

Journey Toward Mental Wellness

A Guide for Talking to Your Congregation



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The United Methodist Health Ministry Fund (Health Fund) developed this sermon guide and toolkit to help faith leaders begin meaningful conversations on the importance of mental health. In this sermon guide, we define mental health as something **we all have**. It's a person's psychological and emotional well-being. Having great physical, spiritual, and mental health is key to ensuring that communities thrive.

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ABOUT THE HEALTH FUND

The United Methodist Health Ministry Fund is a statewide health foundation that facilitates conversation and action to improve the health and wholeness of Kansans—especially those in rural and under-served communities. Through funding programs and ideas, providing hands-on expertise, and convening influencers, the Health Fund advances innovative solutions to improve Kansans' health for generations to come. Located in Hutchinson, Kansas, the Health Fund has provided more than \$75 million in grants and program support since its inception in 1986.

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Journeying Toward Mental Wellness

Sermon Guide and Toolkit

Mental health is a concern across the country. However, access to mental health services is not equitable. Access is often determined by income, where you live, awareness of local services, education about mental health and illness, and the stigma surrounding mental health.

Community partnerships are vital to improving the use of mental health services and reducing its stigma. We regularly hear that congregations need tools to help address these needs.

In this toolkit, you will find resources on connecting others to behavioral health services. You will also find sermons on mental health and exercises to start thoughtful discussion with your congregation. Ultimately, we hope this guide will help your congregation create a stigma-free, supportive environment that will encourage those affected to seek help.

HOW TO USE THIS SERMON GUIDE AND TOOLKIT

Welcome! Now, take a deep breath in...and out. Hear this word again: **welcome**. Whether you are gently exploring or anxious to dive in, undertaking the topic of mental health and mental wellness in the church and the world is a daunting task. So again, welcome. You are not alone in this journey.

The goal of this sermon guide is to bring together Scripture, theology, and public health to help congregations connect their faith to their individual and communal journeys toward mental health. Woven throughout the discussion of Scripture and theology are three essential skills necessary for cultivating mental wellness: naming emotions, nonjudgmental and compassionate listening, and active hope. The first week introduces the skill of naming emotions as part of removing the stigma from mental illness and mental health challenges. Mental wellness cannot occur without removing the negative connotations society puts on mental health concerns. The second week introduces the skill of nonjudgmental and compassionate listening, a way of being present to ourselves and others that encourages empathy and acceptance of our experiences and emotions. The third week introduces congregants to active hope, which builds on the previous two weeks by inviting congregants to imagine flourishing in the midst of their struggles and begin to take action to promote flourishing in their own lives and in the life of their community as part of participating in God's work in the world. Each week, the Call to Action bulletin insert offers suggestions for how congregants can cultivate these skills in their daily lives. In addition, liturgical pieces like the Welcome, Call to Worship, and Benediction build on some of these skills so that congregants begin practicing them during worship. You are invited to use these pieces as they fit your particular context. Keep in mind that every opportunity to layer explanation and practice of these skills over the 3-4 weeks of the series increases the likelihood they will take root in your congregants' lives.

This sermon guide was originally imagined as an Advent series, though there are alternate liturgical and homiletical options provided that adapt the guide for use year-round. The Scriptures for each week are taken from the Revised Common Lectionary readings for Advent across Years A, B, and C. However, not all of the Scriptures directly align with the week they traditionally appear in the Revised Common Lectionary during the Advent season in order to better accommodate the arc of the sermon series. The guide provides three weeks of worship materials, including a call to worship, hymn selections, children's sermons, exegesis, sermon notes, and more. If you are using the guide for Advent, the intention is to allow for a pageant or special music Sunday during Advent that is a tradition in many churches without forcing the pastor to either squeeze in or skip a week of content. If your church does not traditionally have a pageant or special music Sunday during Advent, you are encouraged to use Weeks 1, 2, and 3 for the First, Second, and Third Sundays of Advent.

This guide also includes a liturgy for a Service of the Longest Night. This service is used in many faith traditions to mark the longest night of the year at the winter solstice, which typically falls around December 21. The Longest Night Service invites congregants to acknowledge their grief and struggles, giving space for mental health challenges to be named, accepted, and blessed during a season when our society excessively emphasizes joy and festivities. This liturgy was written to have several possible uses. First, consider offering the Service of the Longest Night during a weekday on or around December 21. Second, if you do not traditionally have a special music Sunday during Advent, consider using this service on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, which typically falls close to December 21. Third, if you are using this guide outside of the season of Advent, note alternate options provided that adapt the service for use during other times of year. You might want to use it as a midweek prayer service or consider using it as a fourth and final Sunday in this series.

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Journey Toward Mental Wellness

Toolkit

A Guide for Talking to Your Congregation



Journey Toward Mental Wellness Toolkit:

Tips and Resources for Talking to Your Congregation About Mental Health

8 THINGS YOU CAN DO TO IMPROVE MENTAL HEALTH DISCUSSION IN YOUR CONGREGATION*

1. Deliver sermons or homilies about mental wellness.
2. Pray openly for people who are affected by mental health challenges.
3. Provide space for support groups or programs to meet.
4. With their permission, include families and individuals with mental health challenges on the prayer list.
5. Reach out to those who are struggling.
6. Maintain and provide a list of local mental health services available in your community.
7. Use respectful language that does not define someone by an illness. Say, “she has bipolar disorder.” Do not say, “she is bipolar.”
8. Avoid labels such as crazy, not normal, sufferer/victim, or demented.

* Based on NAMI’s “Being a stigmafree Faith Community.” <https://www.nami.org/NAMI/media/NAMInet/Outreach-Partnerships/NAMIFaithnet-StigmaFree2Pager.pdf>

RESOURCES

- Kansas Suicide Prevention HQ <https://www.ksphq.org/help>
- LGBT National Help Center <http://www.glbtnationalhelpcenter.org>
- National Alliance on Mental Illness resources for faith communities: <https://www.nami.org/NAMInet/Outreach-Partnerships/NAMI-FaithNet/Bridges-of-Hope>
- National Alliance on Mental Illness resources for LGBTQI mental health : <https://www.nami.org/Your-Journey/Identity-and-Cultural-Dimensions/LGBTQI>
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline available in English and Spanish: <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org>
- Resources to Recover Kansas resources: <https://www.rtor.org/directory/mental-health-kansas>
- Suicide Prevention Resource Center Kansas information: <https://www.sprc.org/states/kansas>
- The Trevor Project counseling support for LGBTQ youth <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/get-help>

Sermon Guide

Week 1



Welcome

Welcome! As we begin, let us take a deep breath in...and a deep breath out. As we welcome one another this morning, we also want to welcome everything we are bringing with us today. So, take a moment to close your eyes and be still.

What do you sense in your body?

What do you sense in your mind?

What do you sense in your heart?

What do you sense in your spirit?

However you are feeling, whatever you bring with you today, you are welcome here. May the love of God and the love of this community surround you as we carry all that we are and all that we are feeling into worship today.

Amen.



Call to Worship

As we embark on our Advent journey*, we name the suffering in our nation and our world. From the uncertainties and losses of the COVID-19 pandemic to the violence of war to the destruction of natural disasters, we are inundated by adversity and long for a Savior. As we wait for our rescue, we ask:

How long, O Lord, how long?

We name the sorrow and challenges in our neighborhoods. From anxieties about how to educate our children to the strain of public discourse riddled with malice instead of kindness to the violence that makes neighbors afraid of their neighbors, we are surrounded by trouble and long for a Shepherd. As we wait for our relief, we ask:

How long, O Lord, how long?

We name the worries and the strains in our homes. From the stresses of juggling childcare, elder care, and full-time jobs to the concerns of how to make ends meet when we are already stretched thin to the grief for all we have lost, we are overwhelmed by distress and long for the Prince of Peace. As we wait for our restoration, we ask:

How long, O Lord, how long?

How long, O Lord, how long, until you rescue, relieve, and restore your people?

Together we wait. Together we hope.

Together we wait and together we hope as we seek wellness of body, mind, and emotions for ourselves and our neighbors.

Amen.

