

Hope is a Warrior

2 Corinthians 4:7-18

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

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Whenever people have asked me about this year's Faith Questions series, whether members of this congregation or other who know what we're doing, I have often remarked that the one question I've been most apprehensive about is the one on medical assistance in dying (MAiD).

(Marie and I will be tackling this one together next Sunday.)

But this Sunday's question has also loomed large in my planning and preparations. It is a huge question and a hard question. It hovers over so many other questions, not least the question about MAiD!

"Is despair a sin? How do we account for its prevalence these days?"

Despair is defined as "the complete loss or absence of hope." That's a scary thing to contemplate. It's a scary thing to feel. It's a scary thing to see in those we love. It can be a scary thing to talk about.

And yet we know that despair is pervasive. Indeed, as I sat down to write this sermon, I despaired of even knowing where to begin!

I was wandering around the internet looking for a launching point for this sermon and I came across an image. It was in an article that talked about how unhappy we are all becoming (these articles are everywhere these days).

Ordinarily, I hate graphs and charts. My eyes glaze over, and I begin to get this queasy feeling that something vaguely mathematical might be required of me.

But even I can understand this image.

The top line describes people who say they are “very happy.” The bottom line describes those who aren’t very happy.

For about forty years things bump along in a fairly stable pattern with between 30-40% of people saying they’re happy and between 10-20% saying they’re not. And I guess around 40% of people are just kind of reasonably satisfied.

And then, right around the year 2015-16, happiness started to trend in the wrong direction.

Now, many people will look at a chart like this and look for easy scapegoats. It was Trump. And then it was COVID. End of story.

But I’m very suspicious of answers that seem too easy. I think that despair has been growing in our world, and the polarization produced by Trump and COVID combined with the technologies we have embraced in the early part of the twenty-first century have sent unhappiness into overdrive.

However, and wherever we locate the causes, it is difficult deny the reality that this image illustrates. Despair seems to be everywhere we turn.

There is the increasingly prevalence of “deaths of despair” in Western culture.

This week, CBC said that Alberta has experienced 10 000 “excess deaths” since 2020. Some of these are COVID. Some are the result of the demands on a creaking health care system.

But many are what have been termed “deaths of despair.” Suicides, overdoses, the opioid crisis that is tearing a swath through so many Canadian cities (including our own).

There is the epidemic of loneliness which has also exploded (ironically) with the rise of the smartphone and social media.

There is the prevalence of anxiety and depression, which together with loneliness is made worse by the crumbling of familiar institutions that once provided community and connection and mutual obligations.

There are alarming demographic trends. We are used to hearing that the great crisis of our time is climate change. Increasingly, some are speculating that changing demographics could be our more immediate threat.

Put simply, we aren't having kids as we once did, particularly in the West. There are many reasons for this, but one of them is, I think a function of a kind of despair. *Why bring kids into a world like this?* I have heard this from younger people

Many are wondering what this will mean for our communities, our institutions, our economies.

There is the nasty, biting polarized cultural moment that we all live in (which no doubt contributes to anxiety, depression, and loneliness). Many people see a growing divide between people who have fundamentally different views of the world and wonder if it can ever be bridged.

There is also just this vague sense that things are generally falling apart. Institutions aren't as strong as they once were (including the church). Moral and cultural norms seem to change at breakneck pace, and we're not always sure it's for the better. Trust—in our institutions and in each other—seems to be at an all-time low.

This week, Paul Kingsnorth wrote an essay on “nostalgia” and expressed what many of us feel:

[W]e are living in a time of obvious decline and fragmentation... the cultural disintegration of the West; the ongoing degradation of nature; and the rise of revolutionary technologies, especially in the digital sphere... This is a time in which nothing, from received culture to the climate of the planet itself, can be counted on to remain stable. Disintegrative forces are pulling at everything from all angles. Sometimes it feels like living in the heart of a whirlwind. It is only going to get fiercer.¹

And then there is secularism with the increasing prevalence of doubt. Scientific materialism has delivered to us many technical goodies, but it has not given us anything close to meaning and purpose. This has led to a kind of existential despair for many. *What is the meaning of my life? Is there even purpose to be found?*

¹ <https://paulkingsnorth.substack.com/p/watch-the-great-fall>

And then there is the oldest source of despair in the book. Plain old human suffering. People go through genuinely awful things. It is hard to suffer and to watch those around us suffer.

All these things feed into this general sense that we live in a despairing moment. And of course, it almost goes without saying that we in the church are not immune from these pressures.

This is the air we breathe. These are the waters that we swim in.

So, is it a despair to sin? I really struggled with this question.

Pastorally, my instinct is to instantly go into comfort and reassurance mode. I want to say, “No, of course it’s not a sin to despair! Look at the picture I just painted! I understand how hard this world is, it’s ok to struggle, God understands, God is near to the broken-hearted, God is present with all of those who struggle with the darkness of this world.”

But I’m not going to go there. Instead, I’m going to say something that may sound blunt, and which you might not like, but which I believe to be faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I think that it actually *is* a sin to despair. As long as I am allowed to explain what I mean by his.

Let me start by saying what I am *not* saying.

I am not saying that it is a sin to feel sad. There are things in this world that can and *should* call forth our sadness.

I am not saying that it is a sin to have seasons of life where things feel bleak, even hopeless. I think that we all go through these.

I am not saying that it is a sin to have doubts. Doubt is part of the life of faith. Unexamined and untested faith is often very thin and fragile and easy to lose.

I am not saying that depression and mental illness aren't important or that they don't deserve our best and most multifaceted care and attention.

So, what *do* I mean when I say that I think that despair is a sin. Sin, fundamentally, is missing the mark. This is what the Greek word *hamartia* means.

