

My Only Friend

“Hello darkness, my old friend
I've come to talk with you again
Because a vision softly creeping
Left its seeds while I was sleeping
And the vision that was planted in my brain
Still remains
Within the sound of silence”

Powerful words that represent a much bigger pandemic- bigger even than covid. This song is a powerful representation of the very crisis we as a world are walking through. It doesn't matter if you have a relationship with Jesus or not, it doesn't matter if you attend NHCC or another church, we're all fighting the crisis of mental health.

Hello darkness! I'm coming back to you!

We just heard in detail what many of us believe, especially during this time of year: and that is darkness is the only true friend we have. Depression is the only friend I have.

Anxiety is the only friend I have. We're in a battle for mental health, and it's becoming more and more difficult to process this thing called life, and even less so given the holidays. It's difficult to process because many of us are in such deep crisis emotionally and mentally that we TRULY believe that the only consistent partner we have is darkness. We downplay how important other people are in our lives, and we especially downplay the value God puts on us as created children of God.

We just finished a terrific series, where Rick discussed how at its root LOVE is GREATER THAN EVERYTHING:

If we can learn to love others, our lives will improve. We discussed why that is and how valuable love is to others, and over the course of the series we defined what TRUE love is.

We learned how to love as a leader, and how Jesus showed love through servant leadership, and how we have the responsibility to love others, even our enemies.

(Now I listened to the last few weeks, and was able to process ALMOST all of it, with the exception of loving your enemies.... Still working on that one.

I prefer the analogy Rick used, which was singing a song about running them over with a truck.... Did I miss read that illustration? I think I missed the point.)

HOWEVER, there is a flaw in the process, an inherent missing piece to this idea of loving others. And no, the flaw isn't in the biblical approach, and no, it wasn't in Ricks sermon or delivery.

The roadblock to loving everyone is this: when a lack of emotional and mental health rocks us to our very core, it becomes nearly impossible to love others, or even love ourselves. Healthy mental health is defined as "a strong condition and regard to the well-being of self and those around us."

Over the last few years, we've seen a steady decline in the emotional well-being of our families, our coworkers, our spouses, and even in our own children.

As of 6 months ago, the call activity of Kansas City student suicide and self-harm call centers have gone up an astounding 600%. Families are being told to wait MONTHS just to talk to someone about their mental health. I was talking to a military friend of mine, and they said since COVID began, the emotional health has been

going down at such a devastating level that 5 of the sergeants in their program have taken their own lives. We are at war with mental health...

And this isn't the first crisis of personal health and emotional wellbeing we've seen! If we look to scripture, we find almost half of the Psalms that were written in the Old Testament in the book of Psalms were expressions of lament. Of sadness. Of being overwhelmed.

We see a prime example of this in Psalm 40. The author David, the giant slayer, and King of Israel, is going through a crisis. He begins by talking about how good the Lord is and wise are those that listen to His instructions:

"Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord."

"Many, Lord my God, are the wonders you have done!"

But then it gets dark. David then covers where his mental state is by observing EXACTLY what the darkness wants him to see.

"Troubles WITHOUT number surround me; my sins have overtaken me, and I cannot see. They are more than the hairs on my head."

In this moment it seems that God is no longer his ally, his protector, his friend: darkness is now the one whispering in his ear.

And to sail the point home, the author of Psalm 88 even ENDS their psalm with the words we heard a few times this morning:

“Darkness is my CLOSEST friend.”

If David or the author of psalms 88 weren't depressed, they certainly knew what it felt like. It sounds like they're in the middle fighting against the very enemy we're fighting today.

Many of us this morning knows what this feels like. Many of us feel there couldn't possibly be anything positive that comes out of this season, and we turn to darkness as that's seemingly all we know.

Although we all struggle, we each call it something different. As I was preparing for this morning I was talking with Shannon and Rick, and Shannon mentioned her

small group has a name for when someone is down, or in crisis. They call it “The black dog” or the “emotional flu.”

