

GOT THE BLUES

Psalm 13:1-4, 16:5-11; John 21:1-14

Danny Massie

First Presbyterian Church
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“Got the blues!” that’s not an expression often heard today but my mother-in-law used it all the time when she was upset about something. My wife hated it when she was growing up because she thought her mother was being sacrilegious and was using the Lord’s name in vain. But no, her mother was not saying God but rather GOT! “Got the blues.”

Maybe that expression didn’t migrate over to North Carolina from Mississippi, but I can assure you that any person from Mississippi would be quite familiar with the blues as either a musical genre or a feeling of melancholy or depression, Mississippi is, as you may know, the birthplace of the blues. Alabama has the Robert Trent Jones Golf Trail, twenty-six golf courses at eleven different sites for golf enthusiasts. And South Carolina has its Gullah/Geechee cultural Heritage Corridor, North Carolina has its Tobacco Road Rivalry in college basketball, but the Mississippi delta has the Mississippi Blues Trail which visits various juke joints and historic sites where scores of legendary blues musicians and singers gave the world this distinctive sound that has influenced most other musical genres since the nineteenth century, but especially gospel, country, rock and roll, and soul. Of course, you don’t have to be from Mississippi nor do you have to be a slave on one of the plantations in the delta to know about the blues or to experience the blues. The blues are a universal phenomenon.

The blues speak of misfortune, regret, betrayal, heartache, disappointment. You lose your job. Your mate leaves you. Your dog dies. Your crops fail. Your hopes are crushed. And then it is, you “Got the blues!”

Who of us hasn’t known times of frustration, disappointment, and depression, seasons of sadness, even despair? These mood shifts are prompted by body chemistry, by a change in life circumstances, even by a change in the weather.

In the midst of winter, we often hear about or even experience what is called Seasonal Affective Disorder, better known as SAD. Apparently, this condition is brought on by diminishing daylight and the increasing absence of sunshine and warmth. But not everyone is

so affected and not everyone succumbs to the blahs and blues of wintertime. Skiers, outdoorsmen, hunters are often energized and invigorated by winter's arrival and associate it with joy and excitement.

Now I have a confession: I too, suffer from Seasonal Affective Disorder of a different sort. But I must tell you that we have just entered the season of my personal sadness. Oh, I know, it is an occupational hazard for the clergy but that does not change the fact that I happen to be seasonally affected and disordered each year right after Easter. This is when we clergy-types get the blues and the blahs. How so? Well, I'll tell you. No, better yet, I'll sing about it. It's not really the blues unless you have a sad song that expresses its.

*I got the post-Resurrection, baby, predestined Low Sunday blues,
And if you ain't got 'em, son, I sure hope that you never do!
The palms are all wilted, the lilies are brown.
The pews are near empty, and the offering is down.
I got the post-Resurrection, baby, predestined Low Sunday blues.*

Low Sunday, as it is aptly called, the Sunday following Easter, is enough to cast any preacher into a bout of depression. Last week there were one thousand two hundred eighty-one joyous worshippers packed into three services, singing triumphant songs and listening to the organ at full stop. It took a while, I'm sure, to count the offering. There were many more people, much more joy, more of everything exciting and hopeful than you would see on a typical Sunday at church. And each year, despite my experience from previous years, I delude myself into thinking that they will all be back, that they will continue their joy, their giving, their singing, their vibrant worship. Don't they realize each Sunday is to be a mini-Easter? I identify with Charlie Brown of Peanuts' fame. I start to think that this is the year that Lucy will hold the ball and allow me to kick it. But Lucy always moves the ball and the Easter throngs always disappear and invariably depression sets in once again.

That is why ordinarily I have tried to go away the week after Easter. I let someone else preach on this particular Sunday. I do what the Apostle Peter did in our morning lesson. Left dazzled, puzzled, and depressed by his Lord's death and his rumored resurrection. Peter simply hung a sign out saying, "Gone Fishin'!" and slipped out of town to get away from it all.

And often in our depression we are not unlike the psalmist David, who in *Psalm 13*, which was read as our Old Testament lesson this morning, laments his life and vents his despair and disappointment. He asks God if he has forgotten him, if he has hidden his face from him.

He inquires as to how long he must remain in pain and sorrow and bemoans that his enemy has been exalted over him. He calls on the Lord to answer his complaint.

And yet, if you look ahead and read *Psalm 16*, you will find that this same David is rejoicing in the pleasures and joys and goodness of life and affirming a faith that is radically different. In *Psalm 16*, David confesses how pleasant life is, how he has gladness and joy within his soul, how he feels secure and has known the blessing and guidance of God.