There is a mark that a human life was created for. That mark is faith, hope, and love.

Yes, the world is fallen and broken in countless ways. Yes, we are part of this brokenness. No, we will never fully or finally hit the mark this side of eternity. But the mark still exists.

There is still a good and true and beautiful way to be human in this world. And the good, the true, and the beautiful really do rely for their existence upon a transcendent order beyond our preferences.

This is the mark. And in light of all this, I think that true despair is a kind of sinful mistrust in God.

It is to absolve oneself of responsibility. It can be a way of taking refuge in easy cynicism and victimhood and refusing to engage the world that God has called us to live in, to contribute to its flourishing.

I have not come across anyone recently who has expressed this duty to hope and to take responsibility for joy in the world than the Australian musician Nick Cave.

I've referenced him in a few sermons and quoted him endlessly on my blog in recent months. If you're getting sick of hearing about him, I apologize (sort of... not really).

I follow his website called The Red Hand Files where he answers a wide variety of questions from his fans, including many from those who are despairing.

Nick Cave has lost two sons and so he knows a thing or two about sadness and the temptation to despair. I want to read a few passages from the Red Hand Files.

The first one is in response to Valerio, in Rome, who would be represented on the graph I showed earlier. He says, "Following the last few years I'm feeling empty and

more cynical than ever. I'm losing faith in other people, and I'm scared to pass these feelings to my little son."

Cave responds (I think what he says about cynicism also applies to despair):

Dear Valerio,

You are right to be worried about your growing feelings of cynicism and you need to take action to protect yourself and those around you, especially your child. Cynicism is not a neutral position—and although it asks almost nothing of us, it is highly infectious and unbelievably destructive. In my view, it is the most common and easy of evils.

I know this because much of my early life was spent holding the world and the people in it in contempt. It was a position both seductive and indulgent... It took a devastation to teach me the preciousness of life and the essential goodness of people. It took a devastation to reveal the precariousness of the world, of its very soul, to understand that it was crying out for help... it took a devastation to find hope.

Unlike cynicism, hopefulness is hard-earned, makes demands upon us, and can often feel like the most indefensible and lonely place on Earth.

Hopefulness is not a neutral position either. It is adversarial. It is the warrior emotion that can lay waste to cynicism. Each redemptive or loving act, as small as you like, Valerio, such as reading to your little boy, or showing him a thing you love, or singing him a song, or putting on his shoes, keeps the devil down in the hole.²

I love that idea of hope as a "warrior emotion" that keeps the devil in his hole.

The second one is in response to a question from Maja in London: "What is joy? Where is it? Where is love in this world that is such an evil mess?"

Dear Maja,

² <https://www.theredhandfiles.com/do-you-still-believe-in-us/>

If we do not attend to the work of projecting delight upon the world, what are we actually doing? If we do not look for joy, search for it, reach deep for it, what are we saying about the world? Are we saying that malevolence is the routine stuff of life, that oppression and corruption and degradation is the very matter of the world? That we greet each day with suspicion, bitterness and contempt? It seems to me that to make suffering the focus of our attention, to pay witness only to the malevolence of the world, is to be in service to the devil himself...

I choose to be an optimist through a kind of necessity, because from my experience pessimism is a corrosive and damaging position to take—one that casts its shadow over all things, **causing a kind of societal sickness, a contaminant that ultimately amplifies and glorifies the problems it professes to abhor.**

For me, to strive toward joy has become a calling and a practise. It is carried out with the full understanding of the terms of this hallowed and harrowed world. I pursue it with an awareness that joy exists both in the worst of the world and within the best... Joy sings small, bright songs in the dark... **joy exists as a bright, insistent spasm of defiance within the darkness of the world. Seek it. It is there.**

Love, Nick³

Or, as the apostle Paul puts it in today's reading:

So, we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure (2 Cor 4:16-17).

One more thing I must say.

I have said something hard today. I have said that it is a sin to despair.

But that is not the last word. It can never be the last word.

³ <https://www.theredhandfiles.com/what-is-joy-where-is-it/>

It must be followed up by these words. Jesus is the friend of sinners. Jesus loves sinners. It is for sinners that Jesus came.

Our sin, in all its forms, has been judged, healed, forgiven, and defeated by the cross and empty tomb of Christ.

Our sin does not keep us from God.

Jesus famously said that it is not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick, that he did not come to call the righteous but sinners (Mark 2:17).

I think that we often hear those words and implicitly think that Jesus comes for the sick and that's the end of the story." We transfer from the category of "sick" to "not sick" and that's it.

But of course, this doesn't fit with human experience. We don't see the doctor once in our lives and then never again. Just like we get sick more than once in our lives, so we fall into sin more than once.

We don't cease to be sinners once Jesus comes for us.

Of course, we strive for holiness. Of course, we seek moral and spiritual progress. Of course, we want to live healthier and truer lives from the point that we meet Jesus onward.

But we remain sinners in need of grace for all the days that God grants us.

Despair is not some special category of sin that cannot be forgiven. It is no different than any of the other sins that plague us, the other sins that we return to more often than we would like, the other sins that we confess and leave at the foot of the cross.

Each Sunday, many churches around the world pray these words:

Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone...

One of the things that we often leave undone is to hope.

And so, we bring our despair, like all our sins, to Jesus, again and again and again.
And we say,

We are truly sorry and we humbly repent. For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us; that we may delight in your will, and walk in your ways, to the glory of your Name. Amen.

And once we have confessed our sin, we step boldly forward, once again, in the power of the Spirit, into faith, hope, and love.

I believe that joy really can and should become our calling and a practise. And I believe that hope is a warrior emotion.

So let us battle the despair of our time. Let us look for joy, search for it, reach deep for it, “because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us... into his presence” (2 Cor. 4:14)

Amen.