**If not using during Advent, say "As we embark on our journey toward mental wellness..."*



Hymn Selections:

Advent

- **“Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus”**
United Methodist Hymnal #196
- **“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”**
United Methodist Hymnal #211
- **“Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence”**
United Methodist Hymnal #626

Alternative

- **“Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah”**
United Methodist Hymnal #127
- **“It Is Well with My Soul”**
United Methodist Hymnal #377
- **“Sweet Hour of Prayer”**
United Methodist Hymnal #496



Children’s Sermon

SUPPLIES: Large printouts of four emojis on separate pieces of paper—a smiling emoji, an angry emoji, a crying emoji, and a surprised emoji—and slips of paper for each child

After the children gather, say: “Good morning! Today, we are going to talk about our feelings for a minute, and I brought some pictures to help. (*Hold one of them up.*) Have you ever seen one of these before? (*Wait for answer.*) These are emojis, or pictures of faces that tell us how someone is feeling. (*Hold up the happy face.*) Can you tell me which emotion or feeling this is? (*Wait for answer.*) Yes, this is happy! Can you all make happy faces? (*Wait.*) Good! (*Hold up angry emoji.*) Now, can you tell me which emotion this is? (*Wait for answer.*) Yes, this is angry. Can you all make angry faces? (*Wait.*) Good! (*Hold up crying emoji.*) Which emotion is this? (*Wait for answer.*) Yes, this is sad. Can you all make a sad face? (*Wait.*) Good! (*Hold up the surprised emoji—this one may be a bit tricky.*) Now, last one, what emotion is this emoji? (*Wait for answer.*) This is surprised. Can you all make a surprised face? (*Wait.*) Good!

Now, tell me this, if you were to pick any of this emojis to feel—happy, angry, sad, or surprised—which one do you *want* to feel? (*Wait for answers.*) A lot of people want to feel happy or even surprised, and that can sometimes make us think that happy or surprised are good emotions and angry or sad are **bad** emotions. But, in our Scripture today, people express all kinds of emotions to God. They show God they are excited then sad and then even angry—and God is okay with all those emotions.

Some emotions feel great and other emotions feel difficult or challenging, but God accepts all of them because they are part of what makes you **you**. This week, I want to give you a challenge. I want you to take a piece of paper and when you feel an emotion this week, write it down or have your grown-up write it down for you. And you might even add a note about what made you feel that emotion. Then bring it back next week, and we are going to keep talking about our emotions and how God is with us in everything that we feel, okay? Let’s pray:

God, thank you for loving us through every feeling and emotion we have. Please help us notice our feelings and learn to love ourselves and our neighbors better every day. Amen.



Scripture • Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead Joseph like a flock!
You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth
before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh.
Stir up your might,
and come to save us!
Restore us, O God;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.
O Lord God of hosts,
how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?
You have fed them with the bread of tears,
and given them tears to drink in full measure.
You make us the scorn of our neighbors;
our enemies laugh among themselves.
Restore us, O God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.

But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand,
the one whom you made strong for yourself.
Then we will never turn back from you;
give us life, and we will call on your name.
Restore us, O Lord God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.



Exegesis

While the possible date of composition for Psalm 80 falls within a wide spectrum, many scholars contend that the core of the psalm was written in response to the fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel to the Assyrian Empire, especially given the reference to the tribes of “Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh” in verse 2. This original core reflects the distinct characteristics of lament psalms. Psalms of lament generally follow a three-part pattern: 1. appeal to God (verses 1-3); 2. lament or accusation (verses 4-13); and 3. petition (verses 14-19). Despite only using select verses of the psalm, the three parts of the psalm of lament are reflected in the portion of the text used here, each of which will be discussed below. However, Psalm 80 also includes a repetitive refrain found in verses 3, 7, and 19. Not usually found in psalms of lament, the refrain indicates a later modification of the psalm, likely as the result of Northern Kingdom refugees bringing the psalm with them to Jerusalem where it was adjusted for use during worship at the Temple. The refrain notably punctuates the three parts of the lament genre, coming at the end of the appeal to God, in the middle of the lament or accusation, and finally at the end of the petition.

A tension between accusation and trust weaves throughout Psalm 80. In the appeal to God in verses 1-3, the psalmist calls God both shepherd and the one “enthroned upon the cherubim,” depicting God as both the one who cares for Israel and the heavenly king ruling over creation. God is not weak or impotent, but eminently capable of delivering Israel from their current crisis. Yet, God has not yet shown up, hence the need for the community to appeal to God in their troubles. Verses 4-7 intensify the sense of accusation hinted at in verse 2b, not only by describing the distressed state of God’s people but by placing the blame for their suffering at God’s feet. God may be the Good Shepherd, but in their state of crisis, the people experience God as the opposite—a shepherd who has given the flock over to suffering and misery. Using the metaphor of food made of tears, the psalmist conveys the depth of the community’s grief and distress. Despite the fact that they are the victims of their adversaries’ scorn, the community blames God because God is ultimately the only one who can restore them.

The refrain serves to amplify the tension between accusation and trust already present in the psalm of lament. Whereas the body of the psalm enumerates the miseries of the people, the refrain reasserts their belief that God’s power can save them, if only God will shine God’s face on them. The Hebrew word *yasha’*, translated as “saved” at the end of the refrain, marks the community’s trust in God while also indicating their distressed circumstances. Here, the people do not request salvation in the face of an impending crisis, but salvation out of an ongoing crisis. Thus, even while emphasizing trust in God’s ability to save, the refrain also points to the struggles that prompt the community to turn to God for help while also blaming God for their suffering.

Notably, Psalm 80’s turn to petition, which includes verses 17-19, ends with this same refrain, which is directly preceded by a promise to praise God if God answers the plea to “give us life.” Translated from the Hebrew *chayah*, the phrase “give us life” indicates more than the mere sustaining of life as opposed to death. It also indicates the restoration of health or to live prosperously. The community’s trust and accusation toward God in the midst of crisis comes down to the plea for a certain quality of life—a life full of health and prosperity, a life that removes them from crisis and makes flourishing possible.



Sermon Notes

ADVENT INTRODUCTION -

As we enter the season of Advent, we begin a journey toward the birth of Jesus. It is important to note that Advent is a *journey toward*, not a four-week *celebration of*, Christmas. This can be hard to remember when we are surrounded by Christmas decorations, Hallmark Christmas movies, and commercials reminding us to get our Christmas shopping done before the Thanksgiving turkey is even out of the oven. Nevertheless, during the next several weeks, we are going to go on a journey together that explores mental health, mental health challenges, and mental wellness alongside the exiled Israelites. Each of the Scriptures we will explore during this series comes out of the context of exile. During exile, the Israelites experienced isolation, death, disruption of normalcy, hopelessness, grief, and uncertainty about the future—many of the same things we experience throughout our lives as individuals and as a community. In addition, all of these Scriptures are traditional readings for the season of Advent, because of their relationship to exile. In Advent, we seek our Savior—just as those in exile sought salvation from their troubles. So, think of this series as an invitation to journey with people who share common experiences and who have wisdom to help us journey toward mental wellness as we await the coming of our Savior, God-with-us.

ALTERNATE INTRODUCTION -

During the next several weeks, we are embarking on a journey together that explores mental health, mental health challenges, and mental wellness. The good news is, we are not going on this journey alone! We have one another, and we also have the witness of the exiled Israelites to guide us. Each of the Scriptures we will explore during this series comes out of the context of exile. During exile, the Israelites experienced isolation, death, disruption of normalcy, hopelessness, grief, and uncertainty about the future—many of the same things we have experienced throughout our lives as individuals and as a community. Each of these Scriptures, two psalms and a passage from Isaiah, were written out of the Israelites' experience of exile. In the midst of their suffering, they called on God for freedom from their troubles, just as we may find ourselves doing in the midst of our own struggles. So, think of this series as an invitation to journey with people who share a common experience and who have wisdom to help us journey toward mental wellness as we wait and hope in the God who saves us.

CONTENT

1. As we begin our journey with Psalm 80, we immediately come across evidence that this text was written following the Assyrian invasion and captivity of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the 8th century B.C.E. Referencing the tribes of Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh, three tribes of the Northern Kingdom, Psalm 80 speaks entirely from a communal voice, as if these tribes gathered to air their grief and pain and fear to God together. By speaking to God as a community, they remind us that God made us to be interdependent—we are made to need each other. Sin tells us the lie that because we are made in the image of God, we are created to be strong, capable, and completely independent, never needing help from anyone. This lie is particularly potent in the way we approach mental health in our country. For so many people, the phrase “mental health” automatically indicates that a person has some kind of mental illness or disorder. But actually, we *all* have mental health. Mental health is, simply, a person's psychological and emotional well-being. Mental health is a neutral term that applies to every person because we all have mental and emotional internal lives. And more importantly, our mental and emotional lives are not simply our individual states—our individual mental health is connected to circumstances and relationships in our communities, including our church. We are created to be interconnected people, physically *and* mentally.

2. From the beginning of Psalm 80, we witness the community using their voice to speak honestly to God about their current distress. Psalm 80 follows a typical pattern of a psalm of lament, beginning with an appeal to God, followed by lament or accusation, and ending with a petition for help. In addition, Psalm 80 includes a refrain found in verses 3, 7, and 19. Using the structure of a psalm of lament alongside this repeated refrain, this psalm is full of tension between accusation and trust—blaming God for their distress while also trusting that God can and will deliver them. In the midst of this tension, the community openly expresses complicated, difficult emotions directly to God. For instance, in verse 1 they call out to God as the Good Shepherd, but then accuse God in verse 5 of feeding them tears to eat and drink. In the midst of their suffering, they do not think God is actually being a good shepherd, and they do not hesitate to say so.

