

Pastor Bill Sass – Sermon for June 21, 2020  
Palisade Bethel Lutheran Church

As today's Psalm begins:

“Surely for your sake I have suffered reproach,  
and shame has covered my face.  
I have become a stranger to my own kindred,  
an alien to my mother's children.  
Zeal for your house has eaten me up;  
the scorn of those who scorn you has fallen upon me.  
I humbled myself with fasting,  
but that was turned to my reproach.”

On September 8, 1998, slugger Mark McGwire broke baseball's single-season home-run record. That record had been set by Roger Maris exactly two years to the day before McGwire was born. It was an historic feat in baseball, but it nearly didn't happen. In 1991, McGwire hit only .201, and was hampered by injuries. He seriously considered retiring. He was an emotional wreck, and thought about giving up, but he didn't. Instead, he began therapy for his depression. Seven years later, he was surpassing the all-time home-run record with 70 round-trippers in a single season. Nearly defeated by depression and despair. Millions of people have found themselves in the same low spirits that troubled Mark McGwire.

The magnificent leader Winston Churchill often spoke about his frequent battles with what he called, “The Black Dog” of depression.

Vincent van Gogh, whose paintings have brought some of the highest prices ever paid for art, cut off his ear in a time of despair.

Abraham Lincoln, the Great Emancipator, had a running, lifelong battle with melancholy. He freed the slaves, but he could not free himself.

Many people have experienced what these brilliant people experienced – and here's what's really sad, the numbers are growing. For example, studies show baby boomers are four to five times more likely to be depressed than earlier generations.

Now hold on, you say. If these people just knew Jesus, they wouldn't be so depressed. I wish that were true, but that's not what evidence shows. Some of the finest Christians who ever lived have experienced what St. John at the Cross called, “the dark night of the soul.”

The British preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon was one of the most prominent pastors of his era. His sermons are still read by pastors today. And yet Charles Spurgeon struggled for many years with life-threatening bouts of depression, and melancholy.

Yes, Virginia, some fine Christians do have bouts of despair. That's important for us to acknowledge. It's one thing to be depressed. It's quite another to carry around a sense of guilt about being depressed. In fact, because most Christians are such conscientious people who try so hard to do the right thing, we probably have more than our share of depression.

A lesson also from the Psalms begins like this: “Out of the depths, I cry to you, O Lord.  
Lord hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplication!”

The Psalmist knew what it was to be down. It was undoubtedly written by a person with mature faith. But still, he knew what it was to be in the pits. "Out of the depths I cry to you..."

**Maybe there were some concrete reasons for his despair.** That's certainly a possibility. We all have bad days. Some of us have bad weeks, or even bad years.

It's like the man who had an old white convertible in deplorable shape, but he refused to get rid of it. So, when the old junker was stolen from his office parking lot, his family was delighted. Nonetheless, they called the police, and filed an insurance claim.

Their relief was short-lived. Within an hour, an officer was on the phone. "We found the car less than a mile away," he said, trying to restrain himself. "It had a note on it that read, 'Thanks anyway, we'd rather walk.'"

Anyway, **Take the initiative, but don't forget about God's initiative in Jesus Christ.** The psalmist writes, "O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord, there is steadfast love, and with Him, is great power to redeem." Before most of us take the initiative to solve our problems, we must hope we can succeed. That hope comes from God.

Author Paul L. Walker tells about a man he met in Austin, Texas. Walker asked how things were going. the man replied: "You might say my family is on the comeback trail."

"The comeback trail?" Walker said, "That sounds interesting. What does it mean?" The man said just two years prior he had been a very wealthy man. The recession hit. He wasn't ready. He lost everything he had. He turned to alcohol. His wife turned to activities outside the home. His eldest son turned to drugs. The man said, "My whole family was tearing apart."

"Then, my wife came to me and she couldn't stand it any longer. She wanted a divorce." This was the last straw. The man said he called a family conference. He said to his family, "We've got to do something about this. We can't go on like this anymore. What are we going to do?" To his surprise, his 12-year-old daughter stood up and said, "Daddy, the first thing we have to remember is that God still loves us."

Like a thunderbolt out of the sky, the man said, it hit them. "God still loves us." The family took inventory. They had lost everything tangible, but so what? It was wood, brick, chrome, and a little bit of this and that.

Then he said, "We still had each other. We still had our health. We had opportunity, and we still had God." "So, we got on our knees and prayed for God's guidance. From that moment on, we started on the comeback trail. I swallowed my pride and took a menial job. My wife went to work. The children are helping, and we have become a close-knit unit because we really learned that God still loves us."

This is the way to handle distress, "God still loves us." And as we began with today's Psalm, so we conclude:

Save me from the mire; do not let me sink;  
let me be rescued from those who hate me  
and out of the deep waters.  
Let not the torrent of waters wash over me,  
neither let the deep swallow me up;  
do not let the pit shut its mouth upon me.  
Answer me, O Lord, for your love is kind:  
in your great compassion, turn to me."

AMEN!!