

## **December 8th: Depression**

Welcome, my friends, to “Soulcare: Help For Heavy Times”. This is our new series, and over the next year we’ll be shifting into a different style of sermons and a different kind of topic. We’ll still be looking at passages from all parts of our Bible, but we’ll be doing it with a new intention, and that intention revolves around our desire to see this congregation continue to grow as a healthy, life-giving, safe, and compassionate community.

To that end, we will be discussing a wide range of topics related to mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual wellbeing. For December, we’ve chosen a miniseries called “Blue Christmas,” because we know that despite the never-ending festivities and celebrations and upbeat music, this time of year can be particularly difficult for folks dealing with mental conditions like anxiety and depression. As we bring these sensitive topics into the light, may we be able to fix our eyes on the solid hope, love, joy, and peace that anchors us, even when we’re waiting in the darkness.

Before we dive in, let’s take a moment to pray.

*Gracious God, our lives sometimes feel heavier than we can bear. We struggle under the weight of our culture’s expectations, the demands placed on us by our vocations, and the needs of our loved one—we are longing for a yoke that is easy on our weary shoulders. Shepherd us now into a moment of peace, where we might encounter your loving embrace and feel the burdens being lifted away. Grant us your mercy and grace this morning, we pray. Amen.*

Last week, Pastor Heather introduced us to the experience of anxiety, and she mentioned that anxiety is often accompanied by its sister condition, depression. And as she shared her own journey with us, I was reminded of a passage that spoke to me when I was going through my own struggle with these same conditions. The passage comes from a poem called *Have You Ever Tried to Enter the Long Black Branches*, written by the late great Mary Oliver.

It's a single line, and it goes like this, "Listen, are you breathing just a little, and calling it a life?"

Mary was a prolific poet, having authored 33 poetry collections over the course of her career. She was a Pulitzer prize winner, a recipient of the National Book Award, and in 2007 she was declared America's best selling poet. But in this poem, and this line in particular, I like to imagine that she's just Mary, a dear friend who pulls up a chair for you in front of a gently burning fireplace with a freshly brewed cup of chamomile tea. In the beachy comfort of her Cape Cod home, I like to imagine that she looks you in the eye and asks this curious but loving question, like she wants to know the real answer, and not just the answer you would give to be polite.

As you digest her inquiry, she calmly waits, gently holding your hand and letting you take a moment to reflect on your emotions and innermost thoughts. She gazes at you with compassion, ready to receive whatever vulnerability you are willing to share with her. In her poetic words, she invites you to examine your life, and what parts of your days or weeks are keeping you from living it fully.

So this morning, I'm going to channel Mary and ask you, my friends, are you breathing just a little, and calling it a life? Are you taking shallow breaths without even knowing it, and wondering why life feels so difficult right now?

This morning, as you made your way here, were you breathing just a little, and calling it a life? This holiday season, are you breathing just a little and calling it a life? At this stage in your career, are you breathing just a little and calling it a life? With your relationships, are you breathing just a little and calling it a life? In light of your current stress levels, are you breathing just a little and calling it a life? In your mental health journey, are you breathing just a little and calling it a life?

Mary and I ask this question because I want to explore what it feels like to be in a season of deep sadness, isolation, or even emotional numbness. However, I

do want to specify that when I'm speaking about depression this morning, I'm primarily referring to a condition of spiritual depression or circumstantial depression—a period of time marked by heavy emotions or a feeling of disconnection—sometimes called “the dark night of the soul,” which is a phrase derived from the writings and teachings of St. John of the Cross, a 16th century poet and mystic who lived during the time of the Catholic Reformation in Spain.

In our limited time this morning, I'm not going to attempt to describe the complexity of clinical depression in all of its forms, as that is not my area of expertise. If you are experiencing any of the emotional or physical symptoms related to those clinical conditions, please talk with your healthcare provider and discuss your options. If you'd like to learn more, or are curious about a depression screening for you or a loved one, we have take home sheets for you, they'll be available in the Welcome Center after the service. If the issue is with your brain chemistry, you don't have to continue to suffer, there are therapeutic solutions that can allow you to breathe a little deeper and enjoy your life again. Please don't feel any shame about accessing those medications or counseling options, accepting that kind of medical care is not a sign that you are weak, or not faithful enough, or don't trust in God. In fact, having the courage to seek help is a deeply faithful act.

And to be clear, just like clinical depression, a “dark night of the soul” is not a personal failing. Sometimes we go through difficult situations through no fault of our own, and how our bodies and souls react to these circumstances is not always something we can control. The emotions that we feel when we are faced with great loss, trauma, or anxiety are natural and normal. There's no need to be ashamed or fearful of condemnation here, we pass no judgment on your life or what it has taken you to get to this place.

But this “dark night of the soul,” can be damaging to our wellbeing. It can feel very much like being unable to inhale or exhale deeply. It can feel like a deep sense of overwhelm that leads to emotional and spiritual paralysis. It can feel like being trapped, or held down by the weight of the world. It can feel like a

fog that surrounds you everywhere you go. It can feel like the joy has been sucked out of your soul, and all that remains is an emptiness that you cannot fill no matter how hard you try.

It might look like life, and it may be what some of us are calling life right now, but this state of depression is not the life that God has designed us for. It's not the kind of existence that God desires for his beloved children. It is how God wants you to spend your days. It's not how God imagined the abundance that Jesus promised in John chapter 10 verse 10 when he said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."

If you are looking for life to the full this morning, or if you are in a dark night of the soul with no end in sight, I want to offer you more words of Jesus that feel to me a lot like Mary Oliver's gentle question and poem.

So I invite you to imagine a safe place where you can set down whatever it is that you are carrying. You can close your eyes if you like, or simply find a comfortable posture that allows you to release some of the tension that is living in your body right now. And once you are at rest, I invite you to imagine Jesus across the table from you, or next to you on a cozy couch, his hands extended to you, his eyes kind and ready to meet yours. Imagine his calm demeanor welcomes you into an embrace that lifts the fog or calms the storm that is raging in your mind. As our most intimate traveling companion and friend, he offers you space to speak the truth about your emotions and needs. He wants the real you, not the person you think you need to pretend to be.

And when you're ready, he says this, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Jesus says, "please don't breathe just a little and call it a life." Jesus says, "please don't take shallow breaths when your lungs long to fully expand." Jesus says, "Come, rest with me, take a deep breath with me." Jesus speaks to you

and says, "The life that I am offering you is easy and light, come and be with me this week."

If you're about to enter another season of busyness, stress, or anxiety I invite you to repeat Mary's gentle question to yourself as often as necessary to guide you into some personal reflection and moments of pause. If you discover that you are in fact taking shallow breaths and struggling, I invite you to remember Jesus' kind words, and recall them when you face difficulty or depression. May they be like a mantra for you when the world feels dark.

If you are breathing just a little and calling it life, my friends, I hope that this moment sacred space has given you a glimpse of God's love and compassion for you. I hope that you will internalize the loving presence of our friend Mary, and our companion Jesus, and accept their invitation into a more soul-full life.

Amen.