3. Notice how many direct, imperative statements the community declares to God: “Give ear,” “Stir up,” “Restore us,” “give us life.” The community is not afraid to voice their distress before God and one another and demand help. Yet, in our own society, speaking about our emotions, our mental health challenges, or a diagnosis of mental illness carries so much stigma that many choose to stay silent instead of opening up about their experiences. In the United States, 1 in 5 adults experience mental illness, 1 in 20 adults experience serious mental illness, and 17% of children between the ages of 6 and 17 experience a mental health disorder. And these are just the numbers of people with diagnosable mental illness. Many more of us experience mental or emotional distress that either goes undiagnosed due to fear of diagnosis or does not meet the criteria for a diagnosable condition. Throughout your life you have probably experienced seasons of stress, anxiety, grief, or uncertainty. Those experiences have an impact on your mental health. Yet where our society tells us to ignore or hide our struggles, Psalm 80 shows us that when we voice our struggles and distress together openly and honestly, something holy and life-giving happens.

4. In verse 18, the people voice one of their final pleas to God—“give us life.” Throughout the whole psalm, including the portions we did not read today, the exiled Israelites pour out their grief and suffering at God’s feet. Then, right before the concluding refrain, they come to the heart of what they want from God—*life*. This word in Hebrew, *chaya*, does not indicate life as the mere opposite of death. *Chaya* indicates a life of health and prosperity. By openly sharing in their distress, the community recognizes what they want—wellbeing and health for *everyone*. In the context of mental health, this life that we also implore God to give us is a life of mental wellness. Mental wellness means that our bodies, minds, and emotions are all working together to keep us healthy and help us live abundantly as individuals and as neighbors.

5. The first step toward mental wellness for all of us is removing the stigma around mental illness and mental health challenges by honestly recognizing and naming the emotions and stressors that each of us experience in daily life. Where sin tells us we need to ignore or hide hard emotions, God tells us to bring them out into the open. By accepting our myriad emotions as part of being human, we actually work against sin’s lie by telling the vital truth that we *are not alone*. We are in this life together. This also means that we need to become conscious of the stigma our society places around diagnosed mental illness—mental wellness is possible within a diagnosis of mental illness. People who have been diagnosed with mental illness are not weak, deformed, or evil—they are our neighbors who, given the numbers shared earlier, are experiencing a very common human reality. By removing stigma and embracing the many ways we feel, think, and experience the world, we can start to build a community of connection and interdependence that loves God and neighbor by seeking the mental wellness of every person we meet.

A helpful way to open congregants to the prevalence of mental health challenges is offering examples of shared communal experiences that have mental health impacts. For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic serves as an excellent example of a collective experience that has impacted nearly every person in our local communities, if not our world. We have all experienced some level of stress, confusion, anger, irritability, uncertainty, and/or fear in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the mental health effects of the pandemic will live well beyond the end of the pandemic. Learning to identify feelings and talk about the impacts of the pandemic is a critical first step toward finding mental wellness in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The long history of racial oppression and trauma in the United States that came to a particular boiling point with the murder of George Floyd and subsequent protests in the summer of 2020 is another example of a shared national experience with mental health impacts. The violence committed against Black men and women and the unrest, uncertainty, and deep historical wounds brought to light with these events all injure our collective and individual mental health. We are also reminded in each of these examples that while we all suffer in response to these events, the resulting wounds and challenges are unique in scope and breadth to each individual, opening us to greater grace and compassion for one another.



Benediction

As you leave this space today, take a moment to breathe in...and breathe out. Now receive this blessing:

In all the emotions you brought with you today, in all the emotions you carry out of this place, and in all the emotions you experience this week, may God bless you with the understanding that you are human, created and loved by God just as you are. And may you be assured that no matter what you face, God has never and will never leave you alone.

Amen.

For a printable bulletin insert - [click here](#)

Sermon Guide

Week 2



Welcome

Welcome! As we begin, let us take a deep breath in...and a deep breath out. As we welcome one another this morning, we also want to welcome everything we are bringing with us today. So, take a moment to close your eyes and be still.

What do you sense in your body? Does it feel tense or relaxed, tired or energized?

What do you sense in your mind? Does it feel busy or calm, anxious or excited?

What do you sense in your heart? Does it feel heavy or contented, lonely or hopeful?

What do you sense in your spirit? Does it feel burdened or peaceful, disappointed or grateful?

However you are feeling, whatever you bring with you today, you are welcome here. May the love of God and the love of this community surround you as we carry all that we are and all that we are feeling into worship today.

Amen.



Call to Worship

As we continue on our Advent journey*, we name the suffering in our nation and our world. From the uncertainties and losses of the COVID-19 pandemic to the violence of war to the destruction of natural disasters, we are inundated by adversity and long for a Savior. As we wait for our rescue, we ask:

How long, O Lord, how long?

We name the sorrow and challenges in our neighborhoods. From anxieties about how to educate our children to the strain of public discourse riddled with malice instead of kindness to the violence that makes neighbors afraid of their neighbors, we are surrounded by trouble and long for a Shepherd. As we wait for our relief, we ask:

How long, O Lord, how long?

We name the worries and the strains in our homes. From the stresses of juggling childcare, elder care, and full-time jobs to the concerns of how to make ends meet when we are already stretched thin to the grief for all we have lost, we are overwhelmed by distress and long for the Prince of Peace. As we wait for our restoration, we ask:

How long, O Lord, how long?

How long, O Lord, how long, until you rescue, relieve, and restore your people?

Together we wait. Together we hope.

Together we wait and together we hope as we seek wellness of body, mind, and emotions for ourselves and our neighbors.

Amen.

**If not using during Advent, say "As we embark on our journey toward mental wellness..."*



Hymn Selections:

Advent

- **“Blessed Be the God of Israel”**
United Methodist Hymnal #209
- **“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”**
United Methodist Hymnal #211
- **“Lift Up Your Head, Ye Mighty Gates”**
United Methodist Hymnal #213
- **“When God Restored Our Common Life”**
The Faith We Sing #2182 (musical setting of Psalm 126)

Alternative

- **“He Leadeth Me: O Blessed Thought”**
United Methodist Hymnal #128
- **“The Gift of Love”**
United Methodist Hymnal #408
- **“Blessed Be the Tie That Binds”**
United Methodist Hymnal #557
- **“When God Restored Our Common Life”**
The Faith We Sing #2182 (musical setting of Psalm 126)



Children's Sermon

SUPPLIES: A few strips of paper with a different emotion you experienced during the week written on each one. [Be prepared to share one of your own emotions and a simple story that goes with it if the children are not ready to share their emotions or stories. If you do share, think ahead about what you might say others would learn about you from your story later in the children's sermon.]

After the children have gathered, say: “Good morning! Last week, we talked about our emotions or our feelings and how important it is to name those emotions. I sent you home with a piece of paper and asked you to write down an emotion you experienced on it, and I brought a few pieces of paper with emotions I experienced this week, too. And, if you didn't bring your piece of paper back, that's okay. Think for a moment about an emotion you experienced this week. (*Wait a few seconds.*) Who would like to share an emotion they experienced this week? (*Select one child.*) _____, what is one emotion or feeling you had this week? (*Wait for answer.*) Now, can you tell me what happened that made you feel that way? (*Wait for answer.*) Thank you so much for sharing that story! Who else would like to share an emotion or feeling they had this week? (*Select one child.*) _____, what is one emotion or feeling you had this week? (*Wait for answer.*) Now, can you tell me what happened that made you feel that way? (*Wait for answer.*) Thank you so much for sharing that story!

Continued on next page.

In today's Bible reading, we see people sharing stories about how they feel with each other. They not only share their feelings, but they tell a story about why they feel that way. First, they talk about how they experienced laughter and joy because God took care of them. Then, they talk about how they are sad because they are struggling and need God's help again. No matter how they are feeling, they share their feelings as a community and tell stories about why they feel that way. When we share our feelings and stories with one another, we learn how to be good neighbors. When *(insert name)* shared their story, we learned *(insert key insight or fact)* about them. When *(insert name)* shared their story, we learned *(insert key insight or fact)* about them. By listening to each other's stories, we learn more about each other. Learning more about each other is an important way we share God's love. Love is wanting what is best for ourselves, our families, our neighbors, and our friends. When we listen to each other's stories, we help one another know that no matter what we are feeling, we are not alone, and that is definitely a part of loving like God wants us to love. I want to leave you with another challenge before we pray. This week, look for ways that you can hear someone else's story. Maybe you notice that you have a classmate that sits alone at school, or you notice that a friend is feeling sad, or maybe you have a family member who is feeling really happy or surprised. Whatever it is, ask that person how they're doing, ask if they'd like to share what happened to make them feel that way, and listen to what they say. You never know what God might show you when you take time to listen to someone else's story. Let's pray:

God, thank you for always being with us and being part of our story. Help us be good neighbors by listening to the stories our family, friends, and neighbors might have to tell us this week.
Amen.



