

Longing for God; Mental Health

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Preacher: Rev. Ben Roberts

[0 : 00] Hello, St. John's. Let me add my welcome today. My name is Ben Roberts. I'm a pastor here. It's a joy to hear from Psalm 27 as it speaks to our topic of mental health.

Mental health is deeply complex. It's often deeply painful. It's also incredibly important that we're candid about it as a church community. Addressing this as Christians is not to replace or diminish the gifts that good counselors or helpful medication may offer. It's also not an attempt to fix things with easy answers as if we could. Rather, this morning, we're turning to Psalm 27 and we're asking, how does the reality that God is with me in the midst of my struggle, how does that speak into our mental health? Because if, as David proclaims in Psalm 27, the Lord is our light and our salvation, that has the power to change how we understand ourselves, our emotions, and whatever it is that we may be facing. This promise of light shining into the worst anxiety and rescue reaching into the deepest despair, I think we all long for that right now. Distancing and disruption has not been kind to our mental health. Here in BC, alcohol sales have ballooned. We've seen more overdose deaths than ever before. Domestic abuse has surged. Calls to the battered women's support line went up 400% over March and April. Unemployment is over 12%. We wonder if we're next. Those are not just numbers. Those are people that are in pain and are struggling. We know this, I think, personally within our own networks as well. Many of us are having feelings of stress and anxiety and sadness that are either new or to a degree that we've never experienced before. Things are not okay. We're not doing well. And I think the author of our psalm, David, could relate. He spent years as a fugitive from a homicidal king. He was hounded by enemy troops. He was hungry and hiding. He was slandered and outnumbered. Later on in his life, his own son Absalom overthrew him and he drove him out of the capital. And then in the civil war that resulted, Absalom was killed to his father's horror. The pressure and the pain that are woven through David's life were enormous. So whatever the exact situation that Psalm 27 is addressing, whatever it was written into, it is dire. David describes it in verse 2 as cannibalism. Evil doers assail me to eat up my flesh. In verse 3, he speaks of being hopelessly outnumbered. Talks about an army encamping against him. And in verse 8, talks about character assassination. False witnesses have risen against me.

They breathe out violence. This is a prayer of someone who knows anxiety and depression and fear. And it's what makes his trust in God that much more striking. Who shall I fear? Of whom shall I be afraid? He asks in verse 1. He is clearly afraid and in need of help. Who wouldn't be? And yet he takes that fear and he lifts it up to God in trust and he holds the two together and he preaches into his fear. He preaches into it that he need not fear because of who God is, because this God is his. Psalm 27 begins with questions. David asking, whom shall I fear? Of whom shall I be afraid? But it ends with self-commands. Wait. Be strong. Take courage. And that journey from this place of question and fear deeper into faith is what we're going to examine today. So I'm going to highlight three different aspects of this journey that David is taking, this sermon that he's preaching to himself. And each of them is helpful as we think about mental health. So the first is longing, the second is honesty, and the third is dependence. Let's talk about longing.

[4 : 20] David's trust is built by his longing for God. Verse 4. One thing I have asked of the Lord, that I will seek after, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord, to inquire in his temple, for he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble. He will conceal me under the cover of his tent.

David speaks of the one thing he seeks. It's not the only thing, but it is the first thing, the primary thing. And surprisingly, the primary thing that he's seeking is not just a quick solution or a quick fix to the troubles that he's facing. His first priority is living in the Lord's house, the place of worship. It's gazing on God's beauty, inquiring after his guidance. Where the Lord is, is where David finds

sanctuary and stability. Being with the Lord is living in peace and security.

The Lord is who he longs for. Notice how he doesn't confuse the end with the means. So it's not, Lord, just fix this danger and this anxiety right now. I'm in pain. Do something. Rather, he's saying, Lord, if I'm with you, no danger or anxiety can triumph.