And I bet others of you could relate to this; we must realize the whole world is dealing with the same mutual mess, the same crisis...

BUT there is good news.

This morning we're not going to define mental health or talk about ways to avoid or prevent it. Each situation is particular to each person, and I don't want to take away from someone's experience.

Rather, I want us to mutually come to the realization that darkness isn't our only companion this Christmas, and that darkness isn't the voice we have to listen to.

Earlier, we listened to David's words, and how he expressed how he saw no end to the troubles surrounding him, but let's look at the verses after:

“May all those that SEEK you rejoice and be glad in You; may those that seek your help say, “the Lord is good!”

We may not always see it, but there is light at the end of the crisis. There is hope to be found.

You see, your darkness, your big black dog, tries to lie to you and tell you you're alone and the only one fighting for emotional strength. It tries to tell you that you have no one, and this is all your fault.

That it's due to your sin that you're being punished and left alone. Many believe they're depressed or overwhelmed or anxious because they have a lack of faith in God, and that simply isn't true! That's darkness talking all over again!

Darkness tries to rent a room in your head, and many of us allow it to live there rent free, but I'm here to encourage us to **WAKE UP** and pursue the hope Jesus gave us!

This morning I want to highlight 3 friendships that must be pursued to beat back the darkness that threatens to choke the light from our lives, and from this season.

But before we discuss this, there must be an understanding that many often miss: these friendships must be pursued. They must be chased after and approached, and as hard as that is to hear we must be willing to FIGHT, and FIGHT HARD for these friendships.

Our 1st best friend this season is truth.

If you're in this room or watching online, you will have to grit your teeth while you hear this, but to be helped you need to open up to YOURSELF and to others in saying you need help. You're NOT ok, and that's ok, because it starts with asking yourself the hard, and often painful questions. The problem is, we often approach this in the same way people look at personal break ins, or identity theft, or other tragedies:

"I never thought it would happen to me."

"I never thought I'd need help."

"It's ok that I'm giving advice because I'll NEVER deal with depression or self-doubt. I'll never struggle with loving myself or hating the holidays. It'll NEVER happen to me."

I know I told myself that. As a pastor I've spent almost half my life taking care of other people, but what I didn't know was darkness, that big, dark, shaggy dog, was lying in wait, then at the worst possible moment, he chose to pounce.

I haven't discussed my previous pastoral job very often, and certainly not on a Sunday morning, but while working at my previous church I developed severe anxiety and self-doubt. I was very emotionally and spiritually abused and was in an overall terrible place mentally. I would often come home in tears, feeling so lost, and feeling ripped and torn as they broke me down; The darkness had moved in.

When Morgan and I parted ways with this church I thought the hard part was over. Although covid was rearing its ugly head, we were hopeful. And when we signed on to work here at NHCC, I believed the darkness was gone, when little did I know; the darkness followed me...

I tried to tell myself and the staff around me I was ok and didn't need to talk to anyone about my experiences, even when they offered to help me find someone to talk to. The staff wanted to help, but I kept lying to myself.

It wasn't until I realized how NOT OK I was before I came to Micah on a Sunday morning and simply said, "I'm not ok, and I need help."

And now after almost 2 years of counseling and conversations I'm still fighting to rid myself of this emotional flu; I'm still dealing with that darkness and the trauma that place caused me (I still can't walk into Rick or Micah's office without my stomach tightening in knots as it reminds me of the awful moments I spent at that church), but overall, the truth has won out in my life, and the healing can now begin.

The author of Psalm 88 even shows us that constantly dealing with the darkness is a part of the journey to a better understanding of Jesus. It says "I call out to you Lord EVERY DAY! I spread out my hands to You!"

I'm going to have to fight the temptation of allowing darkness back into my life every day. Some of us will have to fight mental health every day. Many of us will have to commit to the truth every day, spreading our hands wide and saying, Lord, take care of me, because I'm not ok!"

