

He binds the brokenhearted

Isaiah 61.1-4, 8-11

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It is winter, so for many people it is time for their annual winter depression. It is dark, cold, wet, and many people feel blue. I tell you, the season certainly impacts my mood. Give me summer, give me sun, give me warmth and I feel much better!

Harvard psychologist Dr John Sharp is the author of a book titled *The Emotional Calendar*. He suggests that it is not just the lack of sunlight and warmth that makes many people a bit depressed in this season.

Sure, he says, turn on the lights and the heater. But according to Sharp, because of the weather we also do not move enough. Moving around is helpful to everyone's mood. Even a little exercise can make us feel better.

Also, in this season, people are often so afraid to overspend. Holiday expenses take a bite out of your bank account, and fretting about your credit card bills can rob you of good cheer.

And the number of family gatherings some people have to go through can also overwhelm us and make us not feel good.

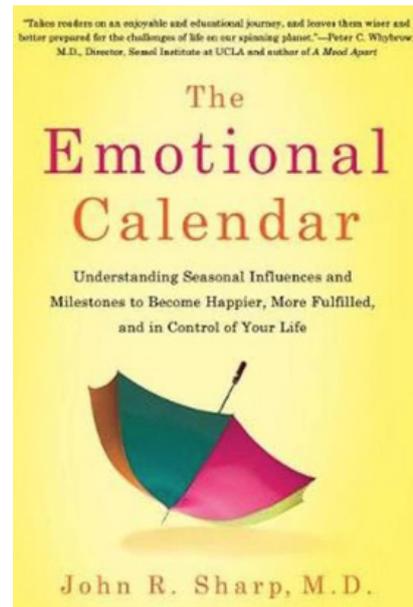
And then, many people eat a lot more food than usual, and not necessarily healthy food. And the alcohol-intake is also often above average. That is only very temporarily good for the mood. When you step on the scales, well, the scale is up and you are down.

And what pushes people down can also be a feeling of alone-ness. Holidays are often easier for couples and families, and if you're by yourself, you may feel alienated this time of year.

1. Dark days

The Hebrew prophet Isaiah had good news for people who felt depressed. And when he wrote his encouraging message, the people certainly had good reasons to feel down.

Israel had returned from their exile in Babylon; they had rebuilt the temple that had been destroyed 70 years earlier; now they ruled over their land again. But it was all so much less than what they had been dreaming about.



So there was always this nagging feeling - has God left us? Is this life in this land all there is?

When Isaiah preached at the nation, what did he see before him? The pews were full of poor people, people who had lost it all. He saw broken hearted people. And people who felt as if they were still captives, in the grip of an enemy. Many felt as if they were still imprisoned in Babylon.

Today, the people of God are not doing good either. Sure, in large parts of the world, the church seems to be blessed with growth; things go very well for them.

But in the old lady called Europe? It does not look good at all. The followers of Jesus Christ have become a small minority, churches are being sold to Carpetland or for being used as a mosque, or for expensive apartments. A few months ago your church council held its meeting in Utrecht, in one of the Catholic Churches - Maria Minor - that has been made into a fantastic large pub.

It is so sad to see this.

And let us admit it frankly. Our personal life with God can also be rather poor. Arid. And we seem to be captives of the spirit of our days - we eat, we drink, we watch television.

So we are, like Israel long ago, not in good shape.

God sent Isaiah to Israel; who are the prophets that we today listen to?

The prophets of today tell us that what we see is all there is. Some say: this world is all there is, and we are making a mess of it, so they challenge us to be activists. For them the environment is like god.

Other prophets say that what we see is all there is, but they comfort us. Just be happy, enjoy, make your own life perfect and do not worry too much about anything.

But our minds and our hearts cannot give up on faith in God. The life we see is not all there is. Yes, we need to be careful with our environment; and yes, it is good to enjoy our life.

But in us, we have this desire for something much better than what we see around us. We feel homesick for a better life. The Germans have this beautiful word *Sehnsucht*. It is hard to translate - it is translated as "longing", "pining", "yearning", or "craving", or in a wider sense a type of "intensely missing".

The Anglican Christian author C. S. Lewis described *Sehnsucht* as the "inconsolable longing" in the human heart for "we know not what."

As if the human heart has some vague recollection of a better world and of God being close to us.

The prophet Isaiah recognised that this better world was real, and that God truly wants to be close to us. He wants to make our life beautiful.

2. Glorious hope

That is why Isaiah has a message that was good for Israel and that is good for us.

The words of Isaiah pointed far beyond his contemporary horizon and they were words that were really not about him.