And so, for you, for me, for King David, and the Apostle Peter, life is replete with moments of exhilaration and despair, of pleasure and pain, of cheerfulness and depression. And bearing all this in mind I would like to reflect with you for a few moments today how we might better cope, not simply with what we call the “Low Sunday Blues,” but more intentionally with those seasons of depression and discouragement that we all experience in various seasons of life and to various degrees. None of us and none of our loved ones, none of our friends or colleagues at work is immune to depression.

For definition’s sake, let us say that depression is a mild or intense experience of sadness, of pessimism, of apathy or even-condemnation. It may be marked by feelings of unworthiness, frustration or despair. It may be accompanied by insomnia, guilt, anger, restlessness, or even inability to get out of bed and accomplish anything productive. In extreme cases, it may even be marked by thoughts of suicide.

I can justify consideration of this subject from the pulpit on this Sunday not simply because it is Low Sunday, but because I have known depression among my own family members, and to some extent in my own soul, and because the Apostle Paul has instructed us to “bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.” (*Galatians 6:2*) Surely one of the burdens we can help one another bear is depression. And therefore, it would be helpful if we were better able to recognize it and deal with it in both ourselves and others. So, let me offer you a few simple observations for what they are worth.

Perhaps, to begin with, we may need to recognize and acknowledge how persuasive clinical depression is in contemporary society. Even this might help us diminish the social stigma so often attached to depression and other mental illnesses. I am encouraged that celebrities in recent months, celebrities like Selena Gomez, Justin Bieber and Britney Spears have been willing to share publicly their own struggles with these issues.

Young adults are certainly not immune to depressive episodes. My little college alma mater wrote to alumni two years ago asking support for more counselors on staff for students.

Some of their supporting data shared with us was that twenty-five percent of young adults between eighteen and twenty-four have a diagnosable mental illness that would be three hundred students in our student body of twelve-hundred. Of that twenty-five percent, seventy-three percent (two hundred twenty) would experience a mental health breakdown during their undergraduate years. And sadly, more than a third of these students would never seek help with their struggles and maladies. So first, let us simply realize that we are not alone in our depression and have much company.

Secondly, we need to remind ourselves and others that our seasons of sadness and our times of depression are temporary, even as are our seasons of joy and exhilaration. Indeed, life is a mixture of both, is it not, and it is helpful in both the good times and the bad to acknowledge their impermanence so that we are not caught off guard, when the seasons invariably change.

After King David pours out his lamentations and grief in *Psalms 13*, he concludes by saying: “But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me.” Notice that he speaks both in the past tense and in the future tense. As David realizes that God has blessed him and delivered him in the past, so he becomes aware that his future will be different. Occasionally one cure for spiritual depression may simply be a conscious remembrance of past mercies for they produce within us hope for future blessings.

In a third sense, I believe one of the most helpful things a depressed person can do is simply admit his or her depression to one’s self first, but also to others. It does little good to deny or hide our feelings. And yet we do so often because we may falsely assume as people of faith that Christians should not be depressed and that this is somehow a sign of personal inadequacy or spiritual immaturity. But if you read your Bible carefully, you will find that this is not the case. David, Jeremiah, Elijah, Job — all persons of great faith, went through times of personal anguish and depression. Even our Lord said to his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane: “My soul is deeply sorrowful” (KJV) or “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me” (NRSV.) And then he pleads to his Father that the cup of suffering might pass from him. I am persuaded that when our depression is recognized it ought to be acknowledged and confessed, especially with those who can help us bear this burden.

I furthermore, believe that depressed people ought to be allowed, even encouraged, to express their emotions and to vent their feelings, so long as they are doing no personal harm to themselves or to others. If they feel like crying, they ought to cry. The Lord gave us tear glands for a reason. If they feel like screaming, then they ought to close windows, shut the doors, and

have at it. Some depressed people need the liberty every once in a while, to do something a little crazy.

I heard of one couple, both of whom were in a down mood at the same time, which if you're married can be a deadly thing as you well know. They were living under a lot of stress and pressure and in the midst of all this anxiety a horrible fight broke out between them. The wife suddenly flew into a rage. In her madness, she picked up a glass vase and smashed it in the middle of the kitchen floor. The husband stared furiously into her eyes without saying a word. The room was filled with tension. Then slowly the husband handed her a quart jar of mayonnaise. Smash! Again, in the middle of the floor. A smile slowly began to appear on his face as he handed next a jar of peanut butter. Smash! Then came the pickles and the jelly and the olives and by the sixth Smash! Both the husband and the wife were collapsed on the couch in the den laughing hysterically — pent up anxiety and frustration lying in the midst of the kitchen floor amid all the debris. What the husband was wisely able to do was simply to allow his wife the freedom to vent her feelings in what was a harmless, though admittedly messy fashion.

