

## **September 8th: Why Soulcare?**

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. This first month, we will be introducing some foundational themes that will guide us through the rest of the year, so that we can enter into these conversations with a similar mindset, and a common vocabulary. Then we’ll launch into more specific meditations, focused on experiences such as loneliness, family dysfunction, anxiety, addiction, and more. We won’t be able to cover everything, but we hope that what we do share will raise awareness, build relationships, and connect you with resources in our larger community.

If that sounds good to you, we’re so glad that you have joined us. Before we begin, let’s pray.

*Creator God, from the very beginning you crafted us with a soulful purpose—you breathed divine life into us and gave us abundance to flourish. Remind us of this ancient reality as we navigate our modern lives. Remind us that you have fashioned us with love and care, so that we might love and care for ourselves and others. In this time of reflection, we ask for your holy wisdom to guide us and shape us anew. Amen.*

As we begin a new year together, you might be thinking: why soulcare? Why choose to focus on this topic instead of others? Why pick a topical series instead of our normal lectionary texts?

To that I say, why not? Why hasn't the church been talking about this before? Why have congregations and pastors stayed silent about these issues and needs that are weighing heavy on ourselves and our neighbors? Why have we avoided these conversations, as if simply not talking about it will make this lack of wellbeing go away?

Frankly, I'm tired of not talking about it.

I'm tired of pretending that our souls don't matter—and that Christianity is only about what we think or what we believe—separated from what we experience on a day to day basis. I'm tired of the kind of spirituality that is supposedly about the good news of Jesus, but has nothing good to say to those who are struggling with physical, mental or emotional health. I'm tired of the idea that Christians couldn't possibly be faced with these challenges because of our faith. I'm tired of the stigma that surrounds these experiences—as if there is something wrong with us if we find ourselves in these difficult circumstances.

I'm just tired. And I have a feeling that many of you are tired as well. Tired of remaining silent. Tired of pretending. Tired of feeling unworthy. Tired of struggling. So we're going to do something about it. We're going to start talking about it. To give us some perspective about the scope of this situation, let's start with some numbers:

In a 2024 survey completed by the National Institutes of Health, it was reported that almost 58 million Americans live with some form of mental

illness, with anxiety disorders being the top diagnosis,<sup>1</sup> with 19% of Americans have had an anxiety disorder within the last year.<sup>2</sup>

That's almost 1 in 5 Americans living with some kind of ongoing, persistent anxiety. A similar study done in 2021 showed that 21 million people in the United States reported at least one episode of major depression, a number which represents approximately 8% of the United States total population.<sup>3</sup>

And the data shows that this isn't just an adult problem, it affects children and teens as well.

The American Psychiatric Association recently released new data to suggest that for those struggling with mental illness, about 50 percent of individuals started to have symptoms by the age of 14, and 75 percent experienced symptoms by age 24.<sup>4</sup> So this is happening to our kids, our grandkids, and the children in our neighbors and schools.

But even though this has likely always been an issue, even before specific diagnoses and testing and mental health professions, it has steadily become more and more prominent in our culture, especially over the past five years. I think we all understand that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these experiences—and now that the worst of this pandemic is hopefully behind us, we can look back and see the impact that this period of time had on all of us.

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<sup>1</sup> National Institute of Mental Health, "Mental Illness," *National Institute of Mental Health*, last modified March 2023, <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/mental-illness>.

<sup>2</sup> National Institute of Mental Health, "Any Anxiety Disorder," *National Institute of Mental Health*, <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/any-anxiety-disorder>.

<sup>3</sup> National Institute of Mental Health, "Major Depression," *National Institute of Mental Health*, last modified July 2023, <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/major-depression>.

<sup>4</sup> American Psychiatric Association, "Warning Signs of Mental Illness," *American Psychiatric Association*, last modified 2022, <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/warning-signs-of-mental-illness>.

I'll warn you—the statistics are sobering.

From 2019 to 2020, mental health related visits to the emergency room for tweens and teens increased by 31%.<sup>5</sup> That's in just one year. 31% increase in emergency situations. As if that wasn't alarming enough, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration reported that 69.1% of youths aged 12 to 17 said they experienced a major depressive episode during the first year of the pandemic.<sup>6</sup>

The same report discovered that 45.2% of adults with a mental illness perceived the pandemic harmed their mental health and more than 10% of adults were not able to access the mental health resources or services they needed during this time, which resulted in a moderate to severe impact on their health.<sup>7</sup>

There's no question that these past few years have dramatically changed our social and emotional landscape, but with these kinds of numbers, it looks like we have a real problem on our hands, don't we?

