July 30, 2017
TEXT: Psalm 137
TITLE: Melancholy Faith
By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

No one likes to be described as a "moody" person. But the truth is we all experience a variety of moods, ranging from happy and excited to angry, pensive, sad and depressed. That is part of our make-up, how God made us. Yet too often we assume that only one end of that scale has value – that we should always be happy. "Don't worry; be happy." We read fairy tales that start "Once upon a time" and end by saying they lived "happily ever after," and we wonder "Shouldn't I be happy all the time too?" Churches can fall into this trap, telling worshipers that if you truly love Christ, you'll be happy and joyful all the time—which conversely means that sad people must be deficient in their faith.

God made us capable of experiencing a wide range of moods, so sometimes that means we are un-happy, living on the other end of the spectrum from joyful. That must have a purpose within God's plan. Melancholy people are still God's people and loved by the Lord. And I would go even further and suggest that the bible is full of melancholy characters who were incredible people of faith and witness, just as can be said of many of us melancholy folk.

If we focus on the somber end of the emotional scale, there are several feelings clustered there. There is sadness, which could come from disappointment or grief. There is gloominess, which is sadness mixed with anger and frustration. There is depression, which in its clinical form can descend heavily like a debilitating fog. Author Susan Sontag described depression as "melancholy minus its charm." The physiological condition of depression and the emotional quality of grief are both worthy of sermons of their own. Today I'm going to move slightly up the spectrum from those options and talk about melancholy—that pensive sadness that comes upon us when things aren't as they should be; it is what someone described as the feeling that comes upon us when we're in a beautiful place but right then the sun is going down. (Thrity Umrigar)

The idea for this sermon came from something I read. A woman found out she was moving to Copenhagen, so the first thing she did was buy a new raincoat. (I wonder how many people do that when they learn they're moving to Pittsburgh?) She'd been told Danish people don't believe in bad weather, just bad clothing, so she ordered for herself a stylish, waterproof mackintosh. When her coat arrived, there was a little card tucked inside urging her to embrace melancholy. It said, "*When we're melancholic we feel uneasy with the way things are. We yearn for a deeper, richer relationship with the world.*"[1]

A raincoat inviting us to embrace melancholy. A little card reminding us that melancholy is not just sadness; rather it is a sense of uneasiness with how things are coupled with a yearning for something more—something richer, deeper, better. Melancholy is Hamlet patrolling his castle of Elsinore, trying to sort out what's rotten in the state of Denmark.

Melancholy is Abraham Lincoln pacing the halls of the White House, carrying the weight of the Civil War as he tried to imagine a future time of peace and unity.

And melancholy is a whole host of biblical characters—almost all of the Old Testament prophets, plus New Testament people like John the Baptist, Mary, and Jesus himself. The prophet Elijah fled from King Ahab and Jezebel, went and sat under a tree in the wilderness full of melancholy and despair until an angel brought him food and sent him on to a place where the still, small voice of God finally spoke to him and renewed his zeal for the Lord (I Kings 19). The writers of Psalm 137 described their melancholy as they sat and wept by the rivers of Babylon, weary in exile and longing for their homes back in Zion.

In the New Testament, when Mary gave birth to Jesus in Bethlehem and the shepherds visited her, or when she brought her son to the temple in Jerusalem and the prophet Simeon told her this child would be a sword that would pierce her own soul, Mary became melancholic—remembering and reflecting on these things in her heart. Later, John the Baptist lived out in the wilderness, eating locusts and honey and baptizing people in the river Jordan to show his displeasure with the ways things were and hopefully to renew and restore the people's relationship with a living God. And Jesus himself had moments of melancholy—times when he went off by himself to think and pray; times when he looked over the city of Jerusalem and wept because of the people's disobedience; times in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus asked for the cup of suffering to pass from him, though ending by saying "not my will but yours be done."

