

Covenant Word

When Despair Moves In

Acts 2:37-41; I Peter 1:17-23; Luke 24:13-35

They clearly state, Samford Together “is rooted in Samford’s core values as its members strive to follow Christ on a path of learning and communication.”

Final approval will rest, ultimately, with the Trustees, however, this week despair moved in. With an approval of the student group by the faculty, the leaders of The Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions issued a public statement which, in part, includes statements like:

We are saddened by this decision, which provides recognition for an agenda that we believe to be contrary to scripture.

We believe the vast majority of Alabama Baptists will continue to stand on the clear teachings of God’s Word as authoritative as to how Christians should live according to the unchanging truth of Scripture.

Yadda yadda yadda...

...it is because of obedience to Christ and our love for others that we should

*A Message by
The Reverend Sarah
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Pastor
Easter Sunday
April 30, 2017*

September 11, 2011, New York City.
April 15, 2013, Boston.
June 12, 2016, Orlando.
November 9, 2016, Clinton Campaign
Headquarters.
April 3, 2017, the Gonzaga men’s basketball
team’s locker room.

And on most any day anywhere around our world where conflict erupts into devastation and warfare.

These are dates when despair moved in.

It doesn’t take much: a critical eye from a mentor you value; a lack of parental support; a spouse’s quick judgment; words spoken in anger; an idea refused. A business associate who disappoints; a promotion for which you are overlooked; sentencing and imprisonment. When the movers come; when the paperwork is signed. When the doctor has a definitive negative answer about a mass or a biopsy or a brain bleed; OR when he/she wrings their hands with no more options and suggests all that is left to do is wait and see. These are the times during which despair moves in.

A recent cartoon in *The New Yorker* magazine shows children playing with their toys. There are rainbows and taped pictures of stick figures on the wall. Blocks, cars and a doll house are on the floor. As the children play, one child asks the other, “So, what do you want to be when you give up?” Despair.

For several years now, students at Samford University have been going through the prescribed process for recognition of a new group on campus. It is called Samford Together and its stated purpose is to provide a forum in which discussion about sexual orientation and gender identity may be held in an open-minded and accepting environment.

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preach repentance from sins, proclaiming Christ who alone offers eternal salvation to anyone who trust Him...

*...More rhetoric and then the threat...
In the days to come, Alabama Baptist leaders will be in dialogue with the leadership of Samford as to the serious implications this has for the relationship between Samford University and the Alabama Baptist Convention...*

In other words, we will defund you and quit sending our children to be educated by you.

Sigh. Are we not any further along? Despair.

Despair is an all too familiar a guest in my life. Despair sits down, makes herself comfortable, wraps her arms around me and pulls me close. “Baby,” she says, “why do you think that you are making any difference in this world? Those people don’t listen to you. The letters to congress don’t make any difference. All that

**Dear Friends,
Thank you for wanting to read and study these thoughts more carefully. Please know that I do not take full credit for anything that may be contained within, because I may have read or heard something at some point during my pilgrimage and do not remember its source and thus, cannot give the rightful author his/her credit. I pray that you will find inspiration and encouragement.**



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Worship with us each Sunday
morning at 9 a.m. and for Bible
study at 10:30 a.m.

reach-out-to-the-community stuff doesn't do any good. Folks are still mean, still indifferent, still unmotivated. You are just one small voice...one single person...you think what you do matters? Girl, you better think again." And despair moves in.

Elizabeth Evans was a Samford University student who sparkled. We so loved her here at Covenant that we invited her to be a summer intern.

She left us to go to Duke Divinity School. She married a man named Kevin Hagan. They settled in Virginia where Elizabeth was the pastor of an American Baptist church. All was right with the world until Elizabeth, try as she might, could not get pregnant.

It is what many young women dream of: carrying a healthy baby full term and then giving birth. It is dream and expectation all rolled into one and when that seemingly normal dream is dashed, it is often devastating. For Elizabeth, she miscarried several times. She attempted IVF and all were experienced as personal failures. Elizabeth recounts in her memoir *Birthed* that her 30th birthday fell on a Sunday. Worship over, the congregation had shared in a potluck meal. Church Council was to begin soon. Elizabeth had just enough time to dash to her office on the third floor, get her calendar and notes, and then make a quick stop by the women's restroom. It was there that she discovered that she was not pregnant again. She writes:

"A particular dream was over. A child, my child, was lost. My hopes, my planning...my sharing the good news with friends – these dreams were all crushed as I sat alone...in the restroom. ...I could hear several church council members inquiring in the hallway, 'Where is Elizabeth? Where is the pastor?' ...and so I robotically moved myself down the hall toward the church council and said 'Let's have a prayer before we begin, shall we?'" (pp. 27-28)

...and despair descends.

Despair is more than grief. It is more than depression. Despair is a total loss of confidence. It is a total loss of hope. It is a slippery emotion that often masks as many feelings other than despair. There are no easy answers for despair, and so we are often left with the question of how do we find any sense of hope for the future?

Despair is what I believe filled the disciples when Jesus is crucified. Despair is what has them huddled together in that locked room. The disciples hear the women's report about the tomb of Jesus being empty, and they believe it to be an "idle tale" (Luke's gospel) and do not believe it. With evening approaching, Thomas has left the room as well as others. Cleopas and his companion decide to return to Emmaus, and so they begin the seven mile journey.