Scripture • Psalm 126: 1-6

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.
Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations,
"The Lord has done great things for them."
The Lord has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.
Restore our fortunes, O Lord,
like the watercourses in the Negeb.
May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.
Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.



Exegesis

Psalms 120-134, leading some scholars to conceive of this group as a small psalter within the larger psalter that is Psalms. Scholars are not clear as to the liturgical use of these psalms or why they were collected in this way, but two theories rise to the level of likely possibilities: 1. These psalms were sung by pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem, or 2. These psalms were sung while worshippers climbed up the steps to enter the Temple. Written and sung in the communal voice, the psalms of ascent were likely used to both reflect and build the identity of the Israelite community, connecting the seat of God at the Temple to the lives of the whole people of God, those living in Jerusalem and those living far away.

Interpretations of Psalm 126 often take two approaches: the eschatological and the historical. The difference between these two approaches centers around how one reads verses 1-3. Has God *already* restored the fortunes of Zion (historical), or *will* God enact the community's dreamed of restoration of Zion in the future (eschatological)? Most scholars take the historical approach, pointing to verse 1 as a reference to the end of the Babylonian exile and the return of the Israelites to rebuild Zion. However, one should not overlook the tension in this psalm between the historical and the eschatological. Whether God *has* or God *will* restore Zion's fortunes, Psalm 126 sings from the liminal space of human life, recognizing that God has or will bring Zion into flourishing, but we are not there yet.

Psalms 126 is generally divided into two parts: verses 1-3 and 4-6. Taking the historical route, the first half of the psalm references God's past action on behalf of Israel, likely Cyrus the Great's liberation of those taken captive by the Babylonians and their subsequent return and rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. The language of dreaming in verse 1b does not merely indicate that the people longed for this restoration. Rather, dreams in ancient Near Eastern culture were seen as communications of what a deity was about to do. To dream of the restoration of Zion was to believe that God would somehow bring it about, and to be like those who dream is to live in the fulfillment of what God promised would happen. This first section ends with a call-and-response between "the nations" and Israel. First, the nations witness and declare God's good works on behalf of God's people, and then God's people respond, reiterating what the nations have witnessed.

In verse 4, the second section of the psalm picks up from this repetitious affirmation of the good and mighty deeds God has performed on behalf of Zion by turning the recitation of God's past deeds into an imperative plea for divine restoration. Here, the communal voice moves away from the grandiosity of God's past acts to the very real and mundane needs of the community by using agricultural imagery. The Negeb was an arid region wherein streams of water would dry up during the summer. But, after the winter rains filled the streams up again, the area would quickly transform into fertile land for planting until the streams dried up again the following summer. Whereas the restoration in verses 1-3 signals the return of political import and power to Israel, verses 4-6 entreat God to restore and bless the community's life through the mundane rhythms of planting and reaping. While such restoration may be unpredictable, it is expected, just as the rains always return to the Negeb, even if no one knows exactly when.

Yet, just as the rains always come, so does the drought. While the opening verses provide the historical and theological foundation for the community's entreaty to God in verses 4-6, underneath the plea is their current state of distress and grief. God may have restored Zion in the past, but Zion needs God's help again. The rhythms of life brought about weeping (sowing) even as there will again be joy (reaping). Thus, Psalm 126 offers a snapshot of a community in a season of suffering and grief. They know God has provided before, and they need God to provide again, to bring them back to a place of thriving, not merely surviving.



Sermon Notes

ADVENT INTRODUCTION -

This week, we encounter a different kind of psalm on our Advent journey toward mental wellness. Whereas our text last week was a psalm of lament, today's reading is a psalm of ascent. But don't worry—there are still plenty of hard emotions and difficult circumstances for us to unpack! As we discussed last week, our first step on the journey of mental wellness is openly and honestly naming our emotions and stressors. Whether you found that task easy or difficult, I hope you took at least a moment this last week to check in with yourself and name how you were feeling in that moment. Recognizing and naming how you feel is a skill and, like any skill, it requires practice to maintain. Today, we will move further on our journey with the assistance of Psalm 126. Psalm 126 is part of a collection of psalms encompassing Psalm 120-134 that each include the heading "psalm of ascent." Whereas scholars identified the structure of the psalm of lament centuries later, the original author or compiler of the book of Psalms lets us know that this collection served a particular function related to "ascent." Scholars have come up with various possible functions for these psalms. Some think that they were sung by worshippers as they ascended the hill to enter the Temple in Jerusalem. Others think they were traveling songs sung by pilgrims who were journeying to Jerusalem to worship at the Temple. Thus, Psalm 126 serves as a fitting traveling companion on our Advent journey.

ALTERNATE INTRODUCTION -

This week, we encounter a different kind of psalm on our journey toward mental wellness. Whereas our text last week was a psalm of lament, today's reading is a psalm of ascent. But don't worry—there are still plenty of hard emotions and difficult circumstances for us to unpack! As we discussed last week, our first step on the journey toward mental wellness is openly and honestly naming our emotions and stressors. Whether you found that task easy or difficult, I hope you took at least a moment this last week to check in with yourself and name how you were feeling in that moment. Recognizing and naming how you feel is a skill, and like any skill, it requires practice to maintain. Today, we will move further on our journey with the assistance of Psalm 126. Psalm 126 is part of a collection of psalms encompassing Psalm 120-134 that each include the heading "psalm of ascent." Whereas scholars identified the structure of the psalm of lament centuries later, the original author or compiler of the book of Psalms lets us know that this collection served a particular function related to "ascent." Scholars have come up with various possible functions for these psalms. Some think that they were sung by worshippers as they ascended the hill to enter the Temple in Jerusalem. Others think they were traveling songs sung by pilgrims who were journeying to Jerusalem to worship at the Temple. Either way, Psalm 126 serves as a fitting traveling companion as we take this journey together.

CONTENT

1. Like the other texts in this series, Psalm 126 uses exile as a key reference point. Verses 1-3 particularly reference the sudden defeat of the Babylonians by Cyrus the Great that led to the liberation of the exiled Israelites and their return to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. The Babylonian conquest of Judah and subsequent invasion in 587 B.C.E. resulted in the destruction of the city walls and Temple in Jerusalem, as well as multiple waves of deportations of Israelites to Babylon. By the time Cyrus the Great liberated the Jews approximately 50 years later, generations of Israelites had been born in exile, having never seen Jerusalem. In addition, those left in Jerusalem and the surrounding area were left without the defense of the city walls and the Temple, the center of Israel's identity and religious practice, was demolished. So, when they were suddenly and unexpectedly liberated, their fortunes were not just restored but reversed—their despair turned to hope, their mourning turned to joy, their tears turned to laughter. Perhaps we, too, can remember a time when God did great things for us, so great that we and all those around us could not help but proclaim God's hand in our lives.

2. But then the psalm turns away from God's past work to the people's present situation. Whereas verses 1-3 recount how God restored Zion's fortunes in the past, verse 4 repeats the same phrase, turning it into an imperative plea for God to restore our fortunes again. Using familiar images of sowing and reaping, Psalm 126 describes the ebbs and flows of the community's life. Once there was joy and laughter, but now they are grieving and uncertain again, seeking a future joy while sitting in their present anxiety and distress. We can almost imagine a whole caravan of worshippers walking together, singing to remember God's provision in the past but also singing to ask for God's provision now in the midst of their suffering.

3. In many ways, Psalm 126 charts the ups and downs of our communal and individual lives. When we find ourselves in seasons of anxiety and grief, we long for stability and may even confuse mental and physical wellness with a static, unchanging state in body, mind, and emotions. However, as Psalm 126 illustrates, this kind of stability is not real. Yes, God provided in the past for the community, but something has gone wrong—be it drought, famine, or another form of loss—and the people need God's help again. In fact, it is striking how Psalm 126 uses sowing in tears—an illustration of grief—to help identify that something is wrong in their present situation. Where we often think of grief as sadness related to the loss of a person, we can feel grief about many things, not just the loss of a loved one. You may have lost a familiar routine, financial stability, a sense of normalcy or certainty, or crucial parts of the support system you depend on to help with family care responsibilities. These are all forms of loss that produce grief. You may have found yourself crying or irritable or fatigued in response to these losses and not understand why. Allowing ourselves to name our grief as Psalm 126 not only helps us live with these difficult emotions but also helps us gain understanding of what our needs might be in the midst of our grief.