A few years ago, Rick preached on a similar topic: he taught that God has instructed us to control our minds by being proactive instead of reactive when it comes to pursuing the truth: Well, the proactive truth is I can't do life alone!

North Heartland, listen to me: I'm not ok! But that's ok!

In fact, let's say it together. Repeat after me:

"I'm not ok, and that's ok!"

See? We're a third of the way there already! We all have a new best friend! And now we're ready to welcome our new best friend. First, we have the truth, and now we have our new voice: community to help us walk through the truth!

Look to your left.... Now look to your right. You now have a hundred new people looking out for you! **THIS IS YOUR NEW COMMUNITY!** We must not only tell ourselves the truth, but also be willing to be vulnerable within a people group that will love, support, and care of us.

In a recent Gallup study performed by dozens of health care professionals, they observed the correlation between church attendance and self-evaluation of one's mental

health. Studies have shown that those not actively attending a church or other community-based groups have seen a drastic drop in mental and emotional health, with 46% of non-church attending Christians having seen their mental state fall from “good” or “fair” to “poor.” Experts have advised Christians to stand by one another as we deal with covid or other emotionally draining issues.

We’re designed to be in community with each other, and God created us to be there for one another. Paul even had the wisdom of the Holy Spirit to advise about this very issue in 1 Cor chapter 1.

1 Corinthians 1:10

“I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought.”

We as a community are responsible to one another. We’re called to be there for each other and carry each other’s burdens. Speaking of this, if you’re in this room, and the holidays are especially hard due to the loss of a loved one, I want to invite you to attend an event we hold every year here at NHCC called “Grieving through the holidays”.

This is a time where we can be amongst others whose holiday is a little darker while gaining support from a mental health professional. Our first session is Monday, December 6th at 7PM. If you can, we strongly encourage that you make time to be there if you need it. Let this group be that community you need.

But if that's not the group you relate with, I wanted to spend the next few minutes of our time together hearing from 3 people who are pivotal parts of our community here at NHCC. Would you give them a round of applause as they come up?

This is Kristi, Jason, and Joseph, three members of NHCC who have called this church their home for quite some time now. They represent the communities we have here at church, from coordinating our middle school students to assisting on our arts team and running a small group.

I wanted to spend a few minutes asking about your personal experiences with mental health, and maybe help to bring clarity for others who may have similar questions regard their emotional and spiritual health.

- After hearing the song we played at the beginning of the sermon, can you relate to the song lyric, "Hello

darkness my old friend?” What comes to mind when you hear that?

- What has been your biggest “Black Dog” this to season?

- How has NHCC helped you through the last few years?

- What advice would you give to those who don’t feel they need to talk about their emotional or mental health?

- Any final comments to families out there who are walking through this mental health crisis?

When I hear my friends, my teammates talking about what God has done in their lives, it gives assurance to me that there still is a light to be found. It may seem small, the final best friend we should all have this season is hope.

Being around people like Kristi, Jason, and Joseph gives me HOPE; an assurance that God is still guiding my life. Now, some of us in this room may be allowing the darkness in our life to snuff out that hope. But even though that light, that little candle, may be seemingly small, we can be assured it's never going out.

“Happiness, or in this case hope, can be found, even in the darkest of times, if one remembers to turn on the light.”

My of my very favorite worship songs says it best:

“My hope is built on NOTHING LESS than Jesus blood and righteousness.”

Some of us this morning may need to be in search of that hope. Some of us may need to tell ourselves the truth that we need that hope, and others of us may need the help of a community to help us FIND that hope.

I know some of you in this room or online haven't made the decision to allow Jesus into your life, and that's ok; I do challenge you to meditate and ponder what has been said this morning. And if you're in this room or watching online, and you've lost that hope this year, or if that darkness has tried to extinguish your emotional health, I challenge you to sing this as a declaration that the darkness has no hold on you!

You're not alone anymore....

Darkness is no longer your friend....