We are often guilty of seeking the means from God. We seek a band-aid rather than the remedy. We want financial security and control. We want to know that we are valuable and loved, to experience peace and satisfaction and joy. And in our brokenness and in our sin, we grab after those things in harmful ways. And there's often very destructive things that result from that. What David articulates is often what we want, what feels the most immediate, is a pale reflection of what we truly need. It's not wrong to desire love and safety and peace, but those desires can only ultimately be fulfilled by the Lord.

To be with the Lord is what we are created for. We will never be satisfied with anything less. And those desires that we have in our hearts, they were put there by God, for God. God is the target of our love and our source of security in life. So, if mental illness is this inward, blinding fixation on these many desires and needs and fears that we might have, mental health is this outward gazing on the truth. It's turning our gaze upon the Lord. It's looking upon Him. The Lord is my light. It's beyond what we feel. It's trusting that help doesn't come from in here, but in Him. The Lord is my salvation. Here's an example for you.

[7:13] We never let our kids eat dessert before dinner. Now, through the years, we've tried to trick them. Dessert is not actually very good. You're not going to enjoy it. We've tried to reason with them. You can eat dessert first, but only if you finish your plate after. Neither of those tactics have ever worked, not surprisingly. So, now we say, first, eat your dinner. And what we do is we lay out a spread, a really good spread, something that fills them up with protein and fiber and vitamins and minerals, all the things that they need to flourish to grow strong and healthy. And I'm not even making this up. By the time we get to dessert, they often don't even finish it. Because despite their desires, their longing to have something sugary, their needs have already been satisfied, which is actually the deepest desire of their hearts.

Friends, many desires and anxieties would rule us, especially in a time like this. But the harder that we chase after those things, the less they satisfy. So, prioritize the one thing.

Feast on the fat and the marrow. Devour God's Word. Fill yourself with prayer. Feed on Christ in your heart by faith with thanksgiving. And find that he has food you didn't know about. It's only as we seek after the one thing that we will be filled in all things. David's trust is built by his longing. Second, David's trust is built by his honesty. This psalm models emotional vulnerability. It's an invitation to honesty. And it shows us that God is not asking for a stiff upper lip from us. He's not asking us to wait to pray until we can massage the messaging and make it perfect. David shows us the way. Look at verse 7.

Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud. Be gracious to me and answer me. God, please listen and help. Verse 8, you have said, seek my face. My heart says to you, your face, Lord, do I seek. You've commanded me to bring myself to you along with my problems and my fears and my desires. So here I am.

[9:29] This is the state that I am. This is who I am right now. Verse 9, hide not your face from me. Turn not your servant away in anger. O you who have been my help, cast me not off, forsake me not, O God of my salvation.

What's he saying here? He's saying, don't abandon me. I'm afraid that you might. Don't be angry. I'm afraid that you are. Even though you've helped me in the past, I'm afraid this time is different. Don't forsake me. I feel alone. Don't throw me off as worthless.

I can't help myself. I need you. Verse 10, for my father and my mother have forsaken me, but the Lord will take me in.

Family and parents are the people that are most likely to have our good in mind. They're the people that are supposed to be in our corner no matter what. But even if they forsake me, even if they shut the door in my face, I can still find my home in you, Lord. I don't know if you noticed this, but this whole psalm is this dance between fear and faith. And so we have it here, right? Verse 9, fear, anxiety. These are the things that I'm feeling. Verse 10, faith. Here's the truth of the situation. Even if my own parents abandoned me, you will take me in, Lord. That's your promise to your people. In terms of practical application for us, we may fear to question God, to express our doubts and our fears, as if tugging on that thread might just unravel everything. But to come to God with honesty

and vulnerability is the first act of faith. It is the first step in any real relationship, actually, isn't it? To bring your actual self. David said he wants to dwell. He wants to make a home in God's house. Robert Frost once wrote, home is the place where when you have to go there, they have to take you in. Something you somehow haven't to deserve. God's invitation to seek my face, coupled with David's honesty, have made God's house into a home. More reliable than his father or mother, the Lord has a place that will always take him in. Along with his fear and anxiety and disappointment and despair and doubt, all the things that he's feeling in whatever he's facing, he will never be turned away from the Lord who has become his home.

