

“Walking with My Black Dog”

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Delivered at Elora United Church in a worship service focusing on Mental Health

Psalms 13

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How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?
How long will my enemy triumph over me?

Look on me and answer, Lord my God.
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death,
and my enemy will say, “I have overcome him,”
and my foes will rejoice when I fall.

But I trust in your unfailing love;
my heart rejoices in your salvation.
I will sing the Lord's praise,
for he has been good to me.

Psalm 13
(New International Version)

I have a puppy dog, named Mookie.

I also have a black dog. Its name is depression.

English poet Samuel Johnson coined the phrase “Black Dog” in the 1780s to describe his own depression. Winston Churchill, the wartime prime minister, used it to describe his.¹ A lot of people walk with a Black Dog.²

Although everyone’s experience of depression is different, many of us find this story gets at it pretty well.

WATCH the video “*I Had a Black Dog*” by Matthew Johnstone.³

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XiCrniLQGYc>

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Major_depressive_disorder

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_people_with_major_depressive_disorder

³ Johnstone made this video in collaboration with the World Health Organization, based on his book with the same name. See his website for some great information <http://matthewjohnstone.com.au/>.

II

Depression first pounced on me when I was 20. My last and most serious flare up was about 3 years ago. I was dealing with a lot of stress and some difficult things, and that was like leaving the back door open for the Dog to bound in.

I kept up a public face of good cheer, though some saw that something was wrong with me. Barb and our children endured a partner and father who had become sullen, exhausted, snappy, and gripped by despair. My whole body was drained by a sadness.

My despair went far beyond anything that was happening around me. It had little to do with circumstances — we all experience ups and downs; life is very hard sometimes. But this was more. This illness was pressing me down from the inside.

I got help. I turned to colleagues whom I trusted. That was tough, but I needed some people to know. I went to my doctor. I began taking medication. Pills did not cure me. Think of an earthquake, though. Medication stopped the ground from shaking, so I can start rebuilding. I saw a counsellor, who helped me better understand a lot of my “stuff.” And I stopped being afraid of depression, and started learning to walk with it. I’m still learning

I’m better now, but not cured. Some days my Black Dog bounds over for a visit. I’m never happy to see him, but I know he won’t stay forever. And even if he doesn’t seem to be going away, I know I’m not alone in this anymore.

III

Another person in our congregation told his story of depression.

IV

In my intellect, my trust in God never wavered. I know who God is, God’s love, and God’s power to redeem us from anything. Yet in my feelings, I just did not care.

But God is not a prisoner to my feelings. Or your feelings. Nor is God afraid of our feelings.

I love that Psalm we read together. It is one of many times the Bible gives us words to cry out to God. It cries out abandonment, it cries out despair, it cries out hopelessness. It does not say, “*You should not think such things.*” Or, “*Just believe more, and you will be better.*” Or, “*Pray, and depression will go away.*” I’ve heard these sorts of things. I’ve even believed them. They are garbage!

I also love this Psalm too, because it ends with trust. I do trust in God's unfailing love. And I trust that it is not the strength of my trust that matters. It is the strength of the One in whom I place my meagre, weak, shaky trust . . . it is God's trustworthiness that makes the difference. God's unfailing love is the Rock on which I stand. And kneel. And some days, I crumble to the ground, yet still on the Rock. Whether or not I feel God is with me, God is.

If you are walking with your own Black Dog, you don't have to do it alone. If you care for someone who has a Black Dog, you don't have to carry that alone. Around you, in our congregation, are many people who are doing the same thing.

And with you, all the time, is God. God, who is good, and who is doing mighty and wonderful things. Amen!