

*Out of the Wilderness*  
**When the Walls Collapse**  
**Joshua 6:1-8a**

*Open with video "Anxious in Nothing"*  
(<https://www.worshiphousemedia.com/mini-movies/81127/anxious-in-nothing>)

Did you catch two phrases there: He said "It (meaning Bipolar 2 and Generalized Anxiety Disorder) is something I will struggle with for the rest of my life." And then, "Jesus has given me peace in the midst of my own chaos." That sounds contradictory doesn't it? But the peace Jesus provides doesn't always mean the elimination of the chaos that unsettles us.

We can leave a wilderness but that doesn't mean the wilderness leaves us. What do you do when your wilderness within doesn't go away?

In this series we have been looking at stories from the opening chapters of the Book of Joshua in the Old Testament, because these are stories about the nation of Israel coming out of a long wilderness and entering the Promised Land. Two weeks ago we looked at the story of the people crossing the River Jordan at flood stage as God miraculously parted the water just like when the people entered the wilderness through the Red Sea. Then last week, we talked about the first thing the people did in the Promised Land. They built a memorial of stones and we talked about the good things we want to hold onto from this pandemic time. Not everything in a wilderness is bad. There are good things to be acknowledged in a wilderness. You can see here some pictures of us taking stones on which we wrote things we want to hold onto and making our own memorial. If you did this at home, you can bring your stone anytime and place it along with others here.

Today, we come to the story of the first city the people approached, Jericho. Jericho is located in the West Bank of Israel and is the oldest city still in existence in the world. It dates back to 9000BCE. Excavations reveal some of the remains of the city walls and a water tower.

This story marks the beginning of the period known as the Conquest, when the Israelites began settling the Promised Land. These are not easy stories to understand because there is so much violence in them, and many people, for good reason, are troubled by these stories. I've preached sermons on how to make sense of the violence in the Bible with the belief in a God of peace and love.

Its not easy to get past, but this morning, I want to look at this story in a very different manner. I want to consider it as a metaphor, a metaphor of the emotional and mental stress our pandemic wilderness has caused. I want us to think about this story from a perspective that is not often considered: the people who lived in Jericho.

I heard a scholar once say that this story is the first historical example of psychological warfare. Jericho was a walled city. When threatened by an enemy, they would close the gates and seal themselves in. So the Israelites marched around the entire city going along the walls one full revolution for six straight days. They didn't make a sound. They didn't talk. Just a silent walk around the city each day and then back to their camp. Now imagine if you lived in Jericho what this would do to you. Each day you see them coming. You wonder if this is the day they are going to attack. But they don't shout or beat drums or make any noise like a typical army. They just circle and leave. Can you imagine how you would feel if you had this happen every day for a week?

Well, on the seventh day, the Israelites marched around the city seven times. And after the seventh revolution the trumpets blared and the people all shouted as loud as they could, and the walls of the city crumbled.

What made that happen? What made the walls crumble? Was the noise so great it created like a sonic force? Of course, the implication is that God caused this, but I also believe you could read this story as a metaphor for what happened to the people inside. After so long, after so many days of fear and wondering and panic, it produced an emotional, psychological, mental stress that finally caused the people to collapse. They fell apart, because they couldn't take it anymore.

Is it really that far of a stretch to read the story this way? Have you ever gotten to a point where you collapse, not from physical exhaustion but emotional and mental exhaustion? A point where stress just does you in?

That has happened to many people through the course of this past year. Last Spring the Kaiser Family Foundation reported that 45% of Americans said their mental health had been negatively affected by the pandemic. The Center for Disease Control reports that people with symptoms of anxiety and/or depressive disorders has quadrupled since before the pandemic. Other studies show how there has been a significant rise in issues of mental illness related to the pandemic. Isolation, grief, economic hardship, and then add the racial upheaval and political turmoil and many folks have gotten to a breaking point.

And this kind of impact, this kind of health threat is not something we can get vaccinated for. Many health experts predict this could be an impact we face for some time. What do we do to come out of a wilderness that has brought a toll on our emotional and mental well-being?

This may sound like a spiritually trite answer, but a good place to begin is to **believe that God meets us in our experience**. For some people that is a big deal, especially if you are someone who believes in statements like, "God doesn't give us more than we can handle." Have you ever heard that before? People sometimes tell us that when we are going through a challenge as if God sent the challenge. But if its true, that God doesn't give us more than we can handle, how do you explain suicide? How do you explain people who under great mental stress slip over the edge of reason and can't

come back? If God was the author of their challenge, and God doesn't give us more than we can handle, how do we explain that?

I get the reason for such a statement. We want to believe that God is in control, sort of like the Great Oz, you know, the guy behind the curtain pulling all the levers. But what if God is not a lever puller? What if God created us with freedom to make choices, and such freedom can have chaotic potential? And that rather than causing everything that happens, God displays power in a different way. God meets us in our challenges to help us and comfort us. Perhaps rather than saying God doesn't give us more than we can handle, we should say, "God never lets us handle anything alone."

Several years ago we studied the life of Martin Luther, the founder of the Reformation. He suffered much mental anguish in his life. In fact he had a word for it in German, *anfechtungen*. It was an emotional turmoil that would lead to physical tremors and ailments. And this was an obstacle in his relationship to God. Why wouldn't God take this from him? But one day when he was working on a class on the New Testament, he studied Jesus' experience in Gethsemane the night before his crucifixion where it says he was in "anguish." He focused on that word "anguish" in Greek and learned it wasn't just describing an emotional experience but a physical one. It literally meant Jesus' guts were churning inside. And suddenly he realized Jesus suffered *anfechtungen* as well. Jesus could identify with his condition. His emotional suffering wasn't a sign that something was wrong with him, it became a place where God met him.

