

October 13th: Stress

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 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. Before we talk about our topic for today, let’s take a moment to pray together.

Gentle God, you created us for flourishing, but we have turned our lives into a mess of pressure and unyielding expectations. Remind us this morning that your kingdom offers a yoke that is easy and a burden that is light—you offer us a different way of being that runs counter to the stress that we have created for ourselves. In this stillness of this sacred time, guide us into a moment of rest and restoration that we might feel our deeply held frustrations fall away. Be with us now, as we look for your wisdom. Amen.

Alright my friends, let’s start with a few questions—

How many of us are stressed right now, or have felt stress already today?
How many of us have been feeling stressed for a while, like stressed for longer than just a few days or a week?
How many of us can't remember the last time we weren't stressed?

Yup, that sounds about right.

Honestly, I'm not surprised. I wish fewer of us were struggling like this, and I wish I wasn't struggling with this, but the truth is that there is in fact a lot to be stressed about in our world today. Whether it's the demands of work, the needs of family, or the internal struggles that you're facing, there's a lot for our souls to cope with. It's just a lot, and I want to validate that this morning. If nothing else, I want you to know that you're not alone, and that is very real for so many of us. If stress is part of your current story, it doesn't mean that you're failing, or you're incompetent or any of the other messages that our culture might try to tell us—it just means that you are a deeply human person in a deeply broken world.

So I'll ask one more question—how many of us would like to feel less stressed?

That's what I thought. Good, me too. So today we're going to talk about this ever present stress, and see how we might be able to move towards greater health or healing. We're going to see if there is a small (or large, up to you) way that we can lower our stress, not just temporarily, but hopefully in a meaningful, long term way.

But first, we all know that stress is bad for us, right? But do we know HOW bad stress is for us? Well, I did a bit of research, and it's not good news. I don't say this to induce guilt, or to make us feel even worse, but to put some of these experiences into perspective, so that we can make some changes.

So here's what I found—

The American Psychological Association's annual "Stress in America" survey found that in 2022, 34% of adults reported a daily level of stress that was completely overwhelming, and that as a result, 21% of U.S. adults report experiencing forgetfulness, 20% report an inability to concentrate and 17% report difficulty making decisions within the last month.¹

To add to this, the same survey found that when in a state of stress, as much as 37% of surveyed adults claimed that they were unable to do daily tasks, things like cooking meals, performing at a job, or running necessary errands.² Stress adds a layer of complexity to our days, turning normal, routine chores into giant, overwhelming obstacles.

However, the data shows that stress isn't equal across generations—the reported experiences with stress vary with age. The survey found that younger people in general reported higher rates of stress, with both men and women ages 18 to 34 showing elevated stress levels compared to men and women in other, older age brackets.³

The most stressed out demographic is women aged 18 to 34, with 62% of respondents claiming to be completely overwhelmed by stress on a daily basis.⁴ As a thirty four year old woman, this is not encouraging. I don't know about you, but this is not what I want to hear. So today we happen to be focusing on a story about one of these stressed out young women—because apparently things were also pretty stressful in ancient times! I guess the more things change, the more they stay the same.

Maybe her story will offer us some wisdom and hope.

¹ [Stress in America 2022: Concerned for the future, beset by inflation](#). American Psychological Association. Accessed 12/2/2023.

² [Stress in America 2022: Concerned for the future, beset by inflation](#). American Psychological Association. Accessed 12/2/2023.

³ [Stress in America 2022: Concerned for the future, beset by inflation](#). American Psychological Association. Accessed 12/2/2023.

⁴ [Stress in America 2022: Concerned for the future, beset by inflation](#). American Psychological Association. Accessed 12/2/2023.

To start, here's a little background about this Old Testament book and our main character, conveniently both named Esther.

Esther was a Jew living during the time of exile—she and her people were dwelling in a city under the control of the Persian empire. At the beginning of this narrative, we learn that the Persian king has banished his wife from the land for disobeying his orders, and so he seeks a new wife. Esther is chosen to become his bride, and becomes Queen, but in this process, she and her relative Mordechai learn of a plot formed by the King's advisor Haman, a plot which includes killing all of the Jews within the empire.

So we've got sneaky advisors, a murder plot, and a young woman who must keep her identity a secret from her new husband. And the suspense only builds from there—Esther is caught in a web of deceit that increasingly puts her own life at risk. The good part is that Esther is a tough cookie, and she outsmarts her enemies, but the bad news is that this whole experience must have been terrible. It must have been like “Mission Impossible, Tom Cruise doing his own stunts” level of stressful. Like “arriving to SeaTac only an hour before your flight and getting stuck in the security line” level of stressful. I am sweating just thinking about it.

If you've resonated with this theme of stress, you might be wondering—how do I fix it? How do I wake up in the morning without the stress elephant that sits on my chest? How do I get through each day without wanting to cry about the to-do list that gets longer and longer? How do I make it through a season of life that feels increasingly frantic?

