

Welcome

A couple of years ago, I tore my ACL. Of course, I didn't know that at first. All I knew was that my knee hurt very badly. It was a sprain, I told myself.

The next day, I could barely walk. It's fine, I told myself. It's always worse the next day. It'll be better tomorrow.

And it was, a little bit.

A couple of weeks later, I was still limping pretty badly. But I told myself I was fine. It was our wedding anniversary, so we went to Hilton Head, SC. We stayed with my cousin and her family, and on the third day, we did a walking tour of Savannah, GA - which is usually my favorite city in the US.

Here's the thing: I don't recommend a walking tour of Savannah, GA when you have a torn ACL. It's significantly less enjoyable.

After that trip, my wife finally made me go to the doctor. I saw an orthopedic surgeon over in Rockwall. He looked at my knee and said, "Oh yeah, it's a torn ACL."

I blinked at him.

He said, "We'll have to run an MRI to be sure, but I see five of these a day. Sorry, man."

I got the scans, did the follow-up and scheduled the surgery.

Long story short, I have a new ACL and walking tours are fine again. But I couldn't get there until I admitted I had a real problem. A problem that wouldn't go away by ignoring it. Something I couldn't fix by myself.

Why did I wait so long to see a doctor? Maybe it's partly because I grew up in the "rub some dirt on it and walk it off" generation. I think a lot of it was that I knew I was hurting but didn't want to admit it and go through the disruption and cost of a major surgery.

But I was never going to heal on my own. I had to name the pain and ask for help. That didn't make me weak - it actually made me smart. What was dumb and weak was limping around like I didn't have a problem, when every single person who saw me walking around could tell I had a big problem.

We're going to talk about naming our pain today. Because the reality is that we're all hurting. And it's not going to get better until we name our pain and look to the one who can heal us.

Message

Welcome to the season of Epiphany! This time in the church year, we ask who God is. Who is this one who came to us on Christmas?

This year, our series is called Deep Breaths. We're at the beginning of 2022, almost two full years into the COVID-19 pandemic. We're all tired. We're all wondering how many more variants we'll have to deal with, how much longer until we can relax a little.

The idea of *doing* more right now is exhausting. So we're not doing. We're resting - resting in who God is.

In both Greek and Hebrew, the same word means both 'breath' and 'spirit'. So as we breathe deeply here at the beginning of the year, we're also pausing to make space for God's Spirit to fill us.

Given the last couple of years, we could use some comfort, some of God's presence. And we all want to know: When is this going to be over?

We began last week where we should always begin: with an assurance that God is still with us, still working within us and among. We began not with a call to ignore our pain and questions, but with an assurance that God sees us, hears us and loves us.

Today, before we move on, it's important for us to name our pain. This is something we're not used to at the New Year. During this time, there's enormous social pressure to resolve to be better, to quit bad habits, to look forward with positivity and hope.

And again, there's nothing wrong with those things. If you're in a great space right now, then there's plenty of space here for you. But I know a lot of us are elsewhere. The last few years, between politics and the pandemic and school and jobs - it's all been an ongoing season of stress.

It's hit us all differently, but it's a *collective* trauma. It's something we're all experiencing together. And that affects us all, especially when it's an ongoing trauma like this one.

To say that, as a culture, we're not good at processing collective trauma is a bit of an understatement. We don't do well with a singular incident like a shooting or attack. We do even worse with ongoing traumas that don't have an end in sight, like this pandemic.

A lot of what we're doing in this first series this year is not rushing past the pain and trauma we're all experiencing. We're taking seriously that things are not okay, that a lot of *us* are not okay.

And that's okay.

It's *okay* not to be okay. God doesn't expect us to be chipper and feel-good all the time. In fact, the story of God's people largely isn't one of feel-good, puppies and rainbows.

Much more often, the story of God's people is about God meeting humanity in our darkest times. Which, frankly, is news we can all use right now, isn't it?

The story of faith is not one of God swooping in and taking us away to a magical land of smiles and cheer.

It's - as we just celebrated at Christmas - God with us. God coming to us, living with us and transforming us so that we can be light for the world.

An essential component to experiencing God with us is to name where we are. That means not pretending things are fine when they're not.