Look at this verse from 1 Peter 5:7: "***Cast your anxiety on him, because He cares for you.***" Our anxiety doesn't mean something is wrong with us. It's a place for God to meet us and let us know God believes in us.

If you have been experiencing mental stress, here is a list of things professionals recommend:

- **Take breaks from the news.** Sometimes we don't realize the stress the amount of news causes us. We can stay informed, but then, if we need it, turn off the TV.
- **Keep a routine.** Set a schedule of things we want to do. It gives a sense of productivity and control.
- **Take care of your body.** Eat smart. Get exercise. Rest.
- **Take care of your mind.** Practice meditation, prayer, focus on positive things, things you are grateful for.
- **Be gracious with yourself.** Give yourself a break if you didn't get done everything you think you should, or if there is something you didn't handle well. Ask for forgiveness, and sometimes be your own priest and tell yourself, "I'm forgiven."
- **Stay connected to others.**

And that leads to another thought on how God's helps us in a wilderness of mental and emotional stress: **God helps us through other people.** Unfortunately there is a stigma around mental health that makes it difficult admitting when we are under stress. We fear being judged and ostracized. Too many in our society have poor

understanding of mental health matters, and our society continues to fall short in providing adequate care for mental health. So it takes tremendous courage to acknowledge when we are in stress, but when we do we open ourselves to the way God meets us through others who help us.

This is where crumbled walls is a helpful analogy, because the more we allow the walls of our own self-protection to come down we find that while there are those who may not understand what we are going through, we will find those who legitimately love us and never give up on us and let us know we are still accepted and we are not alone.

I got an email this past Monday from Charlie Coles, a St. Luker who lives outside Washington, DC. He appreciated the reference to rainbows in the sermon last Sunday and sent me a story about the time in 1965 when he and his wife attended a performance in California by Judy Garland. Judy Garland, of course, was the teenage star of the movie *The Wizard of Oz*, which turned out to be a blessing and a curse. She was just 17, and the fame from that movie at such a young age created huge anxiety in her life. She was under psychiatric evaluation by 18, had three nervous breakdowns by 23, and made 20 suicide attempts in 13 years. She was plagued by paranoia and anxiety and substance abuse.

So back to this performance in 1965. She had broken her arm the night before and arrived late. Several stars filled in and sang including her good friend Mickey Rooney. When she finally arrived she kind of stumbled onto the stage and managed through several songs before finishing and going back stage. The crowd started calling out “Over the Rainbow,” her signature song. She eventually came out on stage. The orchestra started up when she yelled out, “Mickey, where’s Mickey.”

I just want to read this to you what Charlie sent me. He was there that night and included in the email a picture of that moment. He wrote:

Mickey got out of his seat in the audience, came back on stage, knelt down beside her, and held her arm while she sang. In between phrases he whispered in her ear. You can only imagine what he whispered to keep her going, but for us the message was clear — Judy had to have Mickey to lean on.

There’s the point of my lesson, as we sit here together in this room, in the sanctuary, or outside the church doors and on the yellow brick road of life, be alert to the cries that resonate of “Where’s my Mickey?”, be there for those who need somebody to lean on.

We often don’t discover how much support we have until we let people know how much support we need.

But there is one final thought to offer, and this may be the most important for our self-belief and confidence if we ever experience a mental or emotional collapse. **A collapse is something God can use.** How many of you got Covid19? Of those who did, how many would say, “Well I guess God can’t use me as well anymore because I got sick?” Hopefully no one. It’s a crazy idea. But if we get ill emotionally or mentally, we can really do a number on ourselves. We can say, “I must not be able to handle things. I must not be as worthy.”

Well here's a news flash. We aren't meant to handle things. We are limited. We have breaking points. And for some reason we accept our physical limits better than our mental ones, but it's the same deal. We are limited people. And the truth is, God can use our limitations more effectively than our strengths. That's what Paul learned. He said, ***"My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.*** (2 Corinthians 12:9)

His weaknesses became a place where Christ's power was felt. This is what made him usable.

We have a member of our church in med school. A few years ago this person took a year off because of depression and struggles with anxiety. A great psychiatrist helped the student find healing and it really changed this person's life. Having now been on the receiving end of the patient-provider relationship it gave this person a whole new appreciation for what others go through and the way they can experience hope and healing. Now the student is back in med school and has changed focus on degree so that this person can help others who have been through similar experiences.

There is no limit to God's power to redeem pain.

If you are struggling emotionally right now, if you are just finding it hard to feel encouraged and hopeful, if you have had thoughts about hurting yourself, don't keep it in. That is not a place where you have to stay, there is help, but it starts with believing it's okay to reach out. Start by calling the church.

Maybe you're feeling down. Open up to a friend about it. Share it with someone. See if the sharing and talking begins to help.

And be on the lookout for others. Let's all be attentive to the stress others are feeling in this time. Let's be careful not to make situations worse when others around us are not doing well. Reach out to people to check on them and see how they are doing.

The only way we ever really know the dependability of God and the faithfulness of community is when we are willing to relate to those who have experienced collapse.