

October 6th: Loneliness

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. In the past, we’ve followed a lectionary—or a predetermined set of texts that take us through the Old and New Testaments—but this time, we’ll be creating our own path through the scriptures. 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. We will identify certain stories, songs, and wisdom from the Bible that can teach us more about these needs, conditions, and experiences, and help us connect with God and with each other. Last month we discussed foundational topics, and now we begin our October mini-series called “Being Human.” In this month, we’ll be looking at experiences that are pretty close to universal—and we hope that what we learn together will offer you hope and healing, no matter what you are going through.

If that sounds good to you, I’m so glad you joined us today. We have a pretty important topic ahead of us, so let’s pray before we get started.

Ever Present God, we know deep in our bones that we need the warmth of each other’s companionship just like we need your love. We know that you created us for relationship and connection, but our world seems to be engineered to keep us isolated and vulnerable. We listen for your wise voice now, so that we might have the courage to seek out family and friends who are lonely and offer them the gift of friendship. Shepherd us with care, this morning and always. Amen.

Did you know that in 2023, the Surgeon General of the United States declared loneliness to be a national epidemic and a major public health concern?

That's right, loneliness is a national epidemic! After we've all just survived a global pandemic, that probably doesn't sound like good news, does it? I didn't think so. Unfortunately, loneliness in our country has reached such a level that the Surgeon General released an eighty page report to combat this issue—and last week I read through all eighty pages to hear what our nation's experts had to say. I expected some grim news, but I was beyond shocked by what I learned.

For example, in the years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, surveys of American citizens and residents found that one in two people had experienced a moment of significant loneliness or reported ongoing loneliness in their life.¹ One in two. That's fifty percent of us! Half of the country feels this way! And that was before lockdowns and long term illness made things worse.

Even scarier, the Surgeon General asserted that lacking social connection can increase the risk for premature death as much as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.² In addition, poor or insufficient social connection is associated with increased risk of disease, including a 29% increased risk of heart disease and a 32% increased risk of stroke.³ Furthermore, persistent loneliness or ongoing social isolation is associated with increased risk for anxiety, depression, and dementia.⁴ And here's the not good news for cold and flu season: a lack of meaningful connection may increase susceptibility to viruses and respiratory illness.⁵ Yes, a feeling like loneliness can be linked to your likelihood of getting sick—and the lonelier you are, the more likely you are to experience negative health outcomes.

All the experts across various medical and psychological disciplines agree: loneliness can have a profound effect on our emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual wellbeing. And they are issuing a warning that all of us need to hear.

¹ Cigna Corporation. *The Loneliness Epidemic Persists: A Post- Pandemic Look at the State of Loneliness among U.S. Adults*. 2021.

² Holt-Lunstad J, Robles TF, Sbarra DA. Advancing social connection as a public health priority in the United States. *Am Psychol*. 2017;72(6):517-530.

³ Valtorta NK, Kanaan M, Gilbody S, Ronzi S, Hanratty B. Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for coronary heart disease and stroke: systematic review and meta-analysis of longitudinal observational studies. *Heart*. 2016;102(13):1009-1016.

⁴ Penninkilampi R, Casey AN, Singh MF, Brodaty H. The Association between Social Engagement, Loneliness, and Risk of Dementia: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis. *J Alzheimers Dis*. 2018;66(4):1619-1633.

⁵ Cohen S. Psychosocial Vulnerabilities to Upper Respiratory Infectious Illness: Implications for Susceptibility to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). *Perspect Psychol Sci*. 2020:1745691620942516.

But truth be told, the warnings have been sounding off for quite a while. Back in 2001, Harvard professor and researcher Robert Putnam released the groundbreaking book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Putnam argues that a wide variety of societal shifts are to blame for Americans' increasingly isolated lifestyle—it's not just TV and other technology or suburban spread, or demographics or the demands of our careers—it's all of it put together. It all adds up to an unprecedented level of disconnection. Putnam wrote that all of those little pieces of the puzzle mean that we have slowly ended up with a society that doesn't value meaningful relationships as much as we used to.

Strangely, a secular leader like Putnam has a lot to say about the role of religion in this new cultural landscape. He writes, "As a rough rule of thumb, our evidence shows, nearly half of all associational memberships in America are church related, half of all personal philanthropy is religious in character, and half of all volunteering occurs in a religious context. So how involved we are in religion today matters a lot for America's social capital."⁶

And this research holds up—despite declines in attendance and participation, religious and spiritual institutions in our nation are still an integral part of the fabric of our society. Even though our country has changed, I think it's still true that spiritual activity can be a catalyst for meaningful relationships that sustain us through different stages of life.

Now I'm not saying that belonging to a church is the best way or the only way to rebuild our communities—because the truth is that church hasn't always been a safe or welcoming place for some people. I'm not saying the church or organized religion in general is the best or the only way to combat loneliness in our nation—because God knows that even some people who come to church feel lonely while they are at church, or walk away feeling disconnected.

But I think we can be part of the puzzle, we can be part of the solution.

⁶ Putnam, Robert D.. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. N.p.: Simon & Schuster, 2001.

