Jordan, from the land of Mount Mizar.

7 I hear the tumult of the raging seas

as Your waves and surging tides sweep over me.

8 But each day the Lord pours His unfailing love upon me,

and through each night I sing His songs,

praying to God who gives me life.

9 “O God my rock,” I cry, “*Why have You forgotten me?*

Why must I *wander around in grief*, oppressed by my enemies?”

10 *Their taunts* break my bones.

*They scoff*, “Where is this God of yours?”

11 Why am I *discouraged*? Why is my heart so *sad*?

I will put my hope in God!

I will praise Him again— my Savior and my God!

Depression – The Bible offers some spiritual helps for depression:

**Depression can be relieved by meditating on God's Word.** Depression is one of the most common mental disorders. One antidote for depression is to meditate on the record of God's goodness to His people. This can take your mind off the present situation and give you hope that your circumstances will improve. Remembering what God has done will focus your thoughts on God's ability to help you rather than on your inability to help yourself. When you feel depressed, take advantage of this psalm's antidepressant: Read the Bible stories of God's goodness and meditate on them.

**Depression can be relieved by patience.** The psalm writer tells his own soul to be patient. There are plenty of reasons from the past to trust God. In spite of the discouragement of the moment, the author is convinced that God has plans for tomorrow that are better. That may not make the darkness bright, but it may make it more bearable until the new light of morning.

**Depression can be relieved by expecting God to act.** The writer confidently closes this song with a statement of hope in the midst of difficult emotions. He may not feel like it, but he knows that he will again have plenty of reason to praise God for all that He will do. **I will put my hope in God! I will praise Him again – my Savior and my God!** (42:11)

Pastor Stephen Altrogge said, “Until the day Jesus returns, I will live in a body which does not function as God originally intended. My brain, which is a key, central, full part of my body, will not function correctly. Chemicals will become imbalanced. Serotonin will not be properly absorbed. Norepinephrine will be unevenly distributed. Synapses won’t fire correctly. My brain, just like every other part of my body, is prone to illness.”

Suicidal thoughts and mental illness are not only common in our Church congregations, they have become common occurrences among pastors, as well. (88.T)

“Depression speaks a language of its own, known only to those who are depressed. Depression is both ancient and universal. In fact, those who study it – doctors and psychiatrists – tell us that depression is the most common emotional problem in America... No one is immune to it. It is not a willful fault, nor is it a sin... We don’t know how dark the darkness is in someone who is depressed.” But those who experience the dark “feel the pressure of the darkness of despair in their own mind. The darkness is visible to them and often invisible to us.” (Pastor John Petty)

Unless you have been brought to the edge, you may not understand the intensity of another person’s struggle that might trigger a suicide attempt. But God knows the internal struggle of our hearts. In a speech 6 years ago, Vice President Joe Biden reflected on the tragic death of his wife and young daughter: “For the first time in my life, I understood how someone could consciously decide to commit suicide ...not because they were nuts. But because they’d been to the top of the mountain, and they just knew in their heart they’d never get there again.”

Did you know more Americans die by suicide than from war, cancer, and AIDS combined. The myth is that *If you are closer to God you wouldn’t have suicidal thoughts.*

* Globally, one person dies every 40 seconds by his or her own hand.
* Nearly 1 million people worldwide take their lives each year.
* Every 15 minutes someone commits suicide in the U.S.

While we can see evidence of depression and mental disorders throughout the Bible, we also find healthy habits to follow. Listen to these three, as examples:

God created us to have an abundant life; however, we have an enemy, who, **like a roaring lion**, (1 Peter 5:8), **has come into the world to steal and kill and destroy** our lives, (John 10:10). **Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.** (James 4:7)

Romans 12:2 – **Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.**

Jesus said at Matthew 11:28 – **"Come to Me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”**

There are four reasons why this message today is important:

1) The Church must be patient and sympathetic to those who live around us and experience frustrating illnesses within their family that are often misunderstood.

2) We need to remove the stigma from mental diseases, knowing that those who become ill didn’t necessarily do anything to bring it on! In days of old, good-meaning people blamed a lot of symptoms of mental illness on sin; your sin, your actions, your responsibility! But now we know better; there’s no blame and it certainly isn’t a sign of weakness to seek help through the professionals.

3) I want to encourage you who are present, you who may experience symptoms, not to neglect a medical evaluation, and speak openly to your doctor or counselor about any issues that you or your family are identifying. (Dr. Kevin Yingling, former Dean at the School of Pharmacy, said your family may be the first to see the need for professional help.)

4) Finally, it’s important to know that God offers spiritual resources for those who are ill and for their families; resources of prayer and meditation, the communion of the saints, the forgiveness of sins, and the power and gift of faith, hope, and love!

INVITATION: Our heavenly Father calls out to you to trust Him with patience. Let Him love you just as you are! Believe that He loves you!

But let’s not ignore the importance of talking to our doctors or counselors about our life experiences either! It’s so important that the people of God make room in their heart for those who are struggling mentally and emotionally, but also make room for their family members – as we practice empathy and compassion!

**PRAYER:**

Dear God,

I feel such pain, anxiety, and depression.

I know this is not Your will for me,

and yet my mind is held in chains by fear and paranoia.

I surrender my life, right now, to You.

Take the entire mess, all of it,

now too complicated to explain to anyone

but known by You in each detail.

Do what I cannot do.

Lift me up.

Give me a new chance.

Show me a new light.

Make me a new person.

Dear God,

this depression frightens me.

Dear God,

please bring me peace

and heal me in Your grace. Amen

**SONG:** *“You Say”* a song by Lauren Daigle was shared to close the message.

Another song for reflection is *“Fear Is a Liar”* by Zach Williams

1 **I waited patiently for the Lord to help me, and He turned to me and heard my cry.** 2 **He lifted me out of the pit of despair, out of the mud and the mire. He set my feet on solid ground and steadied me as I walked along.** 3 **He has given me a new song to sing, a hymn of praise to our God.**

— Psalm 40:1-3 (NLT2)