

Light For Those Who Walk In Gloom

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A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the third Sunday after Epiphany, January 21, 1990. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 9:1-4; 1 Corinthians 1:10-17; Matthew 4:12-23.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Before the sun rises tomorrow over 60 people in the United States will commit suicide. Over 30,000 men and women in the U.S. take their own lives annually and the overall rate of suicide is increasing.

The most likely candidates for suicide are not teenagers but men over the age of 65. The next most likely, men between the ages of 55 and 64, then men between the ages of 25-34. Only then does the male teenager appear in the rankings. Even so, the second leading cause of death among teen-agers is suicide.

1. Why do people commit suicide? In our society so much of one's self esteem is wrapped up in our health and work. One of the first questions we ask people is, "What do you do?" Men, in particular, seem to find so much of their value as persons in the ability to work and to earn money. When some of these men retire they become deeply depressed and feel worthless. The death of a wife, or debilitating illness, or a sense of worthlessness adds to a sense of meaninglessness. Sometimes it's lack of money. A person retires after working hard all his life and makes the humiliating discovery that he has barely enough to pay the bills. Sometimes the pain's so great that it's overwhelming.

One woman who attempted suicide gave this account: "I was so desperate. I felt, my God, I couldn't face this thing. Everything was like a terrible whirlpool of confusion. And I thought to myself: There's only one thing to do. I just have to lose consciousness. That's the only way to get away from it."

The suicidal person often feels God forsakened. He or she experiences

overwhelming feelings of hopelessness and helplessness, feels incapable of working out any other solution and is unable to see other alternatives. Often a suicidal person feels deeply alienated from God and is keenly aware of his or her sinfulness and worthlessness.

2. Those 30,000 men and women who will take their lives this year aren't the only ones who walk in darkness. The survivors, the husbands, wives, children, parents also may live under a dark cloud for years. The survivors are left to deal with so many negative feelings and sometimes become obsessed with real or imagined guilt.

The person who commits suicide doesn't seem to think about how much those who are left behind hurt. Suicide is most often a form of escape from what's perceived to be unbearable pain. It's not primarily a means of hurting others. Suicide, by nature, is a very selfish act. The focus is on the self and its annihilation, not on what the completion of the act would do to others.

3. Do Christians commit suicide. Yes, they do. A Christian can believe fervently that Christ is the answer to life's tough problems but sometimes feel overwhelmed by those problems. Some even come to believe that, by committing suicide, they'll escape to the comfort of Jesus and finally be free.

I remember well a dark, cold night in December, 1962. I was a freshman in college. Sam and I had been active in Youth for Christ in high school. He was a committed Christian who loved the Lord. I'd known his girl-friend all my life. The night before he took his life I had dinner in the college dining hall with him and his girl-friend. I joked with him about stealing his girl-friend. We all laughed. That was the last I saw him alive.

The next evening I was studying in the library when a friend came up and said, "Sammy's dead. He committed suicide?" "You don't kid about stuff like that," I said angrily. "But it's true. His room-mate found him." I knew by the look in his eyes that he wasn't kidding. I went outside into the darkness and stood in silence on the front steps of the library for I don't know how long. I began to think crazy thoughts. "Could my comment about his girl-friend have been taken seriously? Didn't he know it was just a joke?" I began to look at things I'd said and done that might have contributed to his death. We often react to suicide with feelings of guilt. We become obsessed with "if onlys". If only I'd known! If only I hadn't said that! If only _____!

After the shock came fear. Could this happen to me? I'd been depressed and discouraged before. Like most teen-agers I struggled with shyness and low self-esteem. I felt ugly and stupid and clumsy, especially around girls I liked, but I never seriously thought of suicide. Could things get so bad for me that I'd do something like that? I spent hours talking with our college chaplain. I don't remember anything he said but it seemed to help just to talk about my fear, guilt, shock and sadness.

4. Some of you may be saying, "Why are you talking about suicide? You're liable to put ideas in peoples' heads." I don't believe that talking about suicide encourages people to take their life. In fact, this kind of open discussion, I hope, will free people who are walking in darkness to talk about the despair and hopelessness we all feel from time to time. Maybe, by talking about it, someone will think, "Someone knows what I'm feeling. I'm not the only one."

Chances are that someone you've known has committed suicide; someone you know has attempted suicide or is thinking about it. The

thought may have even occurred to you.

