

January 5th: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

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. This month, we’ll be looking at experiences of trauma and resilience, gaining insight into certain conditions and learning about how to cope in the dark moments in our lives. We know that these topics are intense, so if there is a theme that is particularly relevant for you and you would like to talk with someone about your personal story, both Pastor Heather and I are available for care during our office hours, feel free to email us and make an appointment. We would be honored to listen and support you, or point you towards local resources and organizations that might be able to assist you in your healing journey.

Let’s take a deep breath together, and pray before we begin.

Restorative God, there are things in our lives that feel broken, and things that we feel unable to fix. We are haunted by memories or experiences, and we long for ways to heal and move forward. We look to you this morning for wisdom and encouragement, open our hearts to the guidance and hope that you have to share with us. Walk this road with us, so that even in our darkest moments, we never feel alone. Amen.

When it comes to Christian faith or any type of faith at all, there is one big question that many of us struggle with, can you guess what it is? Here’s the question that lingers beneath the surface for many of us: why do bad things happen to good people?

Theologians call this issue and its concerns “the question of theodicy,” and we’ve been studying this concept of divine power and free will since our ancestors walked this earth. And even though scholars and mystics have debated this for centuries, we haven’t reached any real conclusions. That is, we haven’t found any answers that permanently remove all of our doubts. We still ask, “why does a loving God allow for pain and suffering?” We still wonder, “why would God allow for his beloved children to endure difficult situations and experiences?”

And that’s okay. Asking these questions or having these kinds of doubts is not an indication that you’re a bad person or a bad Christian—they are natural reactions to the situations and circumstances that we find ourselves in. So if you’ve ever had these thoughts, or felt guilty for expressing doubts, you can know that you are not alone, and that there’s nothing wrong with you. In fact, this congregation desires to be a place where we can wrestle with our humanity and be a safe place to share in our questions—there’s no pressure here to act like we have everything figured out.

Which is a bit of a relief, because our text for today comes from the Book of Job—known to be one of the most confusing and difficult writings in our entire Bible. At the very beginning of this story, we learn that there is a man named Job dwelling in the land of Uz, and he was “blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil.” Job had a large family of seven sons and three daughters, and thousands of animals in his flock, a wealthy and well loved man. But tragedy strikes Job’s household, when God allows Satan to test Job’s faithfulness. In the span of a few short verses, all of Job’s livestock are either killed or stolen, and every single one of his children are discovered dead as the result of a house collapse.

This is devastating for Job, as I’m sure you can imagine. Job has lost everything and everyone he cares about, and is now left utterly penniless and alone. And this nightmare continues, because Job is then afflicted with painful sores all over his body, and is forced to use broken pottery shards to scratch at his wounds.

In the part of Job's story that we read earlier, we hear him curse the day of his birth. This is some pretty strong language, Job's despair seems to be reaching new heights in these verses. He specifically curses both the nighttime and the morning, and wonders why he was even born if he was going to suffer so much. The passage ends with this statement from Job: "For sighing has become my daily food; my groans pour out like water. What I feared has come upon me; what I dreaded has happened to me. I have no peace, no quietness; I have no rest, but only turmoil."

Think about it this way: every day, Job wakes up and has to relive the losses of his family, property, and possessions. Every day, he wakes up and remembers that all that he has loved is gone, and his new reality is barren and filled with grief. Every day, he starts a new day with the knowledge that this awful experience of loss will continue. And even when Job takes his despair and grief to God, God doesn't seem all that interested in explaining to Job why these terrible things have happened to him. In fact, God's response to Job leaves Job even more confused than he was before.

You might be wondering why we've included this text in our series, because it doesn't seem to offer any hope to any of us who are currently going through difficult situations in our lives. And that is true, this text isn't necessarily one where we can find uplifting encouragement or specific verses to hold onto. But it is a text of honesty in the midst of pain, and I think that has its own value in our culture that looks down on most forms of vulnerability.

Speaking of vulnerability, our topic for this morning is Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, commonly known as PTSD. Now, I want to be clear—our spiritual ancestors didn't use this exact terminology for Job's condition, and the point of this meditation isn't to claim that our biblical character definitively has PTSD. Nowhere in the Bible will you find a character who receives this diagnosis or undergoes psychiatric treatment for a trauma related disorder. However, I do think it is fair to say that Job has gone through a very traumatic experience, and there might be some things we can learn or even unlearn from this story.

But before we dive into that, let's define PTSD and give ourselves some context. According to the Mayo Clinic, "Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental health condition that's caused by an extremely stressful or terrifying event — either being part of it or witnessing it. Symptoms may include flashbacks, nightmares, severe anxiety and uncontrollable thoughts about the event."¹ Although traumatic events have been part of the human experience for millennia, it wasn't until the 18th and 19th centuries that scholars and medical personnel began to identify common traits and behaviors in soldiers who survived the Franco-Prussian and American Civil Wars. At this time, symptoms like depressed mood, sleeping problems, rapid pulse, and trouble breathing led doctors and researchers to name this condition "soldier's heart" or "irritable heart."