4. Just like Psalm 80, Psalm 126 speaks in the communal voice. This community sings their past, present, and future hopes together, even as their past and present include suffering and distress. Thus, in this psalm we witness the next step in our journey toward mental wellness—sharing our emotions and stories with one another. In Psalm 126, the community not only honestly tells God what they feel and what they need—they also remember their stories together. As we work to name our emotions to ourselves, the next step is to practice compassionate, nonjudgmental listening and sharing with one another. Note that this is *compassionate* and *nonjudgmental* listening. First, compassionate listening centers care for the person who is sharing. To listen compassionately is to recognize and hear your family member, friend, or neighbor as a whole human being made in the image of God. Second, nonjudgmental listening centers presence instead of fixing. In other words, a nonjudgmental listener does not assign blame or shame to anything or anyone in what their neighbor shares, choosing instead to serve as a loving presence that allows the other person to be heard.

5. Through this kind of compassionate, nonjudgmental listening, we begin to create a community of solidarity and trust. Solidarity is what we see in the people who travel together while singing Psalm 126—a people who move together through whatever trials they face, knowing that when they face suffering, distress, uncertainty, and grief, they are not alone. It is no mistake that public health organizations, mental health practitioners, and medical researchers all recommend participation in a community of some sort, including a faith community, for persons experiencing mental health challenges. Remember that mental wellness means that our bodies, minds, and emotions all work together to keep us healthy and help us live abundantly as individuals and as neighbors. When we practice nonjudgmental and compassionate listening, we create a community that resists sin's lie of individualism, embraces our interdependence as we journey through life together, and contributes to the mental wellness of *everyone*.



Benediction

As you leave this space today, take a moment to breathe in...and breathe out. Now receive this blessing:

In all the emotions you brought with you today, in all the emotions you carry out of this place, and in all the emotions you experience this week, you are not alone. May God bless you with traveling companions both divine and human that come alongside you as we journey through life together.

Amen.

For a printable bulletin insert - [click here](#)

Sermon Guide

Week 3



Welcome

Welcome! As we begin, let us take a deep breath in...and a deep breath out. As we welcome one another this morning, we also want to welcome everything we are bringing with us today. So, take a moment to close your eyes and be still.

What do you sense in your body? Does it feel sleepy or awake, tight or loose?

What do you sense in your mind? Does it feel peaceful or restless, distressed or at ease?

What do you sense in your heart? Does it feel proud or downcast, sorrowful or joyful?

What do you sense in your spirit? Does it feel broken or whole, abandoned or redeemed?

Now, turn to your neighbor and say,

However you are feeling, you are welcome here.

You are indeed welcome here, just as you are. Let us worship God together.

Amen.



Call to Worship

As we near the end of our Advent journey*, we name the suffering in our nation and our world. From the uncertainties and losses of the COVID-19 pandemic to the violence of war to the destruction of natural disasters, we are inundated by adversity and long for a Savior. As we wait for our rescue, we ask:

How long, O Lord, how long?

We name the sorrow and challenges in our neighborhoods. From anxieties about how to educate our children to the strain of public discourse riddled with malice instead of kindness to the violence that makes neighbors afraid of their neighbors, we are surrounded by trouble and long for a Shepherd. As we wait for our relief, we ask:

How long, O Lord, how long?

We name the worries and the strains in our homes. From the stresses of juggling childcare, elder care, and full-time jobs to the concerns of how to make ends meet when we are already stretched thin to the grief for all we have lost, we are overwhelmed by distress and long for the Prince of Peace. As we wait for our restoration, we ask:

How long, O Lord, how long?

How long, O Lord, how long, until you rescue, relieve, and restore your people?

Together we wait. Together we hope.

Together we wait and together we hope as we seek wellness of body, mind, and emotions for ourselves and our neighbors.

Amen.

**If not using during Advent, say "As we go together on our journey toward mental wellness..."*



Hymn Selections:

Advent

- **“Hail to the Lord’s Anointed”**
United Methodist Hymnal #203
- **“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”**
United Methodist Hymnal #211
- **“Lo, How a Rose E’er Blooming”**
United Methodist Hymnal #216

Alternative

- **“Hail to the Lord’s Anointed”**
United Methodist Hymnal #203
- **“For the Healing of the Nations”**
United Methodist Hymnal #428
- **“Lord, Whose Love Through Humble Service”**
United Methodist Hymnal #581



Children’s Sermon

SUPPLIES: An empty handbag or child-size backpack, a bag of cotton balls, and a bag of medium and large rocks

After the children are gathered, say: “Good morning! Today, I want to talk about a phrase you may have heard us say in church the last couple of weeks—mental wellness. Can you say that with me? (*Have children repeat the phrase.*) Mental wellness means that our bodies, minds, and emotions are all working together to keep us healthy and help us live well. Some emotions feel good and other emotions feel hard, but all emotions are part of being human, so experiencing a lot of different emotions is part of mental wellness. But one of the things that can keep us from having mental wellness is when a person constantly experiences hard emotions with no relief or support.

[*For this example, if you have some lighter rocks, use those in the bag to help illustrate the point.*] I brought some things with me to help us understand this, and I’m going to need one volunteer to help. (*Pick a volunteer.*) Okay, (*insert name*), I need you to hold this empty bag for me. I also have a bag of cotton balls and a bag of rocks. The cotton balls represent emotions that feel good and the rocks represent emotions that feel hard. Let’s talk about some emotions that you might experience in one day. Let’s say on Monday, you start the day stressed because you couldn’t find your lunchbox and were late to school (*place rock in the bag*). But, during P.E., you scored a goal while playing soccer, and you felt excited (*place a cotton ball in the bag*) and proud (*place a cotton ball in the bag*) as your friends cheered for you. Then, that night you felt disappointed after you found out you weren’t going to get to see your grandma next weekend because she’s sick (*place a rock in the bag*), but your mom gave you a hug, reminded you Grandma loves you, and helped you think of ways to show Grandma you love her (*place a cotton ball in the bag*). Now, (*insert name*), put this bag on your back/shoulder and walk around with it. Does it feel too heavy or does it feel like you could carry it a while? (*Wait for answer.*) Good! This is a day with lots of different emotions, some good and some hard.

Continued on next page.

[For this portion, if you have larger rocks, use those in the bag to help illustrate the point.] Now, let's empty the bag again and think about what a day might feel like for someone who experiences a lot of hard emotions without relief or support. Let's say you wake up on Monday morning and you're hungry, but you're worried there's not much food at home, so you wait to eat until you get to school (*place a rock in the bag*). Then, as you wait to get on the bus, you feel sad and alone because you're really cold, but you know you will have to wait several weeks before your family can afford to buy you a new jacket (*place a rock in the bag*). When you get to school, you feel happy when your friends smile at you and give you a hug (*place a cotton ball in the bag*). Then, in math class, you realize you forgot to grab your homework this morning because you were thinking about how hungry you were (*place a rock in the bag*), and to make it worse, you feel ashamed because someone laughed at you for forgetting your homework again (*place a rock in the bag*). When you get home, you feel happy to get a hug and talk to your mom for a minute (*place a cotton ball in the bag*), but you feel sad and lonely when she has to leave to go to work right after you eat dinner together (*put a rock in the bag*). Oof, that's a lot of emotions. Okay, (*insert name*), now put this on your back/shoulder and walk around for me. Would this bag be harder or easier to carry around for a while than the first one? (*Wait for answer.*) If you had to carry this bag all the time, it would definitely make it harder to play, do homework, or clean your room, wouldn't it?

In today's Bible reading, a prophet, which is just a name for someone who tells the truth, talks about all of the really hard emotions that some of the people in the community were experiencing. They had a lot of heavy rocks they were carrying around, but no one was really noticing or helping. So, the prophet made their neighbors pay attention and told them that God wants to do something about it. God doesn't want to just erase hard emotions, but God does want to help people who are carrying such heavy loads. And God wants us to help. Sometimes helping means taking away some heavy rocks. Maybe it looks like sharing food with a friend who is hungry or defending someone who is being bullied by another kid or even giving a hug to a friend who looks sad. But sometimes we may not be able to remove any of the rocks. In that case, one way we can help is by picking up one of the straps (*pick up a backpack strap/handbag handle*) and offering to help our friend carry it by listening and loving them through whatever is going on. All of these are ways that we can help other people have mental wellness. And you want to know a secret? Helping other people have mental wellness helps you have it too. Let's pray:

God, thank you for our emotions, both the good and the hard. Please help us notice, listen, and help our neighbors when they are struggling. We want to help your dream of mental wellness for everybody come true. Amen.



Scripture • Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.
They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.

For I the Lord love justice,
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;
I will faithfully give them their recompense,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.
Their descendants shall be known among the nations,
and their offspring among the peoples;
all who see them shall acknowledge
that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed.
I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.



