

Stuck in a Moment that You Can't Get Out Of
Isaiah 40:21-31
February 5, 2006

Gracious God, today we draw near to the valley of the shadow of death. The coldness of that valley greets us by sending a chill down our spine. Be with us now as we do that hard work of thinking theologically and of dealing with our feelings about the tough subjects of suicide and of depression. Equip us with the power and the resources in this hour so that if we ever draw near to this valley of the shadow of death again that insofar as we are able, we are prepared. In Jesus' strong and mighty name we pray, Amen.

My father introduced me to the writings of Charles Poole who is a Baptist preacher and writer. Charles Poole was a self-proclaimed hard-nosed fundamentalist when he entered seminary. While in seminary he experienced a severe bout of depression. As he recovered from his battle with depression, his understanding of life and his theology changed. Charles Poole is still a Baptist, but he's left his fundamentalist views behind. He is now a very skillful pastoral theologian- quite progressive- and a pastoral preacher who brings insightful views about scripture to bear on the hardest topics to preach.

In his book Is Life Fair?: Good Words for Hard Times Poole addresses the issue of suicide. The name of this sermon is "What Judas Did Not Know." The scripture on which he bases this sermon is Matthew 27:3-5, which is the text that describes Judas' suicide by hanging himself. In the introduction of that story Poole writes about another Christian writer, Frederick Buechner.

Every time I think of Judas, I hear the haunting echo of Frederick Buechner's tender words. In his autobiography, The Sacred Journey, Buechner relates the tragic story of his father's suicide, which occurred when Buechner was a little boy of ten. Buechner tells how, several days after his dad took his own life, his mother found a farewell note that Mr. Buechner had scribbled to her on the back page of a brand new copy of a recently released novel called Gone with the Wind. The note said, "I adore you, and I love you, and I am no good."

"I adore you, and I love you, and I am no good." Those are the words that Mr. Buechner left for his family. Concerning his father's tragic death, Frederick Buechner wrote these unforgettable words: "For many years, if anybody asked how my father died, I would say heart trouble.' That seemed at least a version of the truth. After all, he had a heart. And it was troubled."

For about four and a half seconds at the end of my senior year of high school, I was courted by a college student named Ted. Two years earlier when Ted had been a senior when I was a sophomore, we had French class together. Ted randomly dropped by high school toward the end of my senior year. I ran into him in the hall. Two weeks later he's calling me. All very flattering. Here's where things get serious: In that two year space between my sophomore and senior years, Ted's older brother, Chris, committed suicide. When Ted and I had this brief courtship thing, Ted was at the point in his stage of grief of talking about his brother all the time. I'm about to say something awful here. Ted told me that Chris killed himself inside a dumpster. Part of Ted's mourning was how little his brother thought of his own life to end it in a dumpster.

Everybody has their own stories of people we've lost along the way. Probably more than one person in here has a story about a family member or a good friend who killed themselves. Each story of suicide, each scenario is as unimaginable as the next. Suicide is so final. It wrecks the people who it leaves behind in its wake. Within this sanctuary most likely we have more people than we would ever imagine who have seriously contemplated suicide or who have actually tried to kill themselves. I really don't know of anyone specific, but I want to say -whoever you are, we are very glad that you are still with us.

Preachers ignore the subject of suicide because it's awful, awful, awful. It's awful to talk about it in public. When people come to worship, they think "I want to be uplifted" not "I need to hear a sermon on suicide." It's also problematic to think of yourself as having to say something to say about this topic: because to those who have lost someone or more than one to suicide, no one can come close to the subject. No words can penetrate those feelings of gloom. No words can bring your loved one back. No words can heal those wounds that will always bleed.

I was seventeen years old when Ted told me about his brother, but this story stuck with me and it has shaped me as a pastor. Here's why we risk preaching on this subject. Just in case. Just in case I could say something or do something or open a door for someone who, unbeknownst to me, would be like Ted's brother who need to hear a word of goodness and hope that perhaps would have kept him out of that dumpster. Just in case you're ever stuck and tempted to go there. Just in case you know of someone struggling with this. Just in case we think that God doesn't have a kind word to those suffering from depression and despair and to those contemplating suicide. We preach through this discomfort and as listeners we engage in this uncomfortable subject because God's Word spoke first. We've got to trust God enough to trust God's Word with even the most challenging of topics. Just in case you need it, I want you to be spiritually and scripturally equipped for the most difficult of situations. So here goes:

