Dr. E. L. Kersten, Despair Inc.’s founder and COO, lays out his company’s core value: “Whether you’re a pessimist, an underachiever or a chronic failure, I personally offer my unconditional guarantee that DemotivatorsTM will truly inspire you to new lows!”

Despair, Inc. taps into the truth that all of us know and few of us want to admit: life is hard and suffering is a grim reality of the human condition. No amount of wealth, no measure of security, and no low-fat-oat-bran-fueled diet can defend us against illness and eventual death. Good or bad, rich or poor, conflict and calamity are just a word, a mistake, an accident, or an illness away. Depressing? Exactly! While it makes for humorous office art, despair and suffering can be debilitating, fading our view of life to pitch-black.

This is where the psalmist finds himself: in deep trouble, surrounded by enemies, broken in body and spirit. He cries out for help, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (22:1). Amid pain and impending death, the writer seeks the intimacy of a relationship with God, but God seems “so far from helping.” He remembers how God helped others (vv. 4-5), but surrounded, tortured and almost dead, the Psalmist hears the sarcastic taunts of his enemies ringing in his ears. “He trusts in the LORD; let the LORD rescue him” (v. 8 NIV). No wonder the psalmist asks, “Why?”

A few years ago, Glenn Chambers boarded a plane bound for Quito, Ecuador, to begin his ministry in missionary broadcasting. But he never arrived. In a horrible moment, the plane carrying Chambers crashed into a mountain peak and spiraled downward. Before leaving the Miami airport, Chambers wrote his mother a letter. All he could find for stationery was a page of advertising upon which was written the single word “WHY?” Around that word he hastily scribbled a final note. After Chambers’ mother learned of her son’s death, his letter arrived. She opened the envelope, took out the paper and unfolded it. Staring her in the face was the question “WHY?”

We want to know the “why?” Why do we suffer? What is the rationale, the divine purpose? Even though we cry out for answers, often God does not answer the why. But that does not mean God is silent. For, as C. S. Lewis observed, “What God whispers to us in our pleasure, he shouts to us in our pain.” And God is shouting is “Here I am!” Amid disease, destruction, despair, and death, the psalmist discovers that God responds, not with theology (the study of God’s nature) or theodicy (the answer to why God permits evil), but with *theophany*, with God’s very presence. The answer to the pain of suffering and despair is not a “why” or a “what,” but a “WHO.”

The Psalm’s tone changes in verse 21b: “From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me.” In Hebrew, “rescued” can also mean “answered.” The Psalmist’s cry is heard, and God’s answer is not *beyond* the suffering of the psalmist, but *amid* his suffering. The Psalmist’s tune changes from woeful lament to jubilant praise when he realizes that wherever people suffer, God is there among them. “For [God] did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; [God] did not hide his face from me but heard when I cried to him” (v. 24).

Assured of God’s presence in his suffering, the psalmist turns to address the affliction of others. He sets a feast for those who are similarly afflicted. He celebrates the light of new life that breaks through the darkness of death. “May your hearts live forever!” (v. 26), he shouts. It is God’s presence in our pain that enables life and joy and hope to break in at the broken points and overpower despair. That is why this psalm is so significant in the passion of Jesus.

In the ancient world, quoting the first line of a passage was as good as quoting the whole thing. When the crucified Jesus cries out, “My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?” it is not a cry of abandonment, but an affirmation of faith. Even in the agony of death on a cross, Jesus puts his trust in a God who does not “despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted” but who hears their cries of pain and praise and draws ever nearer. Assured of God’s presence amid his suffering, Jesus sees his own suffering and death as a source of life for all who suffer and despair.

The psalter gave Jesus a language for despair, metaphors to describe what it meant to feel poured out on the ground, melted down like a blob of wax, dried up like a broken clay fragment. The texts on his lips were already ancient when Jesus learned them in his youth; a mother tongue shared with countless generations before him. Nonetheless, like all true poetry, the Psalms seem to be newly minted, disarming, to be an utterance that comes straight from the gut as well as from the heart. When we come to the end of our rope and decide to hope against all the odds, we remember the Rock who is our sure foundation: “For I shall again praise him, my help and my God.” The Psalms give us a way to howl through our pain and a way to shout hopeful praise, permission to bewail the darkness and permission to hold on to a vision of light.

We are called to see our suffering in the same light, as a means of grace whereby we receive the assurance of God’s presence and represent God’s presence to others in distress. “We do not know where we will be two, 10, or 20 years from now,” wrote Henri Nouwen. “What we can know, however, is that man suffers and that a sharing of suffering can make us move forward...in the conviction that the full liberation of man and his world is still to come.”

The repair for despair is not gallows humor or wallowing in the whys and wherefores of suffering. The repair for despair is drawing closer to God and closer to others who suffer. In doing so, we see fear give way to hope. Perhaps Paul put it best: “Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s” (Romans 14:8). That is a motivational slogan for any millennium.

Prayer: Creating God, we praise you for your word which called the universe into being; and for your spirit which breathed life into your human creation, made in your image. We praise you that in your love, you seek to embrace us in our brokenness; that while your only Son was handed over to death, you raised him to life, a new creation by which you recreate each of us as we believe in hope and accept in faith. Source of life, Word of life, Breath of life, we worship you. Amen.

Sources:

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**Despair Repair**

Sunday, October 10, 2021 Psalm 22

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Motivational icons. Every decade has one. In the ’70s, a smiley face entreated us to “Have a nice day.” In the ’80s, we sang, “Don’t Worry, Be Happy” with a smiling Bobby McFerrin. In the ’90s we were admonished to “Just Do It.”

But here in the first two decades of the 21st century, motivation seems harder to market. Terror strikes, a volatile stock market, a pandemic, political divisiveness, racial unrest, and natural disasters put a real crimp in the motivational marketing pipeline. Snappy jingles and yellow smileys cannot compete against orange alerts, red states and blue states, or pink slips.

Recognizing this trend, Despair, Inc. offers products for the times in which we live, cornering the market in pragmatic pessimism. While some companies peddle pithy motivational materials, Despair, Inc. markets a line of “demotivational” products, all designed to feed the collective angst of a depressed populace. There is the Pessimist’s MugTM, a glass mug with a line in the middle that says, “This cup is half-empty.” There is BitterSweetTM candy: valentine-style candy hearts with messages like, “Call a shrink,” or “Up yer dosage” or “Find the door?” Then there is the FrownyTM, a Despair-trademarked emoticon that appears on everything from T-shirts to hats.

The centerpiece of the Despair, Inc. product line is the collection of beautiful photos with a depressing twist. On the photo of a sunken ship is the message: “MISTAKES: It could be that the purpose of your life is only to serve as a warning to others.” On the photo of a lightning storm, it says: “PESSIMISM: Every cloud has a silver lining, but lightning kills hundreds of people each year who are trying to find it.” On the photo of a tree bent by the wind: “ADVERSITY: That which does not kill me postpones the inevitable.” On the photo of a dark sunset: “DESPAIR: It’s always darkest just before it goes pitch-black.”