And truth be told, all of these statistics are just scratching the surface of this issue—the numbers tell us how many people are suffering, but we don't hear

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<sup>5</sup> Ellen Yard, PhD, et al., "Emergency Department Visits for Suspected Suicide Attempts Among Persons Aged 12–25 Years Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic — United States, January 2019–May 2021," *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, last modified June 2021, <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7024e1.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, "Key Substance Use and Mental Health Indicators in the United States," *Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration*, last modified October 2021, <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/reports/rpt35325/NSDUHFFRPD-FWHTMLFiles2020/2020NSDUHFF>

<sup>7</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, "Key Substance Use and Mental Health Indicators in the United States," *Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration*, last modified October 2021, <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/reports/rpt35325/NSDUHFFRPD-FWHTMLFiles2020/2020NSDUHFF>

the stories, we don't know exactly who in our communities is struggling. But it could be your neighbor, or your best friend, or the mom you wave to at school drop off, or your coworker, or your spouse. It could be all of those people! And it could be you. You could be struggling. Your experience could be the story behind these numbers. It could be your story that needs to be told.

And so we've decided to tackle these difficult topics and discuss these important themes because we believe that no one should have to suffer in silence. No one should have to navigate these heavy times alone. The church in particular should be a place where these conversations begin—because God's intent for creation has always been for complete flourishing. It has always been God's plan for human beings to exist with goodness and vitality.

How do I know this? Let's take a look at the very beginning of our Bible, and see what God has to say about our collective origins.

The first book of our Old Testament is the Book of Genesis—a book about beginnings. In Hebrew, this book is called *bereshit*, literally, “in the beginning,” taken from the very first line of the text. And this first couple of chapters outlines how God took the universe from total nothingness into vibrant life, step by step from darkness to the complete creation. The story goes that God takes each day to make a specific part of creation—and then finally on Day 6, God starts to make humans. As part of this process, God determines what humans will look like—God sets the blueprint for how human beings will be made.

Genesis 1:26-27 says this: “Let us make humankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

So we have this God who makes things in God's own image—God's own being was the blueprint for this specific kind of life. God makes humans like God, on

purpose. Theologians call this concept “the imago dei,” or the “image of God,” and I think it’s worth reminding ourselves that of all the things God could have designed humans to be like, God chose to stamp us with divine. God could have chosen to make us in the image of sharks or elephants, so I think we got a pretty good deal. And so it’s no wonder that the first chapter of Genesis ends with this concluding statement: “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.”

Our passage for this morning comes from the very next chapter, Genesis chapter 2. This text is a retelling of the creation story, but from a slightly different perspective, and because they have been paired side by side in our text, we can know that our biblical authors clearly believed that both contain important information for us to consider. In this version of events, we start by hearing about the lack of life in the world, verses 5 and 6 say this: “Now no shrub had yet appeared on the earth and no plant had yet sprung up, for the LORD God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no one to work the ground, but streams came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground.”

But all of that changes in verse 7, when God forms the first human. The text says, “Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.”

Just like how God created humans in God’s image in the story from chapter 1, God plays an active part in creating humanity in this narrative from chapter 2. This verse tells us that God had fashioned a human form from the dust, but it isn’t until divine breath enters his lungs that the man becomes alive. It is God’s breath that brings vitality from emptiness, and human beings are indelibly marked by this divine presence in our bodies.

I know that some of us might have differing perspectives on these creation stories, and that’s totally fine. Whatever you think or believe about the literal or metaphorical nature of Genesis and these ancient narratives—I think there is

something essentially true that we can take away from the passages that we heard this morning. Something that we can hold onto as we begin this year together.

I want us to consider that when you combine this *imago dei* and divine breath, we find the source of human souls. Not just in the ancient bodies of people in our Bible, but in our bodies today. I can tell you that I believe that each of us is created by God, in the image of God, with the breath of God in our lungs. I believe that this mark of God upon us and the gift of God within us means that we carry a piece of God wherever we go. That speck of the divine inside of us connects us to all of creation, including our Creator. And we were born for these intimate relationships where we can recognize and honor the dignity and value that are embedded in us.

But the way the world is now, it seems like our culture and our economies are intentionally engineered to be harmful to these souls that were made for connection and goodness. It seems like our fast pace and endless conflicts are specifically set up to keep us from the meaningful community that God designed us for. It seems like we've tried to normalize a way of being that is so deeply destructive to our souls—leaving our bodies, minds, and spirits broken. Our souls are hurting.

But the first two chapters of Genesis tell us that we were meant for more than this.

Our souls were made for more than frustrating to do lists.  
Our souls were made for more than deadline after deadline.  
Our souls were made for more than the constant exhaustion we feel.  
Our souls were made for more than the suffering we experience.

Genesis reminds us that our souls were made for vitality. Our souls were made for abundance. Our souls were made for life to the fullest.

So here's what I want you to know as we care for our souls together: Your soul is holy. Your soul is good. Your soul matters to God, because your soul is God living inside of you.

And as we enter into this series and examine all of the ways in which our souls could use a little support, I want you to trust that we do this work with connection in mind. We may not be able to solve all of the world's problems, but we can connect you with other people who are going through similar situations, and we can connect you with resources that might be a companion on your journey.

I hold out hope that the church can slowly start to change the culture of our communities, but as we do that work, we would be happy to connect you with a local organization or mental health professional to make sure that you're getting the encouragement you need. Both Pastor Heather and I are able to offer pastoral care, we are available by appointment during our office hours.

And each Sunday, when we gather today and draw close to God, we'll remind each other that we are made for this—we are made to be deeply known and deeply loved.

Amen.