Depression is a disease, a biological disease just like a sinus infection or kidney disease or diabetes. Just as we can't see the cholesterol that clogs our arteries, we can't see depression. It is an invisible disease that afflicts the brain, the hormones, the body. Depression isn't about one's ability or inability to control their feelings. It's about their biological disposition to handle stress. Just as some of us are hearty and never come down with the bug that everyone else is passing around, some of us are emotionally hearty. We can take anything and everything that comes because we have a biological disposition to handle stress. Just as our height and eye color and the size of our feet are determined by genetics, so is our susceptibility to depression. Last year my friend Susan Puckett lost her mother, went through a divorce, got skin cancer, lost two other people very close to her, and saw her daughter go through the most serious of situations. Susan never got depressed. Her body just carried her through it. Last summer I asked her how she could stand it. She said honestly "Just about everybody I know is on an antidepressant, but my body can just take it. It's been hard, but my body can take it." Some of us can be seriously depressed because we don't get enough sunlight in winter. Some of us can be depressed to the point of bad thinking just because of the everyday demands of life. Depression is not a choice, it's biological.

As Christians we should not seek to assign blame about much if anything. When it comes to the disease of depression, we definitely should not assign blame. We should educate ourselves and be a supportive community to those who wrestle with this disease in all of its forms. We should also be supportive of important services such as personal counseling, group therapy, support groups, as well as medication if and when people need any or all of these things. Although we believe in the power of prayer and in the power of God and in the power of the Holy Spirit made manifest in the community of believers, we shouldn't simply assert that enough prayer or enough spiritual discipline will somehow completely address another's depression. If Jesus were here to exorcise our demons, perhaps I wouldn't endorse talk therapy so readily, but we've got to make good decisions in light of what Jesus did when he walked on the earth. When Jesus walked on the earth, Jesus healed other people's mental illnesses. Therefore we know that Jesus doesn't condemn others to suffer; Jesus is on the side of healing. Therefore we too should also be on the side of healing.

We should also know that untreated depression sometimes takes its toll. Sometimes that toll is suicide. Perhaps you were raised with the idea that suicide is an unforgivable sin. That's not true. The Bible speaks only of one unforgivable sin and that sin is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. There's no way to construe suicide as blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, therefore it's clear that biblically speaking, suicide isn't an unforgivable sin. Anyone who says differently is ill-informed or hard-hearted or both. As Charles Poole said "Suicide is a tragic choice." However, "God's grace is greater than our worst choices." That's what our sermon today is about. God's grace is greater than our worst choices.

My sermon title today comes from the title of a U2 song. U2 is a rock-n-roll band. They wrote this song after their friend, Michael Hutchence, killed himself in a hotel room. Michael Hutchence was their friend who was former lead singer of the Australian band INXS. I don't where I heard Bono talk about this song, but he said with genuine sensitivity that he believes that if his friend just could have gotten out of that moment, literally gotten out of that hotel room at that very time, that he would still be living. So they poured this idea and their hope into a song entitled "Stuck In a Moment That You Can't Get Out Of." This song encourages its listener:

And if the night runs over
And if the day won't last
And if your way should falter
Along the stony path
It's just a moment
This time will pass.

This time will pass. As the body of Christ who supports people who face hard times and heavy loads and difficult circumstances, we have something to say. We say this not as a cliché, but as ones who have access to the truth that God offers us. God's truth is our source of hope. Our source of hope is that if we wait on the Lord, he will renew our strength. We will mount up with wings like eagles. We will run and not grow weary. We will walk and not grow faint. If we wait. If we don't get stuck. If we allow the bad moment to pass.

Isaiah 40 is a passage like a fulcrum. In it the portrait of God in the book of Isaiah switches from vengeance and destruction to a God of repair, a God of renewal, a God of the future. This passage demarcates a pivotal historical time in Israel's story, a time in which they are in exile in Babylon.

Through poetic thunder and theological storm the poet Isaiah calls God's people from their exile back into their land of promise. In verse 27 we find Israel's complaint in exile: "My way is hidden from the Lord and my right is disregarded by my God." In other words they thought God had forgotten and had forsaken them. Through this beautiful, evocative poetic storm God's voice reminds God's chosen people "Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told to you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?" I'm in charge. I'm the one who looks at you from so far on high that you look like a bunch of grasshoppers running around. Although you on earth are a host of people, no big deal. I know your names. I even know the names of all the stars. Nobody compares to me. I'm your God. I created you. I never stopped creating.