Exegesis

Like the psalms discussed the previous two weeks, exile predominates the context of Isaiah 61. Most scholars speculate that Isaiah 61 was written just after the end of the Babylonian exile and the Israelites' return to rebuild Jerusalem. After recounting the divine call granting the prophet authority to speak and act, the prophet declares a mission of reversal. All the experiences of exile—oppression, brokenheartedness, captivity, mourning, faintness of spirit, devastation—appear in verses 1-4. One might expect such prophetic writings *during* exile. Yet, if Isaiah 61 was written shortly after the Babylonian exile ended, why does the prophet speak as if the people are still in exile? One possibility is that the author is making a theological point—the Israelites remain in a state of spiritual exile because they commit the same sins enacted against them during exile in their own communities. From this perspective, Isaiah 61 seeks to disrupt generational cycles of sin in order to promote a healthier society in which all people can thrive. Physical exile is not the only form of captivity that hinders the Israelites from displaying God's glory—participating in oppression enacts exile on our neighbors, inhibiting the whole community from embodying God's love together.

Regarding mental health, Isaiah 61 does not support notions that mental illness or mental health challenges are forms of bondage from which persons need deliverance. The prophet does not deride the grief or brokenheartedness as indications of faithlessness or as individual disorders. Rather, the prophet speaks honestly about the physical, emotional, and spiritual challenges experienced by God's people alongside God's desire for the flourishing of those who have been exiled, brokenhearted, and oppressed. This passage addresses the impact of societal sins on a person's ability to flourish, including their mental wellness. Verse 2, in particular, illustrates God's desire for human flourishing by referencing "the year of the Lord's favor," or the Jubilee (Leviticus 25), in which the Israelites are instructed to declare a year of liberation—including the return of property and the freeing of enslaved persons—every 50 years. No record exists of the Israelites actually practicing Jubilee, but the prophet's reference to it in Isaiah 61 is clear—God desires liberation and flourishing for everyone, not just those with a socioeconomic advantage. Further, the return of property and the freeing of enslaved persons restores dignity and agency to the disempowered. The restoration of property and livelihood sits directly alongside the restoration of comfort, gladness, and praise.

In verse 8 we experience a shift in speaker. Up to this point, the lone prophet declares God's mission for the post-exile exiles in Israel. Then, in verses 8 and 9, God speaks. Whereas the prophet highlights both the effects of sin and their reversal, God pinpoints the problem—justice, or a lack thereof. God seeks to enact the justice missing in Israelite society and in enacting that justice makes a covenant to bless those who have been oppressed. The return to and rebuilding of Jerusalem is not where God's salvific work ends for the Israelites. Salvation also includes participation in the restoration of justice on individual and communal levels.

The speaker shifts again in verses 10 and 11 as Isaiah 61 ends with Zion's response to the prophet and to God. After receiving instruction from the prophet and God, Zion responds with praise as the community acknowledges the salvation offered them in the naming and turning away from generational cycles of sin. Notably, the Hebrew word for salvation in verse 10, *yesh'a*, is derived from the word *yasha'*, the same word for salvation found in Psalm 80's refrain. The "garment of salvation," then, depicts Zion physically wearing the welfare and prosperity God brings by delivering them out of a crisis, in this case the communal crisis of generational cycles of sin. Thus, God restores Israel by comforting the oppressed *and* building a new creation in which the earth and the people flourish in righteousness and praise.



Sermon Notes

ADVENT INTRODUCTION -

In this final week of our Advent journey toward mental wellness, we shift away from Psalms to explore a prophetic text. Like our other readings in this series, Isaiah 61 references Israel's experience of exile, specifically the Babylonian exile that was also referenced last week in Psalm 126. This text also carries a special significance for Advent because of Jesus' reading of this text in Luke 4 that, in essence, announced his mission of salvation to his hometown. So, as we sit with this text, we hear not only the prophet's divine call to enact God's salvation in the neighborhood but also Jesus' mission announced in his own neighborhood centuries later, as well as the mission we are called to enact today as Jesus' followers. At the same time, Isaiah 61 presents us with a profound perspective on the impact our relationships with one another have for our individual and communal mental wellness. So, as we've learned to honor our own emotions and compassionately listen to the emotions and stories of others, today we explore how the community we seek to build can enact hope together so that every person can live into mental wellness.

ALTERNATE INTRODUCTION -

In this final week of our series, we shift away from Psalms to explore a prophetic text. Like our other readings in this series, Isaiah 61 references Israel's experience of exile, specifically the Babylonian exile that was also referenced last week in Psalm 126. This text also carries a special significance because Jesus reads this text in Luke 4 as a way of announcing his mission of salvation to his hometown. So, as we sit with Isaiah 61, we hear not only the prophet's divine call to enact God's salvation in the neighborhood but also Jesus' mission announced in his own neighborhood centuries later, as well as the mission we are called to enact today as Jesus' followers. At the same time, Isaiah 61 presents us with a profound perspective on the impact our relationships with one another have for our mental wellness as individuals and as a community. So, as we've learned to honor our own emotions and compassionately listen to the emotions and stories of others, today we explore how the community we seek to build can enact hope together so that every person can live into mental wellness.

CONTENT

1. At first glance, Isaiah 61 appears to be a text written *during* Israel's exile. In the first four verses, the prophet presents a laundry list of the conditions of exile: oppression, brokenheartedness, captivity, imprisonment, mourning, devastation. The experience of exile is close at hand to the prophet. However, the style and themes explored in Isaiah 61 lead many scholars to date this text to the period just after Israel's return from the Babylonian exile. So, why is the prophet speaking as if Israel is still in exile when they have already been liberated? The prophet is concerned that, while liberated from the Babylonians, Israel remains in a state of spiritual exile. The Israelites are enacting the same sins committed against them in exile against their own neighbors. The spiritual exile of some results in the physical experience of the effects of exile for others, despite Israel's political and physical freedom from their Babylonian oppressors. By using the language of exile to describe the suffering of some of their people, the prophet seeks to disrupt cycles of sin in order to promote a healthier society in which every person can thrive, not just those with the most power or money.

2. The distinction between physical exile and spiritual exile at play in Isaiah 61 has profound wisdom to offer us now as we grapple with the ups and downs of our lives. Isaiah 61 reminds us that being freed from physical or external sources of suffering or exile does not automatically free us from the spiritual exile of sin. More specifically, we cannot wait to seek mental wellness until the physical source of our suffering is in our rearview mirror, nor can we expect we will automatically find mental wellness once difficult circumstances are over. We must continue to be aware of how sin's lie that we must handle our lives and our emotions on our own continues to influence us in the way we love ourselves and in the way we love our neighbors.

- 3.** In verses 1-4, the prophet uses language of reversal to depict how God calls us to respond to the circumstances of exile, whatever the source may be. God's response to oppression is to proclaim good news. God's response to captivity is liberty. God's response to mourning is comfort and provision. As in Psalm 80 and Psalm 126, note that the emotions and circumstances described in these verses are not used to heap shame on those who experience them, nor is the community ignoring these challenges. By discussing these experiences of suffering and distress in their midst, the prophet opens the way for the people to hear that God knows about the suffering and will respond, particularly through the work of the prophet and those who are listening to the prophet's words.
- 4.** When we encounter this text in the context of mental health, it is important to note that the liberation discussed in Isaiah 61 is not about delivery from the bondage of mental illness or other mental health challenges. This is made abundantly clear when God becomes the primary speaker in verses 8 and 9. God does not blame those who are suffering for their circumstances, nor does God discount their distress. Rather, God says, "For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing." Justice, robbery, and wrongdoing are all communal realities—they happen in the context of how we relate to one another. Where we might be tempted to fall back into understanding mental illness and mental health challenges as individual, isolated realities, God says no. God desires that we live justly with one another, that we not rob or sin against one another, but that we live and act out of the knowledge that we are all connected to one another. Only then can we exercise the active hope we need to promote mental wellness in our community.
- 5.** Verses 10 and 11 begin to show us the impact of this active hope. "Active hope" communicates that we are not simply sitting around waiting for God to bring about the liberation and wellness we all need. Active hope means that we participate in the work God is doing in the world, acting as God's agents of hope that work toward the flourishing and wellness of all of our neighbors. Verses 10 and 11 depict this as Zion responds to the prophet and to God. While the singular "I" is used throughout these last two verses, Zion represents the whole people of God, so these last few verses are actually the community responding to the truth that the prophet and God have shared with them. Importantly, their response is praise—recognizing sin and sin's effects and then turning away from sin produces praise. In addition, the Hebrew word for salvation in verse 10, *yeshah*, is derived from the word *yasha*, the same word found in Psalm 80's refrain. The "garment of salvation," then, depicts Zion physically wearing the welfare and prosperity God brings by delivering them out of a crisis, in this case the communal crisis created by cycles of sin. Thus, God restores Israel by comforting the oppressed and building a new creation in which the earth and the people flourish in righteousness and praise as they participate with God's work in active hope.
- 6.** Journeying toward mental wellness and thriving for ourselves and our neighbors begins with naming our own emotions and compassionately listening to the stories and emotions of others—the skills we've already been cultivating throughout this series. You or your neighbor may feel imprisoned, brokenhearted, or oppressed by emotions or circumstances that are seen or unseen. You may be experiencing enormous grief—you may be like those who mourn. Name those emotions and tell your stories about these emotions together. *And then*, imagine what flourishing might look like and do something, no matter how small, to start to make that flourishing a reality. Isaiah 61 is filled with imagination and call to action—it both imagines what flourishing would look like for those who are suffering in the community and then it calls us to participate in making that imagination a reality. By accepting suffering and distress as part of being human in a broken world, the prophet helps us imagine how we can be a community that acts in hope toward our individual and communal mental wellness. Together.