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Walking, they talk over the events of Passover weekend. I imagine that there are expressions of disbelief, shock, and grief. As they attempt to work through their despair, they are joined by a third person. This person appears to be clueless about

the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus. Scripture says that his lack of knowledge causes the disciples to stop in their tracks, look at one another, and experience such sadness that they cannot move. They stand perfectly still. How had this man missed the mobs that welcomed Jesus into the city...the turmoil of Jerusalem as Jesus goes to trial, is sentenced and then executed? And so Cleopas takes the lead. He tells all the news and even adds that their hopes were that Jesus would redeem Israel. Now what? Their hopes are dashed. Their dreams lay encased in a tomb. Fear has taken away their confidence.

Now when you are in such a state, are you particularly observant of the things around you or are you so consumed by your own grief, trying to hold yourself and the little bit of your world that you can control together that details get lost and tangled? After my mother died, I remember being honked at after sitting through two complete cycles of green lights. I just simply could not move. I think that this is where these two disciples happen to be. They are so consumed by their sad and tangled thoughts that they do not recognize Jesus. Scripture says, "Their eyes were kept from recognizing him."

So Jesus does two things to help them move from despair to belief. First, he reminds them of Scripture. He begins with Moses and moves through the prophets interpreting scripture as it applies to himself. Then, he stays to enjoy table fellowship. While there, he does something else that jars their memory and opens their eyes to his identity. He takes the bread. He blesses the bread. He breaks the bread, and he shares it with his friends. He reminds them that what they know about Jesus is enough to keep belief alive in their hearts and in the world.

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He leaves them at this point, and they, in the dark of night, return to Jerusalem to inform the other disciples that Jesus was so powerfully in their presence that their hearts burn within them. No longer is grief, sadness, despair filling their spirits, but their hearts are burning with purpose and

hope. Frederick Buechner helps us here:

To believe that Christ is risen and alive in the world is to believe that there is no place or person or thing in the world through which we ourselves may not be made more alive by his life, and whenever we *are* made more alive, whenever we are made more brave and strong and beautiful, we may be sure that Christ is present with us even though more often than not our eyes, like the two disciples' eyes, are kept from recognizing him. ("The Secret in the Dark," *Secrets in the Dark*, pg.256.)

Dr. Craig Barnes is the president of Princeton Theological Seminary and in a recent article in *Christian Century* ("Finding God at the Bottom, April 26, 2017), he tells about an Emmaus Road experience that occurred in his life. He grew up as a preacher's son. His father believed it so important to memorize scripture that on Mondays of each week, he gave a small white card to each of his sons. On the card was a memory verse and by the end of the week, their father would point to one of them and give a reference like "Romans 8:28." They were expected to respond immediately with "For all things work together for good for those who love the Lord." If they could not, they were asked to leave the dinner table. Barnes says of it, "By the time I was a teenager, I had memorized a lot of the Bible, but it was not out of love for the sacred text. It was because I did not want to be dismissed from Saturday evening dinner!"

When Barnes was 17, his parents divorced. His mother moved to live with a sister in Dallas, and his father disappeared. Living in a parsonage, the two boys were left to pack up their family's things. The older brother dropped out of college to get a construction job and to help Barnes finish high school. They did not talk about how their world had crumbled. Emotions were a price they could not afford. They were too worried about their next meal and a place to stay.

The following Christmas, they decided to visit their mother. It was out of the question to buy two plane tickets from Long Island to Dallas. They couldn't even afford bus tickets. So being young and impulsive, they decide that they will hitchhike. By the end of the first day, they are somewhere in the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia on Interstate 81. It is snowing. Dark descends. Eerily, they see headlights. It is a Virginia state trooper, and he pulls over. Rather than lecture the boys about the illegalities and dangers of hitchhiking, the trooper informs them that the highway is closed due to the blizzard. He promises to take them to a nearby diner after tending to a wreck down the way.

So the boys are left to wait in the dark in the middle of a blizzard at an exit ramp on Highway 81. After months of

hustling, they are finally forced to talk about their situation. It doesn't go well as the reality of being disposable people to those who are supposed to love them is acknowledged. So they try another tactic to pass the time. They attempt sports statistics, but neither are any good at that. So, the

At the oddest of times, Christ's presence comes to chase away despair: in the words of an old hymn; in the comfort of being with a trusted friend; in the beauty of the world. But, like Barnes and the disciples, Christ often comes in the established routines of practicing faith even when faith may be dim.

older brother points at Barnes and says, "Isaiah 43:1-4." And from somewhere deep within came words that brought tears: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the

waters, I will be with you...because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you."

At the oddest of times, Christ's presence comes to chase away despair: in the words of an old hymn; in the comfort of being with a trusted friend; in the beauty of the world. But, like Barnes and the disciples, Christ often comes in the established routines of practicing faith even when faith may be dim: taking bread, the rubbing up against others who not only believe with me, but sometimes, they believe for me; and in the words of Scripture. Paul's words to the Corinthians are my guiding light. I offer them to you in conclusion:

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed;
Perplexed, but never driven to despair;
Spiritually terrorized, but God does not leave our sides;
Struck down, but not broken or destroyed.
What they did to Jesus, they do to us. But, what Jesus did among them, he also does within us...living in and with us.
So we do not lose heart.
We are not giving up!
We are always of good courage.
We are new creations. The old has passed away.
Behold, the new has come. (II Corinthians 4 and 5 from RSV and The Message)

May it be so on the Emmaus Road you walk. Amen.