This is backwards from how a lot of us were taught to think about religion. We're taught that expressing pain, doubt and weakness are a sign of a lack of faith, that somehow if we were just good enough, our lives wouldn't be bad.

That's wrong. It runs contrary to the whole of the Biblical story. So today I want to take you back to the time after the return from Exile so we can hear God's words to a people who are living in one of those long traumas.

Turn with us to [Isaiah 62](#).

The prophet here is speaking to the Israelites who have returned from Exile. The return experience was so much like our experience of the past year. For 70 long years, God's people were hoping for the Exile to be over, to be able to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their city. To rebuild God's Temple and begin worshipping again. But when they did return, it was... underwhelming.

The city was in much worse shape than they realized. And they didn't return to empty land - the descendants of the folks who *didn't* get exiled were there, having built a life in the rubble. The two groups clashed, and the divisions were fierce.

The glory of their imagination quickly gave way to the grim reality of their circumstances. "This is it?" they must have murmured to themselves.

You feel that, right? This is 2022? Two years into a global pandemic, with vaccines, and we're still doing masks and distancing and shutdowns? A year after an inauguration and we still have people disputing the results even as they're talking about those coming at the end of this year?

The prophet is offering words of hope here in chapter 62, but in order to do that, he has to open with an honest assessment of where they actually are.

So as we read, I want us not to rush past this.

Because I love Zion, I will not keep still.

Because my heart yearns for Jerusalem, I cannot remain silent.

I will not stop praying for her until her righteousness shines like the dawn,
and her salvation blazes like a burning torch.

The nations will see your righteousness. World leaders will be blinded by your glory.
And you will be given a new name by the Lord's own mouth.
The Lord will hold you in his hand for all to see— a splendid crown in the hand of God.

Never again will you be called "The Forsaken City" or "The Desolate Land."
Your new name will be "The City of God's Delight" and "The Bride of God,"
for the Lord delights in you and will claim you as his bride.

Your children will commit themselves to you, O Jerusalem, just as a young man commits himself to his bride.
Then God will rejoice over you as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride. -- Isaiah 62:1–5 (NLT)

Notice the prophet names his people's trauma as the reason he is speaking: we're in such a pitiful state, I can't *help* but speak. I have to say something.

So, in the power of the Spirit, he ahead to see what fruit God's work is going to bear.

He says, "Right now, you're known as 'the forsaken city'." The people around them looked at God's people and said, "Those people were abandoned by their God. How else do you explain their situation?"

The other peoples looked at the land of Judah and said, "What a worthless place. It's desolate. Nothing grows there. Nothing comes from there. It has no value, no future.

Notice the prophet doesn't tell the people they're wrong for feeling worthless or forsaken. He doesn't say, "Well actually..."

He names their pain. And yes, he does insist that God is doing something different in the future... the forsaken city will be known as "God's delight."

The place that was barren and worthless will become known as God's Bride - the one God chose and loves.

But first comes the naming of their pain. Giving voice to their experience of trauma.

I get why we want to rush past this to the "City of Delight" and "God's Bride" stuff. It's not even a contest which one feels better, where we *want* to live.

But doesn't it matter that God doesn't skip past that? Doesn't it matter that part of the prophet's job is to tell the truth about where we are? That *telling the truth is part of God's message to us?*

Each week during this series, we're taking some time to hear from our counselors about how we take some deep breaths at the beginning of this year.

<counseling wisdom with Dr. Phil: Naming trauma>

Friends, this year, we're seeking to be careful and slow, not to rush God's healing work. So part of that is taking some space as we worship together to admit we are not where we wish we were.

Not as individuals.

Not as a congregation.

Not as a culture.

And it's okay not to be okay. If we were okay right now, I might be a little suspicious.

Naming our trauma is part of God's good news to us. God doesn't expect us to fake it, to pretend, to ignore. God doesn't fake it, pretend or ignore.

How could we imagine a God who would go to the Cross for us would be a God who who ignore our trauma?

Communion + Examen

We come to the table as we are, to be named as God's beloved friends.

How have you named your trauma in the last week?

Where have you ignored, hidden from or denied your pain in the last week?

How might you be tempted to deny pain in this next week?

How can you make space to name your trauma in this next week?

Assignment + Blessing