Jesus would later, when he was in a synagogue where he had to preach on the passage that we have read, Jesus would tell his listeners that this passage of Isaiah was truly fulfilled in Him.

Jesus was the one who came to bring good news to the poor. “Blessed are the poor in spirit”, He said, “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Jesus came to bind the hearts of those who had broken hearts. He told people: “if you are tired, if you feel like being overwhelmed by life and its loads, come to me and I will give you rest.”



He proclaimed liberty to the captives.

He opened the prison doors for those who were bound. Even the people so imprisoned by the spirits of evil, He set them free. By linking people with God in heaven, he truly sets them free.

Isaiah was not speaking of himself, but of Jesus Christ - God who came down to be with humankind.

Jesus has been sent by God “to bind up the brokenhearted”. Note that verb. We would usually say, “to comfort the brokenhearted,” but this says “to bind up the brokenhearted.”

Binding-up goes beyond the usual comforting techniques, such as listening or saying some kind words. Binding-up therapy is really heart surgery. It pulls together the broken pieces—repairs the fractures.

This is the spiritual heart, of course. When we speak of people who are brokenhearted, we are talking about their spirit—their emotions. A brokenhearted person is a person who is grieving—who has lost all hope.

But God has sent Jesus to repair the damage.

Our brokenness has to do with us being part of a world that is not as it was supposed to be.

It is because we have this Sehnsucht, this vague but strong memory of better times and our desire for those times.

It is because we know we are never good enough as humans. Not good enough because we are not as good as we are supposed to be.

It is because we are distant from God.

Modern prophets would say a few comforting words. God is dead, and you just live and enjoy. But how does this comfort when you know that God is. He is, not dead, but very alive.

Jesus goes to the heart of the matter. He clarifies for us who God is. Our Creator, our Father. And he lived the life that we are all supposed to live but that we never do.

God saw this perfect life of Jesus, who even loved God and He loved people till the end when He was killed.

He united us with God - our sins our forgiven.

He united us with God - He bridged the gap.

He united us with God - and binds our broken hearts.

That is why many people, when they become Christians, speak of it as a home coming. They find an answer to their Sehnsucht, to their yearning.

3. Waiting for Him

Yes, but wait. As Christians we also recognise that we have not arrived yet at all.

With all of creation we are groaning, says the apostle Paul in Romans 8. Groaning for the desire for renewal.

In his second letter to the Corinthians he pick up this same theme. He writes, "For in this tent", that is, in our present life, "we groan.". "We know that we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight."

Our desire, our search for fullfilment has not stopped because we are Christians. We have come to know the one whom we love and who loves us... but this has in a way, *increased* our realization that we have not arrived yet. It only makes the desire grow.

God is our Father, Jesus Christ is our Redeemer, the Holy Spirit is our comforter. But the very presence of God in our life has also made us realise that so much more, so much better is yet to come. He is close to us with His Spirit, but at the same time, there is still this distance between our beloved and us. "We are away from the Lord"

To know that you are loved by God is fantastic; it gives us peace, and rest.

But to know that we are in many ways still distant from Him, also creates pain at the same time. It created the Sehnsucht, the deep desire for Him whom we love.

Christians should actually suffer from this sense of heartache: when will we finally see our Lord face to face. When will the reconciliation with God, that Jesus gained for us, be fully realized in our life! When will all things in this world be renewed. When will all darkness be driven away from us, and from this world.

Isaiah promised the coming of the Messiah - the one who is good news for the poor, the one who binds the brokenhearted, who sets the captives free. And Jesus has come, and we celebrate this in the Christmas season.

But there is still much to do, and the Holy Spirit who is in your life, makes you always feel that His presence is just a deposit, a small beginning, of much more that is to come.

And we yearn for this. We need it. Our families need it. Our church needs it. The world needs it.

And the pain of the desire for God, is in fact a pleasant pain. It is the pain that shows that we are alive. That we have met the one we love but presently we cannot fully be with him yet. It is the pain that shows that something is not good yet, but with the certainty, the faith, that soon all things will be well.

Conclusion

So what to do?

Well, be a bit more joyful when you feel that pain of imperfection, of having met with Jesus Christ and desiring more, but you have to wait.

This pain is the result of realising that one day, things will be perfect - but we are there not yet.

The only way to not experience this pain, is by being dead. People who are alive with God, see in a deeper way what they presently miss in life.

And Advent is the season of hope. We are missing, we are hurting, but that is the best proof that better times are coming. Our Lord is coming and we look forward to that glorious moment when all things will be made new in a new heaven and a new earth.

+ Amen