Benediction

As you leave this space today, take a moment to breathe in...and breathe out. Now receive this blessing:

In all the emotions you brought with you today, in all the emotions you carry out of this place, and in all the emotions you experience this week, we do not journey through life alone. May God bless you with compassionate ears and holy imaginations that are ready to participate in God's work to make mental wellness and flourishing possible for all our neighbors.

Amen.

For a printable bulletin insert - [click here](#)

Service of Darkness and Light

Advent



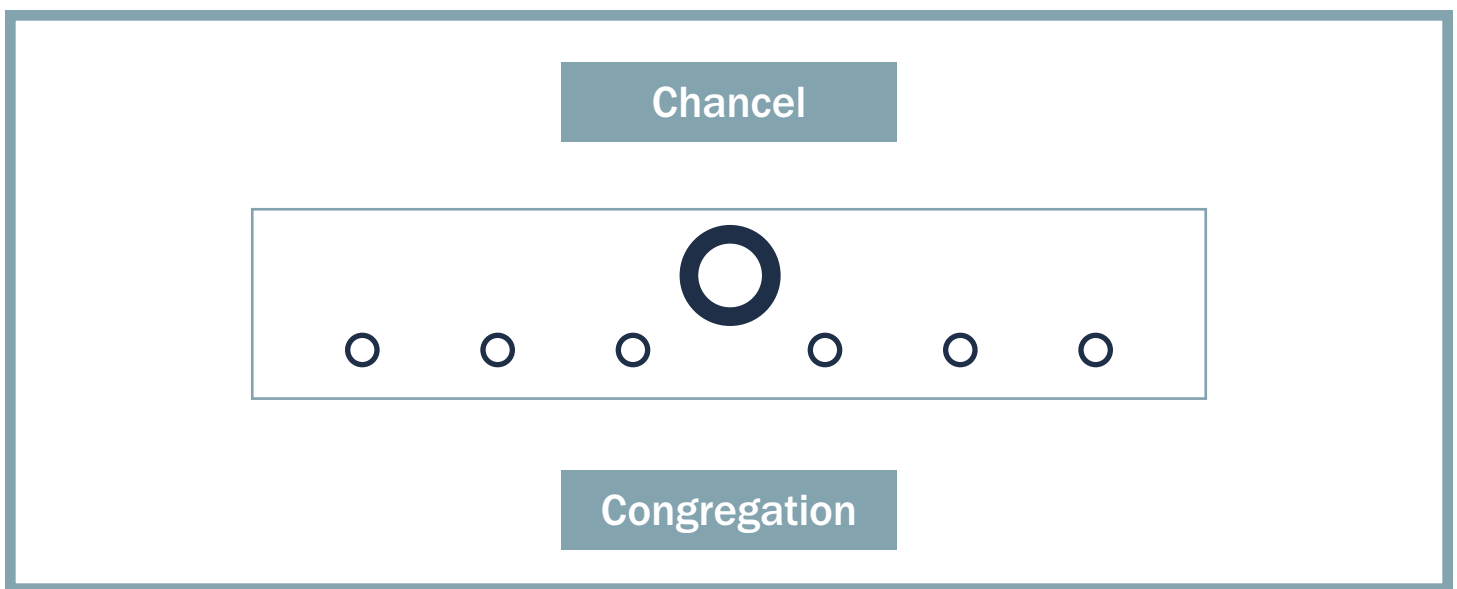
The Service of the Longest Night provides an opportunity for a congregation to gather around and in support of those who mourn and are in distress during the Advent season leading up to Christmas. Held on or around the winter solstice, the service connects the external reality of increasingly darker days with the internal reality of the unrest, grief, and depression that many people feel around the holidays.

As part of the Journey toward Mental Wellness sermon guide, this liturgy seeks to create a worship space for individuals to gather as a community in prayer and solidarity to name their concerns, grief, and challenges aloud or in their hearts. Whether you use this liturgy as a midweek prayer service or as the basis for the fourth Sunday of Advent, the goal is to create room for silence, prayer, and contemplation. If other worship elements are added to this liturgy, keep in mind the need to allow plenty of space for silent prayer during the six readings interspersed with intercessory prayers. Such space for silence is a gift many in our society rarely receive.

SUPPLIES NEEDED:

An altar/table, six small to medium candles (i.e., votive or small pillar candles), one large pillar or taper candle, and a way to light and extinguish the candles. Arrange the candles on the altar with the large candle in the center and the six smaller candles spread out on either side. A diagram depicting one possible arrangement is included below.

Before the service begins, light the six smaller candles on the altar but leave the center candle unlit. It will be lit after the seventh reading. If possible, keep the lights low enough in the worship space that participants experience the slow removal of the lights from the candles throughout the service. Keep in mind, of course, the need to keep enough light that congregants can participate in the service. Before the seventh reading, consider lowering the lights as much as possible to emphasize the lighting of the center candle.





Service of the Longest Night Service:

A Journey of Darkness and Light

Welcome.

To all who are empty and all who are full, we say together:

Welcome.

To all who are joyful and all who mourn, we say together:

Welcome.

To all with anxious hearts and all with peaceful spirits, we say together:

Welcome.

As day turns to night and light turns to darkness, so do our lives ebb and flow between peace and uncertainty, grief and joy. As we enter this service of darkness and light, you are welcome here, just as you are.

You are welcome here, just as you are.

As we begin our journey of darkness and light, God is with us. We are not alone.

God is with us. We are not alone. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

OPENING PRAYER

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Let us pray.

Savior, even as we await your coming, we long for help. Our lives are a mix of sorrow and delight, times of dancing and times of distress. Where we are weary and wounded, hold us close. Where we are content and at peace, hold us close. Guide us, Good Shepherd, into rest, into healing, and into wellness in our lives, our community, and our world. Emmanuel, God with us, keep us near as we travel through darkness and light toward the abundant life you give, know you are with us through it all. **Amen.**

HYMN

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, vs. 1-2

United Methodist Hymnal #211

THE FIRST READING: GENESIS 1:1-3

Creator God, we pray for the world you created and all the people who inhabit it. From natural disasters to a lack of clean air and water to anxieties for our future, we lift our worries and concerns to you...

(In the silence, you are invited to share your concerns aloud or in your heart.)

Lord, in your mercy,
Hear our prayer.

Extinguish the first candle.

THE SECOND READING: ECCLESIASTES 3:1-8

Shepherding God, we pray for our community and the rhythms of life we live together. As we reflect on the joys and challenges of our lives together, we lift our mourning and our dancing to you...

(In the silence, you are invited to share your concerns aloud or in your heart.)

Lord, in your mercy,
Hear our prayer.

Extinguish the second candle.

THE THIRD READING: PSALM 23

Anointing God, we pray for those in need. Where food insecurity, financial instability, housing uncertainty, and crumbling infrastructure does harm to our community's physical and mental wellness, we lift our need for provision and peace to you...

(In the silence, you are invited to share your concerns aloud or in your heart.)

Lord, in your mercy,
Hear our prayer.

Extinguish the third candle.

HYMN

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, vs. 6-7

United Methodist Hymnal #211

THE FOURTH READING: ISAIAH 40:1-2, 28-31

Comforting God, we pray for those who give care to others—those parents, family caregivers, medical professionals, and friends who directly tend to the wellbeing of another. In the midst of burnout, exhaustion, and heavy loads, we lift our weariness and stress to you...

(In the silence, you are invited to share your concerns aloud or in your heart.)

Lord, in your mercy,
Hear our prayer.

Extinguish the fourth candle.

THE FIFTH READING: LAMENTATIONS 3:1-3, 19-26

Faithful God, we pray for those who are grieving. Surrounded by losses of many kinds—loss of a loved one, loss of normalcy, loss of certainty, loss of security—we lift our sorrow and heartbreak to you...