By the early 20th century and the events of World War I, new symptoms such as panic and reactions to explosions were identified, and the condition became known as "shell shock," as soldiers were coming home from war in a state of confusion and distress. This name continued to be used until the mid 20th century, when new studies began to describe these symptoms as "combat stress reaction." However, it wasn't until 1980 that the medical establishment officially recognized PTSD by including it in the newly published DSM-III, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. As the American Psychiatric Association started to treat PTSD in veterans, Holocaust survivors, and abuse victims, their understanding of this condition continued to shift—and today's diagnosis for PTSD is no longer categorized under anxiety disorders, but has been given its own category of Trauma and Stressor-Related Disorders.

We've come a long way in our understanding of trauma, and thankfully, as our understanding has increased, our treatment options have increased as well. Now, we have many different therapies and supports in place in our communities to care for individuals who are suffering, so if any of those symptoms that I described resonated with you, please know that there is help

¹<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/post-traumatic-stress-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20355967>

available to you. We might not have all of the answers yet, but there are ways to cope, and organizations who are committed to raising awareness and building resilience in the lives of survivors.

I do want to recognize that there might be some barriers in the way of getting help—and I specifically want to talk about some internal misconceptions that we might have about PTSD, because we might intentionally or unintentionally believe some things that are preventing us from getting the care we need.

First, it is important that we come to this text knowing that PTSD is not a spiritual test, like the test that God and Satan engineered for Job. Although we are talking about PTSD through the lens of this passage, none of the biblical scholars that I know and trust believe that God desires to test us for his own fun and entertainment. We might face challenges in our lives, or encounter a series of obstacles in our path, but that doesn't mean that these situations are a sign of God's plan to scrutinize our worthiness or faithfulness. Trauma and its resulting conditions are not a test that we pass or fail in God's eyes.

Second, Job's friends give him some pretty unhelpful advice that actually ends up being quite hurtful. The first of Job's friends to respond to his suffering, a man named Eliphaz, claims that Job's pain and grief are a direct result of previously undisclosed sin in his life, and the second friend, Bildad, blames Job's children for their own deaths. The third friend, Zophar, tells Job that he deserves even more suffering. All of this might lead us to believe that the trauma we experience or post-trauma symptoms that affect us are tied to our own behavior, that we are directly responsible for our own suffering, or that we deserve this kind of pain. This could not be farther from the truth. Neither trauma nor PTSD are punishments for what we have done or what we have not done. PTSD is not a reflection of your value or a sign of weakness. Even at our most broken and sinful, I don't believe that suffering is what God wants for us, I think God longs for us to live into the healing that is offered to us.

And third, we might be tempted to believe that if our story doesn't sound like Job's, then we have no reason to complain. Job's situation is an extreme

example, but your trauma doesn't have to be extreme in order to qualify for a PTSD diagnosis. PTSD doesn't just affect soldiers or veterans or survivors of war, but many types of people in many kinds of circumstances. This kind of mental health struggle could be real for anyone who has gone through interpersonal violence, tragedies, natural disasters, car accidents, difficult birth situations, and victims of abuse or neglect. Sometimes, we aren't even aware that we've experienced something traumatic until afterwards—when our daily functioning has been disrupted by symptoms like panic attacks, sleeplessness, uncontrolled anxiety, or irritability. We might not know that an experience has affected us deeply until we find it difficult to return to our normal behaviors and routines.

If that sounds like something that might be real for you, I encourage you to seek support in a way that makes sense for you.

But there is hope—PTSD doesn't have to control your life. Building a sense of resilience is possible, no matter how long you've been suffering. Here's a few small steps you can do today to start your journey towards healing, at least from a spiritual perspective.

One, be honest about your pain. Just like Job did, you can vocalize those feelings and emotions that you might have suppressed or hidden away. You don't have to curse the day you were born like he did, but you can find a way to express any anger or angst that you might be dealing with—start a journal, call a friend, or pray. Don't force yourself to keep it all bottled up.

Two, let yourself mourn. Allow yourself to grieve the people or things you've lost—it's healthy to acknowledge if there are certain aspects of your life or relationships that haven't gone the way that you hoped or planned. Job spent seven days wearing a sackcloth and sitting in silence, so give yourself some time to mourn those experiences or situations that have caused you pain.

And three, stay curious. This might mean learning about new treatments or new therapies that might help you cope or recover, or it could mean

continuing to wrestle with God and your faith. Keep asking the questions that are on your heart, and keep reaching out to God with vulnerability. I can't guarantee that the answers will always be given to us or that we'll understand the mysteries of the universe, but I do know that God meets us in the depths of our brokenness, and God will continue to meet you in whatever circumstances that you're navigating in this new year.

My friends, it is true that the trauma that we experience has the power to harm our souls, but it is even more true that together with God, we have the power to be restored and made whole. If PTSD is part of your story, may you find wholeness this week.

Amen.