Maybe I'm biased, but I believe that faith communities like ours have something to offer for people who need a space to ask big questions and find support. And over the past few years, our congregation has been trying to be intentional about welcoming a wider variety of people and making room for different demographics of people that might have been missing from our fellowship in the past. We've been trying to build a better, more inclusive experience for everyone—I hope that it has made a difference. And because of this intentional effort towards inclusion, I think it's important that we talk about loneliness—I think it's important that we have good news to share with people who might be in search of more fulfilling connections.

So what does the Bible say about loneliness? What does our faith have to say to people who are dealing with a profound level of isolation or a lack of social connection? Well, our spiritual history is littered with people who have navigated moments or long term situations of loneliness—this has been going on since our ancestors first began to populate the earth. But there's one passage in particular that I'd like us to think about today, and it comes from the Old Testament book of Joshua. To give us a little frame of reference, here's some background information.

After the Israelites had been freed from slavery in Egypt, and after they wander the desert for forty years, they finally come to the point where they are on the doorstep of the Promised Land. God had spoken to them, and given them a vision of a new homeland, a place where they would be safe and able to worship as they wished—and now it was almost here. You can feel the anticipation in the final chapters of Deuteronomy, when the great patriarch Moses gives his final speeches to his people—they are ready to begin a new life.

But then, something bad happens. Moses, their great leader, dies. A new leader is needed, and Joshua is the man for the job. But Joshua isn't sure that he's the right person to take over, and this sudden shift into leadership leaves him feeling unsettled and disoriented. Now that he's in a new position, he has all these responsibilities, and they weigh heavy on him. Most importantly, he

deeply misses his friend and mentor, Moses, and he feels like he's all alone. As they prepare to enter the Promised Land, Joshua might have been surrounded by his fellow Israelites, but he was profoundly lonely.

Have you ever experienced that? Have you ever been with others, but still found yourself feeling all alone? Can you think of a moment when you felt this way?

Unfortunately, I bet it happens to us all the time. We are in a crowd at the grocery store, but we go about our shopping without any meaningful connection. We might live in proximity to others in a retirement community, but we don't know them, nor do they really know us. We might belong to a community group, but not have made any relationships that bring closeness. We might encounter other parents at school events, but it's been hard to make friends. We get invited to a party, but we spend the whole time by the food table, shoveling chips into our mouth because it feels too overwhelming to engage in small talk. We go to work every day, but the interactions of our job aren't a replacement for the deep conversation that we are longing for. We scroll social media and watch everybody else's lives, but we wind up feeling like we are missing out. We might even be in a marriage or partnership that makes us feel like we're the only person putting in effort to sustain it.

My friends, I want to acknowledge that this is a painful spot to be in, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. If this is your lived experience, I want you to know you are seen. I want you to know that we recognize how heavy that must feel. The pain of being lonely might be a very human experience, but it is certainly not an experience that leads to flourishing or soul-full wellbeing. But God has something to say to Joshua at this moment of fear and isolation. God has something to say to people who are navigating a season of life marked by loneliness.

Starting in verse 2, we hear God give this advice: "Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them—to the Israelites. I will give you every place

where you set your foot, as I promised Moses...As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you. Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their ancestors to give them.”

Joshua may no longer have his mentor Moses, but God makes this promise: God will be with Joshua, just like God was with Moses every step of the way. God makes this vow: “I will never leave you or forsake you.” And in case Joshua needs to hear this more than once, we hear the same sentiment in verse 9: “Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.” God knows that Joshua feels alone. God knows that Joshua is about to take on a new role that feels vulnerable and isolating. And so God takes the time to remind Joshua that even though he might feel afraid or lonely, he is not alone. Joshua is told that wherever he goes, God is there with him as his traveling companion.

How do you think it felt for Joshua to hear this in his moment of loneliness? Relieved? Happy? Optimistic? If you’re having trouble coming up with an emotion, you can pull out your feelings wheel that Pastor Heather shared last week, and see if any of those emotions might fit.

I imagine that God’s presence didn’t totally take away Joshua’s grief over losing Moses, because God made us to be in connection with other humans, and this kind of relationship was always meant to be deeply important to us. Having God walk alongside us doesn’t negate our need for friendships and partnerships, but we see in the rest of Joshua’s story that this moment is the beginning of a new chapter for him. This promise that God makes gives Joshua the confidence and inner strength to take the next step in his journey of faith. It empowers him to enter a new season with peace and hope—a season where new relationships are possible.

And I think that this is God's desire for all of us, whether we are a biblical leader or not. Because God's ancient promise is for us too—the vows that God makes in this passage are for you and for me. Yes, you!

Sometimes, loneliness tries to tell us a story about ourselves. When we feel lonely or are isolated, we can easily believe that we feel this way because we aren't worthy or aren't lovable or aren't deserving of these relationships. We can construct this whole narrative that we aren't important or that nobody cares about us, but God says something different. God writes a different story for us, just like God did with Joshua.

So here's what I want you to think about if you are looking to take your next step:

How would you feel if God spoke to you and said, "I will never leave you or forsake you"?

What would it feel like if God told you, "I will be with you wherever you go"? How might you sense that God is walking with you as your most intimate traveling companion?

If you are lonely or experiencing isolation in this season of your life, I hope you will hear God's loving voice this week. I hope that you will receive the deep compassion and sustaining peace that God is offering you. And I hope that these divine promises will give you the courage to believe in a new chapter for your life—a chapter where you are valued and embraced exactly as you are.

Amen.