(In the silence, you are invited to share your concerns aloud or in your heart.)

Lord, in your mercy,
Hear our prayer.

Extinguish the fifth candle.

THE SIXTH READING: PSALM 22:1-5, 12-19

Listening God, we pray for those who are distressed. As the overwhelming crush of stress, uncertainty, fatigue, and worry crashes into the beauty of our God-given vulnerability, we lift our despair and longing for relief to you...

(In the silence, you are invited to share your concerns aloud or in your heart.)

Lord, in your mercy,
Hear our prayer. Amen.

Extinguish the sixth candle.

HYMN**O Little Town of Bethlehem, vs. 1**

United Methodist Hymnal #230

THE SEVENTH READING: JOHN 1:1-5

Light the center candle.

BENEDICTION

As you depart from this place, go with this blessing:

May the love of God who made you and sustains you be with you always, guiding you through seasons of darkness and light and drawing you into relationship with fellow traveling companions along the way. And may you always remember you are never alone—God is with us. **Amen.**

Depart in silence.

Service of Darkness and Light

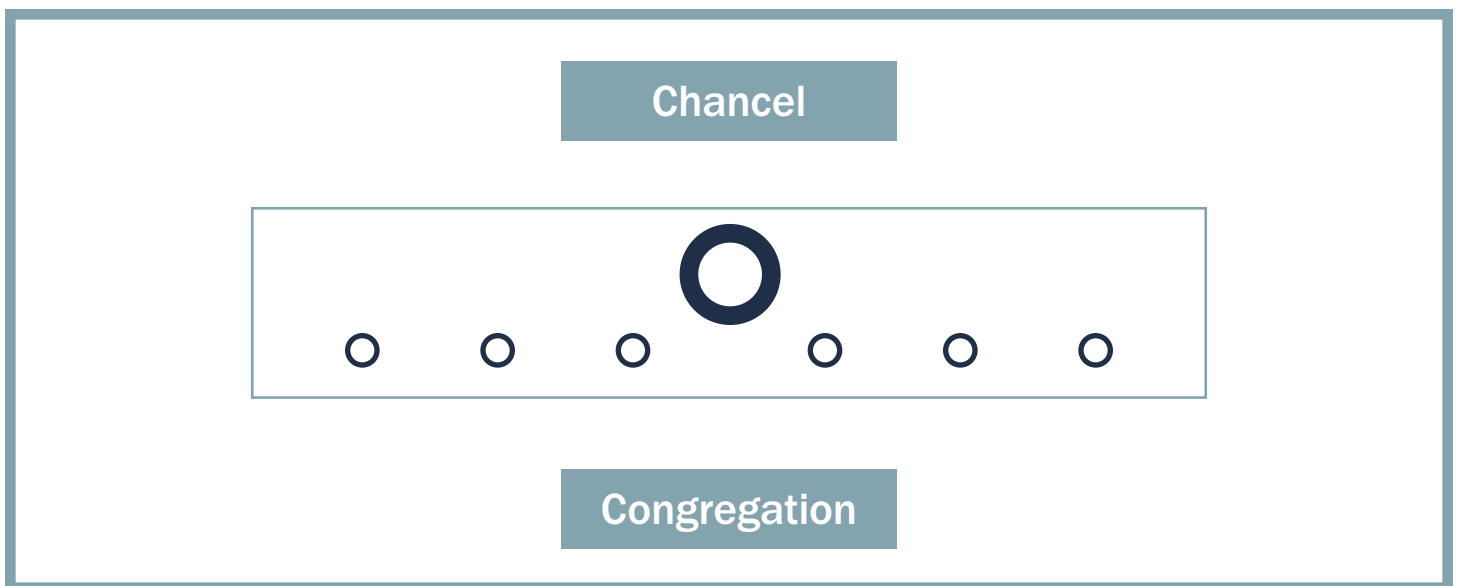
Ordinary Time



As part of the Journey toward Mental Wellness sermon guide, the Service of Darkness and Light seeks to create a worship space for individuals to gather as a community in prayer and solidarity to name their concerns, grief, and challenges aloud or in their hearts. Whether you use this liturgy as a midweek prayer service or as the basis for a fourth Sunday of this sermon series, the goal is to create room for silence, prayer, and contemplation. If other worship elements are added to this liturgy, keep in mind the need to allow plenty of space for silent prayer during the six readings interspersed with intercessory prayers. Such space for silence is a gift many in our society rarely receive.

The supplies needed for this service are: an altar/table, six small to medium candles (i.e., votive or small pillar candles), one large pillar or taper candle, and a way to light and extinguish the candles. Arrange the candles on the altar with the large candle in the center and the six smaller candles spread out on either side. A diagram depicting one possible arrangement is included below.

Before the service begins, light the six smaller candles on the altar but leave the center candle unlit. It will be lit after the seventh reading. If possible, keep the lights low enough in the worship space that participants experience the slow removal of the lights from the candles throughout the service, keep in mind, of course, the need to keep enough light that congregants can participate in the service. Before the seventh reading, consider lowering the lights as much as possible to emphasize the lighting of the center candle.





A Service of Darkness and Light

Welcome

To all who are empty and all who are full, we say together:

Welcome.

To all who are joyful and all who mourn, we say together:

Welcome.

To all with anxious hearts and all with peaceful spirits, we say together:

Welcome.

As day turns to night and light turns to darkness, so do our lives ebb and flow between peace and uncertainty, grief and joy. As we enter this service of darkness and light, you are welcome here, just as you are.

You are welcome here, just as you are.

As we begin our journey of darkness and light, God is with us. We are not alone.

God is with us. We are not alone. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

OPENING PRAYER

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Let us pray.

Savior, as we go journey through the ups and downs of life, we long for help. Our lives are a mix of sorrow and delight, times of dancing and times of distress. Where we are weary and wounded, hold us close. Where we are content and at peace, hold us close. Guide us, Good Shepherd, into rest, into healing, and into wellness in our lives, our community, and our world. Emmanuel, God with us, keep us near as we travel through darkness and light toward the abundant life you give, know you are with us through it all. **Amen.**

HYMN

Sweet Hour of Prayer, vs. 1-2

United Methodist Hymnal #496

THE FIRST READING: GENESIS 1:1-3

Creator God, we pray for the world you created and all the people who inhabit it. From natural disasters to a lack of clean air and water to anxieties for our future, we lift our worries and concerns to you...

(In the silence, you are invited to share your concerns aloud or in your heart.)

Lord, in your mercy,
Hear our prayer.

Extinguish the first candle.

THE SECOND READING: ECCLESIASTES 3:1-8

Shepherding God, we pray for our community and the rhythms of life we live together. As we reflect on the joys and challenges of our lives together, we lift our mourning and our dancing to you...

(In the silence, you are invited to share your concerns aloud or in your heart.)

Lord, in your mercy,
Hear our prayer.

Extinguish the second candle.

THE THIRD READING: PSALM 23

Anointing God, we pray for those in need. Where food insecurity, financial instability, housing uncertainty, and crumbling infrastructure does harm to our community's physical and mental wellness, we lift our need for provision and peace to you...

(In the silence, you are invited to share your concerns aloud or in your heart.)

Lord, in your mercy,
Hear our prayer.

Extinguish the third candle.

HYMN

Sweet Hour of Prayer, vs. 3

United Methodist Hymnal #496

THE FOURTH READING: ISAIAH 40:1-2, 28-31

Comforting God, we pray for those who give care to others—those parents, family caregivers, medical professionals, and friends who directly tend to the wellbeing of another. In the midst of burnout, exhaustion, and heavy loads, we lift our weariness and stress to you...

(In the silence, you are invited to share your concerns aloud or in your heart.)

Lord, in your mercy,

Hear our prayer.

Extinguish the fourth candle.

THE FIFTH READING: LAMENTATIONS 3:1-3, 19-26

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THE SIXTH READING: PSALM 22:1-5, 12-19

Listening God, we pray for those who are distressed. As the overwhelming crush of stress, uncertainty, fatigue, and worry crashes into the beauty of our God-given vulnerability, we lift our despair and longing for relief to you...

(In the silence, you are invited to share your concerns aloud or in your heart.)

Lord, in your mercy,

Hear our prayer. Amen.

Extinguish the sixth candle.

HYMN**Great Is Thy Faithfulness, vs. 1**

United Methodist Hymnal #140

THE SEVENTH READING: JOHN 1:1-5

Light the center candle.

BENEDICTION

As you depart from this place, go with this blessing:

May the love of God who made you and sustains you be with you always, guiding you through seasons of darkness and light and drawing you into relationship with fellow traveling companions along the way. And may you always remember you are never alone—God is with us. **Amen.**

Depart in silence.