Frankly melancholy is a necessary component of faith. Yes, we are meant to be happy people who rejoice in the Lord. Yes, we are to lift up our hearts and in Christ know the peace that passes all understanding. But it is also true that we will know times of melancholy. To be melancholy means you have a soul; you have a spirit within you that will not be satisfied when things are wrong, when people are suffering, when justice or equity or truth are not fully realized here on earth. To be melancholy means that you have glimpsed heaven on some level and you recognize that it is not here yet—so you long for it, like the singers of Psalm 137 thinking of Zion although exiled in the city of Babylon, vowing never to forget Jerusalem or God's promised kingdom.

Langston Hughes, one of the great Harlem poets of the 20th century, grew up in a time of segregation and institutionalized racism in America. He wrote this short poem called "Merry-Go-Round" which has a melancholy tone: *Colored child at carnival: Where is the Jim Crow section on this merry-go-round, Mister, cause I want to ride? Down South where I come from, white and colored can't sit side by side. Down South on the train there's a Jim Crow car. On the bus, we're put in the back—but there ain't no back to a merry-go-round! Where's the horse for a kid that's black?*

Abraham Lincoln had a melancholy spirit. Martin Luther King, Jr. had a melancholy spirit. The boy at the carnival had a melancholy spirit. They all raised questions about how things are, even as they glimpsed there is a different way things could be. Christian

faith does that to us. That's why, whenever we pray the Lord's Prayer, we say "*Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*" As blessed and beautiful and wonderful as this creation is, it is not heaven. It is still a place disfigured by sin and pain, brokenness and violence. Recognizing the disconnect between the way things are and the way things should be is part of a faithful spirit of melancholy. If you were fully satisfied with this earth, you'd have no cause to strive for heaven. It is only when we see how things fall short, how some things go wrong, how sometimes harps have to be hung up on tree branches and songs left unsung, that melancholy comes upon us provoking us both to imagine a better world and to act to make it so, with God's help.

Sometimes we're not sure we can make a difference in this world. Like the old preacher of Ecclesiastes, we become stoic and resigned that things will be what things will be—that there's nothing new under the sun and hence, there will be times of birth and times of death, times of tears and times of laughter, times of love and hate, peace and war, building up and breaking down. But in truth we're not stoic and cynical and resigned. We're not Ecclesiastes; we're Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. We're melancholics who know the Easter story—of resurrection, of Christ's light that cannot be overcome by darkness, of how we are called to walk by faith, not sight.

People can say: Things don't change. Nations will always fight wars—to which we reply, yet nations all desire peace on earth. Even the horror of World War I included a Christmas Eve truce. People can say, politicians always fight and look after their own interests—to which we reply, yet democracy can work when we strive for the common good. When the Affordable Care Act, or Obamacare, was passed in 2010, the final bill contained 188 amendments put forth by Republicans plus an additional 17 bi-partisan amendments. There is no reason our elected officials cannot come together, working across the aisle, for example, to find ways to provide basic, affordable and just health care for all citizens.[2] People have learned to say "There is no Jim Crow section on a merry-go-round or in the waters of a swimming pool." People have learned to say "transgender people are not second-class citizens, especially when they are willing to protect our nation through military service." People have learned to say these things; but if anyone if tempted to forget what we've learned, then we have to speak up and remind them, doing so as Easter people who long for what we do not yet see, but who deeply believe, that with God all things are possible.

We are a faithful people who sometimes feel melancholy, and that's OK. God wants us at times to be dissatisfied, so that we will always strive for what is true—what is right. In Christ we have our very being, which means we are both a crucified and resurrected people. In that is both our comfort when things are hard and our joy all the other days.

Thanks be to God!

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[1] Lisa Abend, "True North: A British expat takes a nuanced look at Scandinavian culture", NY Times Book Review, July 16, 2007, p. 7.

[2] Audrey Carlson, "Obamacare included Republican Ideas, But the G.O.P. Health Plan has left Democrats Out," New York Times, July 21, 2017.