As Christians we believe that a great light has come into the world with Jesus. We believe that since Good Friday and Easter Sunday no situation is so hopeless or so dark that there's no light. We affirm to those who are walking in darkness, "God is for you. He's not against you. He's with you, and will never leave you, even when you don't feel his presence; even when you can't even believe in God or the grace of God; even when you don't want to believe." Jesus comes to you and me in our dark night and says, "I am this dark world's Light; Look unto Me, thy morn shall rise, And all the day be bright."

Years ago, when I was feeling depressed, I came across an article in a Sunday newspaper. Graffiti had been found, shortly after WWII, in a cellar where a family had taken refuge from the ravages of war. In those dark days of death someone had scratched on the walls of that cellar,

I believe in the sun, even when I cannot see it shining.
I believe in love, even when I feel it not.
I believe in God, even when he is silent.

That's what the prophet Isaiah was telling his people. The kingdom of Israel was falling to pieces. It was one of the darkest times in the history of God's people. They felt utterly forsaken by God, utterly without hope, living in the shadow of a brutal, savage Assyrian invasion.

Darkness and gloom all about but they won't last forever, God assures them through the prophet Isaiah. The all-embracing gloom will pass away. God will keep his promises. Our God is faithful to his promises, the darkness will be dispelled. In the place of the darkness of calamity is the light of peace and blessedness; in place of the darkness of death, the light of life; in place of the darkness of ignorance, the light of knowledge; in place of the darkness of sin, the light of salvation.

Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed starred in one of the greatest movies ever made. It's called *It's a Wonderful Life*. Kay and I have watched that movie nearly every year since we first saw it years ago.

When Stewart's character, George Bailey, comes to the end of his rope, and is convinced that the world would be richer if he were dead and had never been born - he tries suicide... but he's rescued... by his guardian angel.

Then that guardian angel shows him the tombstone of his brother, who fell through the lake and drowned. "He didn't drown!" Stewart says, "I rescued him! He grew up. He's a grown man." "No," the angel said. "You see, you were *never* born. There was *no one* to rescue him. He drowned."

Then the angel shows a poor pharmacist walking into a bar to get a drink, using cardboard to shelter himself from the cold. Stewart recognizes him as the pharmacist he worked for when he was in high school. "What's wrong with him?" he asks. "He just got out prison," the angel says. "You know, he was drinking and he gave the wrong pills... and he killed a man." "No!" he says. "That's not true! I pointed it out to him and he slapped me. I didn't deliver that! It would have killed him. He didn't die."

"You weren't born," the angel said. "And you weren't there to intervene... and he did dispense the wrong medication... and he was sent to the penitentiary for 15 years, and has just gotten out."

All of a sudden, Jimmy Stewart realizes: "It does matter that I was born. At least someone has benefited by my birth."

Now think, if you will, if *you* had never been born. Is there a mother or a father who would have been bereft because you were not born? Is there someone who would've remained *unloved* by anyone? If you had never been born, is there someone to whom you've extended forgiveness and to whom *no one else* has ever extended forgiveness? Is there someone in

desperate need, a need you have uniquely met, but a need that would not have been met if *you* had not been born?

Sometimes we may feel overwhelmed with darkness. Sometimes we ask ourselves, "Do I really matter to anyone? Do I matter to God?" The darkness in which you walk is not impenetrable gloom and the night has stars. Jesus faced the agony of death. When he suffered death on the cross he bore every conceivable pain and guilt and sin that may weigh us down. He is raised from the dead, and in him only do we truly find our resurrection. Because he lives, we live. Amen.

God of light, in whom there is no darkness: give us such joy in Jesus that darkness may be driven from us, and your light shine in our lives by faith; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

ben Haden, "Do you Matter?"

John R. Throop, Dealing with Suicide.

James S. Stewart, "God and the Fact of Suffering: Lights in the Darkness"

John H. Hewett, After Suicide.

Edward J. Young, The book of Isaiah.

Lois A. bloom, Mourning After Suicide.

Prayers of the People

Lord Jesus Christ, you are the light of the world: light up our lives when we are in darkness. In the darkness of our uncertainty- when we don't know what to do, when decisions are hard to take: Lord, give us light to guide us. In the darkness of our anxiety - when we are worried about what the future may bring, when we don't know where to turn: Lord, give us the light of your peace. In the darkness of our despair - when life seems empty, when we feel there is no point in going on: Lord, give us the light of your hope.

Lord God, we praise you, we worship you, because by our baptism into the body of Christ you have given us anew beginning, a new kind of life. We know that much of our life - our thoughts, feelings, and action- has not yet been touched or changed by the life you have given: help us to see the claims of your love in every part of our life and having seen them to accept them, so that everything in us may be remade by your love. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

And now as Christ our Saviour has taught us, hear us as we humbly pray...