

December 15th: Chronic Illness

Welcome, my friends, to “Soulcare: Help For Heavy Times”. This is our new series, and over the next year we’ll be shifting into a different style of sermons and a different kind of topic. We’ll still be looking at passages from all parts of our Bible, but we’ll be doing it with a new intention, and that intention revolves around our desire to see this congregation continue to grow as a healthy, life-giving, safe, and compassionate community.

To that end, we will be discussing a wide range of topics related to mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual wellbeing. In the month of December, we’re going to be focusing on a mini series called “Blue Christmas,” because we know that this time of year can be particularly difficult for folks dealing with mental health conditions like anxiety and depression. We’ll take a closer look at these topics with sensitivity and compassion, always aiming to provide hope in the darkness. Before we begin, I invite you to pray with me.

Healing God, there are wounds in our lives that only we can see, and scars that only we can feel. There is pain inside of us that we rarely are able to be honest about, and many of us hide these conditions from the world, hoping to get through another day or week without too much struggle. Our bodies bear a heavy burden, and our souls are tired of carrying the weight of these conditions. We come to you this morning, trusting that you see us and hear us in our moment of vulnerability. In this sacred space, remind us of your love for us, and give us the courage to face a new day. Amen.

If any of you have been watching the news recently, you know that healthcare in America is a big topic of discussion right now. How that conversation began is pretty controversial, but over the past couple of weeks, I think we’ve seen a big shift in how we as a nation talk about our wellbeing and the inequalities that exist in our system. And I’m glad that we’re finally naming all of the issues—the lack of access, the denied claims, the suffering that comes from incomplete or insufficient care. So, without getting partisan, I want to tell you a little bit about my own story.

Last fall, I had a big fight with my health insurance company.

Starting in about September, I went through my normal routine with one of my physicians—we needed annual bloodwork to refill a medication that I’ve been on for almost a decade. When my bloodwork came back fine, my physician sent in a new prescription, but my specialty pharmacy kept losing the order and so my insurance company wasn’t processing any of my claims. This was an issue because the out of pocket cost for my medication is \$9,000 per month. I’m on a patient assistance program, but the pharmaceutical company wasn’t any help during this process. It was chaos, and all these companies blamed each other for my predicament. I spent hours on the phone trying to fix this situation, but nobody seemed to understand how to solve the issue. I missed one dose of my medication, then two, then six, and without my biweekly injections my once stable condition deteriorated rapidly.

Let me rewind a little bit.

While I was in seminary, I was diagnosed with psoriatic arthritis. What I had assumed was normal pain from walking too much or lifting heavy weights was in fact an autoimmune condition. By this point, I already had a number of other autoimmune diagnoses, but this one hit particularly hard. At the age of 25, a lifelong, chronic condition like arthritis meant that I had to reimagine everything. I had to reevaluate what my body was capable of, I needed to rethink my approach to wellbeing, and I was forced to consider that my career and life might look vastly different than I had dreamed. Thankfully, medication helped almost immediately, and I spent several years living a relatively normal life with relatively normal routines.

But last winter, when my medication was no longer available to me, the pain returned, this time with a vengeance. After a couple of missed doses, my joints began to swell and become stiff. Getting out of bed became difficult, and my daily long walks quickly became too much. I was lucky if I could walk the two blocks to the grocery store. It was a struggle to perform tasks like cooking, cleaning, and typing, my hands were gnarled and my knuckles inflamed.

But to be honest, the most difficult thing was that most of this pain was mostly invisible to everyone else around me. I'm sure people noticed that I was moving more slowly, or that I limped a little bit after sitting for too long. I'm sure that my friends saw how difficult it was for me to use chopsticks when we went out for sushi. But on the whole, I had to continue all of my weekly routines, and so from the outside, it could look like I was the same. On the outside, I'm sure I still looked relatively young and healthy. In a lot of ways, I looked like a normal thirty-something. And in some situations, I actively masked the pain, because it seemed shameful to show just how much I was struggling. But on the inside, I was in pain. On the inside, I was hurting. On the inside, chronic illness was a big piece of my life.

I know that I'm not alone, my story is not unique.

In fact, the Centers for Disease Control estimates that almost 130 Americans have at least one major chronic condition as part of their medical history—and this statistic includes people suffering from heart disease, cancer, diabetes, and hypertension.¹ That's more than a third of our country. But sadly this figure doesn't include Americans struggling with other conditions like chronic pain, autoimmune diseases, respiratory disorders, gastrointestinal issues, or mental health diagnoses—and those numbers are more difficult to pin down. The CDC notes in a recent study that the prevalence of chronic illness has increased drastically over the past two decades, with recent surveys showing that 42% of our nation has been diagnosed with two or more life altering conditions, and 12% of our nation has been diagnosed with at least five.²

Some medical experts call the rise of chronic illness a silent epidemic, because even though we have statistics for this phenomenon, most of these stories and personal experiences are invisible. Chronic illness can be hiding in plain sight, because many of us look fine or are perceived as healthy. Chronic illness can be

¹ Boersma P, Black LI, Ward BW. Prevalence of multiple chronic conditions among US adults, 2018. *Prev Chronic Dis.* 2020;17:E106. [PubMed doi:10.5888/pcd17.200130](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/doi/10.5888/pcd17.200130)

² Buttorff C, Ruder T, Bauman M. Multiple chronic conditions in the United States. RAND Corporation; 2017. Accessed July 6, 2022. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/tools/TL221.html>

hard to see, because the inner reality doesn't always match the outside appearance. And because of this disparity, chronic illness can be a devastating experience for our souls.

