

Beloved
Rev. Nicole Farley
First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
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Isaiah 43:1-7

¹ But now thus says the Lord,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
² When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
³ For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.
I give Egypt as your ransom,
Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.
⁴ Because you are precious in my sight,
and honored, and I love you,
I give people in return for you,
nations in exchange for your life.
⁵ Do not fear, for I am with you;
I will bring your offspring from the east,
and from the west I will gather you;
⁶ I will say to the north, 'Give them up',
and to the south, 'Do not withhold';
bring my sons from far away
and my daughters from the end of the earth—
⁷ everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made.'

Isolated. It's one of most universal feelings of any mental illness or addiction. The feeling that you are alone in what you are experiencing. The feeling of being a foreigner in a land full of natives. It's not unlike the exile that the Israelites, to whom God is speaking, were feeling. Emmanuel, God-with-us, is not only a name for God in the season of Advent. God-with-us is who this missive from Isaiah is all about. God's words of comfort to the

Israelites were “Do not fear, for I am with you.” Isaiah spoke these words for a people who despair, for a people who feel alone.

Overwhelmed. A feeling which can kick-start anxiety. It can be the repeated voice which grows louder and louder until the urge for release becomes frantic, release through a temporary calming, release through a temporary high, release through a temporary refocusing of attention, release through a temporary affirmation. Instead of getting to the other side of whatever overwhelms, getting to the root of what overwhelms, it gets set aside until the next wave. God says, “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.” Isaiah spoke these words for a people who could not imagine a tomorrow, who could not bear another “today.”

Invisible. A feeling that nobody has a clue how much you are hurting, and maybe no one cares. The feeling reinforces the thought that you don’t fit in in a world of “normal” people. God says, “...you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you...” Isaiah declares that God **sees** God’s children, really sees them and knows them and seeks to soothe their pains.

To live with a mental illness is to live with an invisible illness. That makes it more difficult. If you are walking behind someone who is carrying an oxygen tank, you know to take into account a challenge he or she is experiencing. Likewise, someone showing the clear effects of chemotherapy. But not being able to get out of bed, not being able to prepare a meal, much less shop for a meal, not being able to go out when invited – we are not conditioned to see these behaviors as “acceptable” signs of illness. People wonder instead why someone can’t just get over it or put in a little effort or think of others. These things said to someone with diabetes or cancer sound despicable but they’re said every day to people living with mental illness.

God does not tell the Israelites to “suck it up and stop complaining.” God says “I hear you, I see you, and I care about what you are going through.” There is a great resource I access through Facebook called Mental Health on The Mighty. The Mighty self-describes

themselves as a group who faces disability, disease, and mental illness together.¹ Their subgroup specifically focused on mental health surveyed their followers with social anxiety, which can be defined as “extreme fear of being scrutinized and judged by others.”² Social anxiety cannot be relieved by telling someone that “it’s no big deal, no one is really paying attention.” The followers were asked to share one text they would like to receive after canceling plans because they could not overcome their anxiety in the moment. These are some of their responses:

“I understand, and I’m not angry. We’ll try again when you’re feeling up to it.”

“No problem! Please let me know when you are able to hang out. Is it OK to keep inviting you to events? I want to make sure you are in the loop!”

“That’s totally fine. If you think you need to talk things through, just text.”

“I may not understand your anxiety, but I do understand that it’s difficult for you, and I appreciate that you’re taking care of yourself.”

“What can we do instead that won’t be too overwhelming?”³

In other words? Do not fear, for I am with you.

Responding with frustration to the limits mental illness imposes is far easier than repeatedly responding with the grace found in the suggested text messages. Avoidance is also far easier, especially when we are guided, conditioned, to believe that the signs of mental illness are really portrayals of a lack of fortitude. The pin I wear every time I am at work reads, “You can talk to me about mental health. Break the stigma.” because there can be so much shame in mental illness when society is telling you to just deal with it. I believe comments recently made reinforce the link between mental illness and a presumption of deserved shame when language such as this is used: “when you talk about the mental health problems, when people come back from war and combat and they see things that maybe a lot of the folks...have seen many times over and you’re strong and you can handle it. But a lot of people can’t handle it.”⁴ People with mental illness like Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (or PTSD) were not called weak but there is a widely believed implication that the strong are the ones who can “handle” what they’ve seen in combat.

¹ <https://themighty.com/>

² http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/17-texts-people-with-social-anxiety-would-love-to-get_us_57e9728be4b05d3737be6610

³ Ibid.

⁴ <http://www.snopes.com/donald-trump-didnt-say-vets-with-ptsd-are-weak/>; redacted only to remove “in this room”

God says to these whom others see as weak, to the Israelites who were taken from their homes, who were overpowered, “Do not fear, I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.” God tells them, just as they are, that they are beloved. They are God’s sons and daughters, everyone who is called by God’s name, whom God created for God’s glory, whom God formed and made. They are beloved. You who are crying, you are beloved, you are seen, you have not been left alone. You who are afraid, you are beloved, you are seen, you have not been left alone. You who have nightmares, you are beloved, you are seen, you have not been left alone. You who cannot cope, you are beloved, you are seen, you have not been left alone. You who feel so vulnerable, you are beloved, you are seen, you have not been left alone.

We are called to speak truth to the lie that mental illness, that addiction, is weakness. Appendicitis is not weakness, arthritis is not weakness, skin cancer is not weakness. Because the brain is not an appendix or a joint or skin does not make its afflictions a weakness to be controlled. Because we believe in God who looks at us each and tells us, **exactly** as we are, “you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you,” we are called to declare the same to one another. You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you. I understand, and I’m not angry. Do not fear, I am with you.

Let us pray: God, give us strength that we might say, “I am with you.” Give us courage that we might say, “I will be with you.” Give us eyes that we might see and say, “You are precious in my sight,” we pray. Amen.