In addition, I think we all need to realize that generous doses of patient love can be a real tonic in the midst of depression. Of course, depressed people are usually the hardest to love, right? And it is especially hard to love them when they're taking their depression out on themselves or on others and may even direct their anger and hostility toward you. Sometimes depressed people treat their families and their dearest friends worst of all, and yet, if you really want to help someone in bearing this burden of depression, your loyalty and your love may even require of you, that you allow the person to hate you for a while, if necessary.

Something else I have learned in dealing with depression and would recommend to any of you who are helping others to bear this burden is that you remember the therapy of touch. We may not always know the right words to say to a person who is down and may even fear that we could say the wrong thing, but a hug or a clasp of the hand almost always communicates concern and expresses our desire to be helpful and supportive. I have been both the recipient and the dispenser of this kind of therapy and I know what that has meant to me and to others. I have seen the therapy of touch at work, in the hospital, and in the funeral home. What you may not be able to express with your words can certainly be communicated with an embrace or a hug.

And isn't it intriguing to read how often people reached out to touch Jesus, like the women who touched the hem of his garment, and how often Jesus himself reached out to touch them in the course of his ministry? He dared even to touch lepers, who were completely

shunned by others. Most religious people would not even come near a leper, but Jesus touched them and in so doing communicated far more than what could have been expressed in words alone. One anonymous poet has expressed it this way:

*It's the human touch in this world that counts,
The touch of your hand and mine
That means far more to the fainting soul
Than shelter or bread or wine.
For shelter is o'er when the night is gone,
And bread lasts only a day,
But the touch of a hand and the sound of a voice
Live on in the soul always.*

Finally, because depressed people often find themselves lethargic and without energy or ambition, I believe they should be encouraged to engage in some kind of simple, physical activity, preferably the kind where results are self-evident. I mentioned recently in a sermon the plaque and other crafts my mother made when she was being treated for depression. Sometimes in life, we become frustrated because we cannot see any immediate result of our labor or our thoughts or our efforts. It is so easy to conclude that we are only spinning our wheels in vain and getting nowhere in solving our problems — our problems with others, our problems with ourselves, our problems at work. We would then be well advised in such circumstances to do something simple and constructive — to go home and mow the lawn, to clean out a closet, wash the car, to memorize a poem to write a song. Actually, the more physical and strenuous the task, the more helpful it may prove to be.

The medical community has long recognized the direct correlation between physical and emotional health and that physical exertion itself can be an antidepressant.

As I indicated earlier, most depressions eventually pass, but perhaps they will pass more quickly and leave less damage in their wake if only we could acknowledge how common and universal these are, if we could recognize and confess them when they come along, if we could be encouraged and enabled to express our feelings in appropriate ways and if these times could be accompanied by patient, love, therapeutic touch, and a little exercise and constructive work. And if the depression continues we should not hesitate to help the depressed person to get to a professional therapist or counselor who can come along beside them in their struggle.

If you are in a depression right now you may feel terribly isolated and alone, but you need to know that many outstanding and productive people have walked through this same valley before you and may do so again.

Back in 1835, a lovely girl by the name of Anne Rutledge died of malaria. The man she loved was consumed by grief and depression and the week after her burial, he was found rambling in the woods beside the Sangamon River, murmuring incoherently. He was in such a state of depression that his friends would not even allow him to have a pocketknife. These friends, Bowling and Nancy Greene, decided to take this depressed man into their home for the summer where they put him to work — digging potatoes, shucking corn, picking apples. In time, with the love and support of these friends and with their simple therapy of encouragement and hard work the man's spirits were lifted, the old orderliness returned to his life and by the fall of that year, Abraham Lincoln was able to return to his seat in the Illinois legislature. Yes, no one is immune to depression and when it strikes, any one of us can use the help and support of friends and family who are willing to help us to bear our burdens. And we can in turn be the burden bearers for others, thus fulfilling the law of Christ.

Yes, I got the post-Resurrection, baby, predestined, Low Sunday blues.
 But I've had 'em before — so maybe, baby, this ain't news;
 I know the Lord is with me, my friends are all around,
 With a little help and healin' touch! I won't stay down,
 Despite the post-Resurrection, baby, predestined, Low Sunday blues.

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, in our moments of darkness, in our times of depression, remind us of your presence and give us your grace. Help us to acknowledge and confess our feelings and to express them appropriately. Encompass us with the patient love of understanding family and friends who stand beside us and undergird us. Enable us to give help when and where we can and to seek help as we should. Free us, not only to bear the burdens of others in the name of Christ, but to allow others to bear our burdens as well. For we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, our Great Physician.

Amen.