If chronic illness of any kind is part of your story, I want you to know that I understand what it's like. I may not know your exact condition or any diagnoses that you've received, or treatments that you've tried, but I know how difficult it can be. I want you to know: your pain isn't invisible to me. Your experiences are seen. You are seen.

And there's someone else who gets it too—our scripture passage for this morning involves a woman who had been struggling with a bleeding condition for over twelve years. In verse 26, our text tells us that “she had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse.”

I'm sure there are people listening right now who don't need to imagine what it's like to suffer for over a decade without any relief. I'm sure that there are people among us right now who are living this reality. I'm certain that at least one of us knows what it's like to go from doctor to doctor without any answers. I'd be willing to bet that at least a few of us know the pain of gradually getting worse instead of getting better. If the statistics are correct, probably more than a third of us can relate to this surge of desperation that the woman is clearly feeling—it might be you who knows the hopelessness and despair that brings her to this moment.

In this situation, what does God have to say? In the face of chronic illness, what does Jesus do?

Well, in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus seems to be on a healing mission—he is traveling throughout the countryside and stopping in many different cities and towns to heal all kinds of individuals. In this particular chapter, Jesus is already on the way to heal the daughter of a synagogue leader when he encounters a situation in the midst of the large crowd that is traveling with

him. While the crowd is walking, the woman develops a plan. Our story continues, “When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, because she thought, ‘If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed.’ Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering.”

At this moment of healing, Jesus looks around for the person who has touched him. The disciples are confused by this, but the woman comes forward to confess, falling at Jesus’ feet. Verse 29 records Jesus’ reaction, “He said to her, ‘Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.’”

Our text wants you to know: her pain is not invisible to Jesus. He sees her condition. He sees her.

This seems like a nice, happy ending, doesn’t it? The woman is healed, and she no longer suffers from the conditions which caused her agony for twelve years. She is able to walk away from this encounter without pain or the shame that she has carried for so much of her life, and that is a miracle, but I want to be careful with this text. Unfortunately, I think we sometimes get the wrong idea, or I think sometimes the way that this passage is preached or taught in Christian circles almost makes people with chronic illness feel worse. That probably isn’t the intention, but sometimes when people of faith talk about this passage, it comes with the understanding that if our faith was strong, we would be healed too. And if we’re not healed, it’s because our trust isn’t deep enough, or we haven’t truly encountered Jesus in the way that we need to. And I find that a little patronizing. Okay, more than a little. It doesn’t sit right with me, because I know so many of us are just as desperate, and just as vulnerable as the woman in this story. I know that there are plenty of people who are reaching out for Jesus with every fiber of their being, and they still have not received a miracle.

If you are struggling with chronic illness or a condition that has gotten worse instead of better, I hope that you know your health is not a reflection of your

moral value or your spiritual strength. You could be doing everything right—praying all the time, going to church, serving others, worshipping God in your own ways—and you can still be waiting for healing.

Here's why I wanted to talk about this story during Advent.

Advent is an anticipatory season, it means that we are waiting in the darkness for the light to appear. We wait, in all of the uncertainty and discomfort of being human, for our God made flesh to be with us. We wait for the future Emmanuel, God with us, to rescue us. We anticipate that God is coming into the world to dwell alongside us, but we wrestle with the fact that he's not here yet. This can be why Advent is so hard for us, because we are an impatient species, and we deeply wish that everything that is wrong with the world could be fixed right now. We want the resolution now, we want the healing now.

So how do we wait? What does that look like? What does that feel like for our tired and aching bodies?

Well, on this third Sunday of Advent, we focus on the theme of joy. This Sunday even has a special name, Gaudete, meaning "rejoice." That's the calling for us on this day, that's the action that God invites us into, even in the midst of our human pain and suffering.

But if you're like me, joy doesn't always come easy.

For a long time, I believed that chronic illness and joy could not coexist, I thought the presence of one surely indicated the absence of the other. I believed that there was no joy at all to be found in seasons of pain and suffering—maybe you believe the same.

However, I'm starting to think that in these situations, joy is an act of resistance. Joy can be a powerful antidote to a world that seems irreparably broken. Christians around the world lit our pink candles this morning because

we are choosing to rejoice, we lit that candle because we are willing to find joy in desperate and despairing places, even though it feels hard or even impossible.

Here's how I see it.

It's true that it took at least six months for my body to feel normal again once I was able to resume my medication. It's true that even now, almost a full year later, I still feel the lingering effects of this arthritis flare—it's still with me, and it always will be. But it is also true that there was joy in those days, even if the joys were small. There was the joy of being in the company of friends. There was the encouragement of family members. There were milestones to be celebrated. There were vacations to new places and memories made with loved ones. There were sunny mornings, and gorgeous sunsets, and iced lattes that hit just right. There were silly cat videos, and hugs that filled my soul. There was the softness of a cozy blanket, and the feeling of deep breaths as I drifted off to sleep.

Your joy might look different than mine, and it might not always be easily visible in the face of your chronic illness, but it is there, and it is worth seeking. I invite you this week, to be on the lookout for joy, to seize it where it can be found.

In those small joys, our resilience can grow. In the intentional search for joy, we can endure this waiting period between our current reality, and the wholeness that is promised to us. In these moments of joy, we can remember that God sees us, knows us, and loves us for who we are, and that one day, our pain will be no more.

Amen.