I wish I had a magic wand to make all of our stress disappear, I really do. But unfortunately, stress is something that we have to manage without any superpowers. But I think we can learn an important lesson from our friend Esther about how to get through times of increased anxiety. This might sound like common sense, but the most significant thing we can do during times of stress is to enlist some help.

In the book of Esther, our title character knows that she's in over her head. She knows that she can't handle the situation alone—and so she wisely seeks out her uncle Mordechai for support. Mordechai can't make Esther's stress go away, but he does make it easier to bear. Throughout the story, Esther and Mordechai are a team—leaning on each other, using each other's skill sets, and providing strength during moments when their lives were on the line. They depend on each other. They encourage each other. And they celebrate together when they succeed.

So here's our lesson from this text: We can and should do the same. Whether our current experience means that we identify as an Esther or a Mordechai, we can learn from their teamwork. And this is not just a biblical truth, because in our modern times of stress, a wide variety of experts say that identifying someone that we can rely on is one of the best predictors of lessening the weight of what we're carrying. Being able to verbally express what we're going through removes some of the burden of the stress, because simply sharing our experience or being honest about our situation allows someone else to truly see us and hear us.

I was listening to an interview that was done with the author Simon Sinek, and he was telling a story about a conversation he had with one of his dear friends. His friend was going through a very difficult time but didn't reach out for help, and when he later heard about what she went through, he was angry that he hadn't been able to support her. He referenced an article that mentioned that when someone is struggling, all that it takes to feel just slightly better is eight minutes of help. Eight minutes. So Simon and his friend agreed to a rule—if they needed help but didn't know how to ask, all they had to say was “do you have eight minutes?” That's all they have to say, that's the code that says, “I need you.” They say to each other, “do you have eight minutes?”

I know all of us are busy, and our daily stress makes us feel like every minute is precious—but I want us to think about this for a moment. Do YOU have eight minutes?

Is there someone in your life that you could call to chat while you commute to work? Is there someone that would answer your call, day or night, to be with you if you really needed help? Is there a friend or family member that would pick up if you texted them and simply asked for less than ten minutes of their time?

For some of us, this might feel like a no-brainer, but for others, this might be new. It might not be the norm for you to ask for help, because you've believed a bunch of lies about how asking for help makes you needy or a burden. But I want you to hear this straight from God: asking for help doesn't make you weak, and it doesn't mean you're a failure. Asking for help means that you are like our brave friend Esther, and it is wise to know when we can't do it alone. It is a sign of strength to trust someone else for encouragement and support.

Last week we talked about loneliness, so if you're coming to this conversation without a person that you rely on, I want you to add my email address to your contact list: pastor@bremertonumc.com. If you run into a stressful situation that you don't know how to handle alone, and you don't have anyone else in your life to call, I want you to email me with the subject line: do you have eight minutes? I will know exactly what you mean.

But if you do have someone in mind—a friend or family member for example—that could be a listening ear for you, I want you to make a point to contact them if you need a little encouragement. In fact, if you have your phone with you, I'm actually going to invite you to pull it out now. That's right, take out your phone, open it up, and pick out that person in your contacts. I'll give you a second to scroll through the list. Once you've found the person you would call or text, I want you to make a mental note that if you get stressed this week, about something big or small, that you're going to ask them for eight minutes.

And here's what you can say when you find yourself in a stressful situation:

“Hey friend, I’m having a hard time this week, do you have a few minutes to chat?”

“Hi family member, I could really use your support right now, can I call you really quick to process something?”

“I’m reaching out because I’m really stressed, would you be willing to listen for a little bit?”

“I’m going through a rough patch with my job/family/relationship/whatever, are you available for a brief pep talk this evening?”

Use one of these scripts or write your own—whatever works for you. I know that sometimes our stress feels insurmountable, it feels like there’s no answers for the overwhelming anxiety and frustration that we feel—but even a small moment of processing through a situation and receiving some comfort can go a long way towards taking the wind out of stress’ sails.

Now before we close, here’s one last thing I want us to think about this week:

Esther’s story is a powerful reminder that God works through us for personal and communal transformation. In spite of the tremendous stress of her situation, Esther’s actions save her people, and she is remembered as a leader who was chosen “for such a time as this.”

Just like Esther, this might be a season in your life when God is powerfully at work in and through you. Whether it’s parenting young children, working through mental health challenges, advocating for justice in our community, or preparing for the future, you have been chosen and you are deeply loved by God. This might be your own “for such a time as this,” and this might be the moment when you will make a difference in our world. You were made to be a leader. You were made to shape the next generation. You were made to speak words of truth and hope. You were made to bring about change. You were made to leave a legacy. You were made to make an impact.

So my friends, let's bear each other's burdens and see what amazing things we can accomplish together.

Amen.