Have you not known? Have you not heard?

The Lord is an everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.

God does not grow faint or grow weary;

his understanding is unsearchable.

He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.

Even youths will faint and be weary,

and the young will fall exhausted;

but those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength,

they shall mount up with wings like eagles,

they shall run and not be weary,

they shall walk and not faint.

Many of us who are here today are battle weary. There are too many bills and too much pressure and not enough time. Perhaps there's too much pressure at work or too much pressure to find work or too much pressure coming from the closest relationships in our life. We've all logged in our hours of worry and our restless nights. We've all fought too much with those we love. We've all lost something dear or precious to us. Most of us here today have cried out from the depths of our heart because the despair and lack of control in our lives suggest that God doesn't have a clue. Most of us have felt, at one time or another, as if God has abandoned us. During these times of spiritual exile we feel that we are our only resource and our own sense of resourcefulness and competence has failed. In our brains, even if we know that this time is temporary, and in our brains, even if we know that this time will pass, we feel stuck. Feeling stuck, being stuck is a very scary place. It's a godless place. It's a lonely place. From time to time, it's a tragic place.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, the God that I proclaim to you today is a God that doesn't abandon you in scary, godless, lonely, tragic places. God was in that dumpster with Chris. God was in that hotel room with Michael Hutchence. God is with us when there's not enough money in the bank. God is with us when the car falls apart at the worst time. God is with us when we feel trapped in our own despair. God is certainly with us when the thick fog of depression traps us into endless days and nights of no reprieve. We might be stuck, but God is always working, always creating, always finding answers, always providing a way out of cramped and lonely places. God's creative power spoke this world into being and God's creative power still speaks and still creates new solutions and new energy and new strength and new potential and new resolve every day. Even if we are stuck, God is not stuck and God is on our side.

So at these moments we're asked to do a hard thing. We're asked to wait. Not just wait as if we're standing in line at the bank or a cafeteria, but to wait on God. If there's a trick to this waiting, I don't know it because I am lousy at waiting on God. When I wait on God, often bad behavior ensues. I make smart remarks. I cry. I feel abandoned. I cry some more. I stop speaking to God. I shout at God, then shout some more. I can rage at God with the best of them when I am stuck and when I am convinced that God is stuck. Serenity is not my spiritual gift, but somehow, somehow each time I stick it out. That's my encouragement

{to you, too. Stick it out. Persevere. Rage and cry and pray and pout at God as much as you need to. God can take it if you must give it. But wait. Wait upon the Lord, whatever that means and however you choose to do it. Wait upon God and someday the bad moment is gone. At long last it's dawn. It's a true dawn, a true new day. You'll know that day because your strength is renewed. You'll know that day because you'll no longer feel old inside. You'll know that day because you'll find yourself smiling again, something that perhaps doesn't come that frequently. You'll know that day because you'll run and not grow weary. You'll walk and not grow faint.

Isaiah 40 and other passages like it can be lifesavers. When you can't pray, reach for it. When you can't stop the flow of tears, find it. Mark it in your Bibles at home so you don't have to think about where to find it. Isaiah 40 is ÷ not a substitute for proven modern methods to treat depression. Before we had therapy and before we had Wellbutrin, we had Isaiah. Isaiah had God. God's Word is powerful. God's Word is sustaining.

When it comes your time to be on the listening end of someone who is experiencing despair, come to the well of Isaiah 40. Come and drink. Share your drink with the parched soul of a person with heart trouble. This is the living water, the living water that we share. The living water that renews our strength. The living water that keeps us out of the dumpster or the hotel room or whatever place in which we've become stuck. Brothers and sisters in Christ, don't get stuck. Find help. Find professional help. Find a trustworthy community. Find ways to wait for God. One bad moment, one bad time, one bad stretch of desert seems daunting, but don't get stuck. Learn how to wait.

Once your particular wait is over, share your renewed strength with others who need you. In Jesus' strong and mighty name. Amen.

Charles Poole, *Is Life Fair: Good Words for Hard Times*. p. 21-22.

Ibid, p. 23.

Ibid, p. 23.