If we flip it around the other way and think about it, to bring fake prayers or pretend that your faith is fearless and your life is trouble-free, well, if you do that, you've actually made yourself homeless. When we pretend we don't erase struggle, we simply displace it to somewhere else. And when we feel alone and we're in need and we're in pain and we don't bring it to God and we don't bring it to other people, what are we going to do? Well, all the things that people have been doing during COVID, right, with this pain and anxiety that we're feeling, we'll drink just to take the edge off.

[12:49] We'll be glued to our phones, scrolling through the news or something just to completely distract ourselves from what's going on. We'll use pornography. We'll try to fill a need for love and connection with it. We obsess over body image or try to fix ourselves in other ways.

You know what it is for you. But we should ask this, what if it is the case that in this pandemic, in this time of disruption, God has actually presented an opportunity for us to ask some really brave questions. In what way have I tried to fill my need for the one thing with other things?

If this is the truth, if this is who God is, and I've been not living on the basis of that, what is the lie that I've been believing instead or the lies that I've been holding onto instead?

Once we begin to wrestle with those things, we bring those things to God. We find a friend to listen to us, to pray for us. Perhaps we pursue clinical help as well.

All of it starts with honesty about who we are and our willingness to bring who we are before God and before others. David's trust is built by honesty and so is ours.

[14:13] Finally, David's trust is built through dependence. He knows he can't solve it himself.

That's an important thing to know. He depends on God, the one who can save. Verse 11, teach me your way, O Lord. Lead me on a level path because of my enemies.

Dependence allows us to be taught and led in God's way. It's a disposition. It's humility. And when we're led in God's way from this place of humility, it's as if the path forward, the next step is just straight and flat. Even though this trail might be an absolute death trap filled with obstacles and terror, when we follow God's way, when we depend on him and put ourselves before him, it becomes like a highway. Verse 12, give me not up to the will of my adversaries. I'm in your hands. Without your help, they'll get their way. One of our favorite phrases at home when we're facing something difficult, a situation that we don't know how to solve, is we tell each other, you just need to sit in the ambiguity on this one. We're just sitting into the ambiguity.

And it's looking at a situation and saying, I don't know how to solve this. I don't know how it will resolve. And so the only thing that I can do, the right thing to do, is to wait on the one who does.

And this is actually difficult. It sounds basic, but it's very difficult because rather than acting in response to the pain and just whatever bad feelings I'm feeling or whatever's happening, just trying to force this resolution to happen or things to change. It's actually the discipline of placing those things in God's hands. It's choosing dependence as David does, lifting those things up to him.

Verse 13, I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord. As we've seen here, longing and honesty and dependence are the road to trust that David takes. And what began as a question ends with this declaration, David's sermon to his soul, God will show me goodness, even in this. He is my longing and my home and my Savior. Therefore, wait on him. Be strong. Let your heart take courage. This is the sermon David can preach to his own soul.

[16:55] This is David's self-talk, right? So just consider the sermon that you and I can preach to our souls as we face similar things to David and as we look to Jesus, our Savior.

I regularly do this. I regularly preach sermons to myself and we need it. We need to hear the gospel over and over and we need to rehearse it in our minds and our lives. So think about some of the elements of that sermon that you might preach to yourself as you're facing something difficult.

Because rather than be apart from us, God has given his own son, Jesus, to die for us. Just as we long for him, our ultimate longing is for God. Well, God longs for us and he made a way for us to be

with him. In Jesus, God looks on us. He sees us as valuable and lovely and precious beyond our situation or our feelings or whatever we've accomplished. God treasures us as his children through his son. Jesus goes to prepare a home for us in heaven. Jesus promised never to forsake us, never to leave us, but that he was going to finish the good work that he started within us, working all things for good for those who trust in him and love him.

Those are some of the pieces of the sermon that I've preached to my soul this week. Into fear, into anxiety, into depression, and all the rest of the things that we're facing in these days.

Because whatever we face and whatever we fear, the Lord is with us. He is our light and our salvation. Amen.