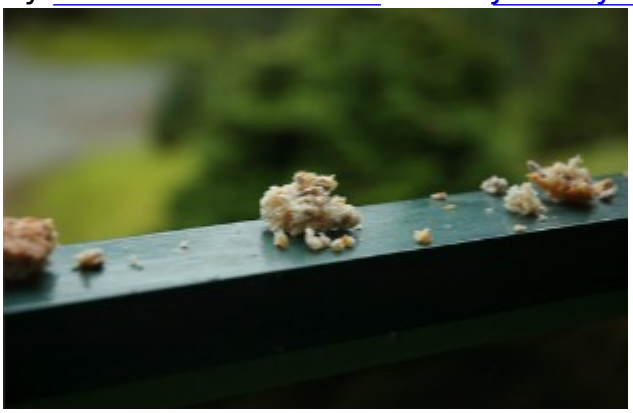
Barely enough: Manna in the wilderness of depression

We all live out our lives in the wilderness.

by Frederick A. Niedner in the January 25, 2012 issue



Sometimes I wish one of the Gospels told a story in which Jesus slumps in the shade of a tree and can't make himself face another crowd or meet one more supplicant's plea for help. If, for example, in Mark's account of the stormy voyage on the Sea of Galilee (4:35–41), Jesus looked blankly at those who woke him to ask if he cared about their desperate plight and mumbled, "Sorry, guys. I just can't think about that right now," then went back to sleep on the cushion in the stern, theologians who focus on Christology would have even more reasons for debate.

The rest of us, however, would possess a cherished resource. We would have a text in which we could see the Lord's Messiah bludgeoned and nailed to a cross of gaping emptiness and paralyzing anxiety, not amidst the drama of public betrayal, screaming crowds and cruel despots, but on an ordinary day when he would have, even should have, prayed or sung or roused himself to face one more challenge but simply couldn't. Then we could say to family members, friends and colleagues who have fallen victim to the dark force we call depression, "See, God *knows* your deep despair. Even in this hell, you are not alone."

We want, often desperately, to say something helpful that might mitigate the suffering of someone who ordinarily contributes to the richness of our days but who seems a diminished, gray shadow drained of vitality, joy and purpose. Statistics on

the incidence of clinical depression vary widely, but conservative estimates indicate that around 12 percent of women and a slightly lower number of men in developed countries fall victim at least once in their lives to sustained, debilitating depression.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that creative types—artists, poets and musicians—and those particularly sensitive to others' emotional lives are especially susceptible, although a kind of chicken-and-egg riddle may underlie this perception. In *The Denial of Death,* Ernest Becker observes that the sanest individuals among us, the people most fully in touch with the reality of our mortal nature and flimsy constructs of meaning and purpose, are those whom fear and depression have reduced to states of catatonic paralysis. The rest of us who go blithely about our routines, oblivious to the fleeting quality of our arc through space and time, inhabit a fictional world, the insane realm of denial. Typically, those who help the rest of us make sense of our lives have themselves sojourned in the abyss. They know from experience the fragility of the webs and fabrics whose patterns of meaning they see, describe and inspire in us. Sometimes their own vision escapes them. They become exhausted in service to those around them.

I have occasionally wandered close enough to peer into the emptiness and feel its icy pull, but thankfully have never fallen victim to its clutches. I do, however, share a home and work closely with people who have suffered lengthy, tortuous periods of depression, and I have helped to bury students and colleagues who took their own lives in the face of excruciating mental and emotional pain whose end they could not see. The abiding memories of losing those who couldn't hang on make one desperate for words and wisdom enough to respond helpfully to those who teeter on the brink of hopelessness.

Christianity's theological resources seem most directly applicable when, as bystanders to depression, we must comfort each other in the aftermath of a suicide. Hymns, psalms of lament and familiar readings help us give voice to grief and hope. Not long ago, when a colleague in ministry took her own life and the young people she had assisted through perilous life passages wondered how they could keep a grip on life when even the pastor could not, the tradition provided the necessary elements of comfort and hope.

I knew that this kind of darkness is no stranger among God's people, nor has it ever been. Martin Luther, familiar with dark nights of the soul, wrote with compassion about a certain Bishop Krause, someone much loved and trusted among Luther's

friends and colleagues, who took his own life after church authorities reprimanded him for sympathizing with the reformers. That it happened on All Saints Day compounded the community's grief.

Later one of Krause's confidants revealed that the broken pastor had come to believe that even Christ himself heaped only judgment and criticism upon him. When Luther preached about this he said, "This is the tragedy of our human condition, that we fall so far we can no longer see or hear the true God, and we imagine the condemning God is the only God. And then, the God we imagine becomes the God we get."

But this is not the true and only God, Luther continued. In Jesus Christ, the true God breaks into even the most utter despair. In the one who cries out, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" God joins those whom darkness has swallowed. In so doing, Christ unhelled hell, Luther preached, declaring that Christ's descent to hell means there is no place that any one of us could ever end up, no depth to which we might ever sink, but that even there he is Lord for us. Even there, he says, "Come with me."

William Styron, whose novels *Lie Down in Darkness* and *Sophie's Choice* draw readers into their characters' deadly depressions, describes his own descent into the madness of this disease in *Darkness Visible.* This is the book on depression I risk recommending or giving to friends affected by it. Although Styron did not consider himself a religious person, the spiritual dimensions of depression stand out clearly in *Sophie's Choice* and *Darkness Visible*. In the latter, Styron describes personal torments very much like those that Luther's Bishop Krause suffered. Internal and imagined accusations of fraud and incompetence rained down on him and he felt alone, without a defense counsel. He became reclusive, saw himself as trapped in a living hell and ruminated about ending his life.

What saved him? Therapy and medication, yes, and also music, but at least as important were contacts amidst the darkness with a few faithful friends, one of whom was hospitalized half a continent away with the same disease. The two spoke by telephone most days, sharing their darkness while at the same time holding a light. Each deemed the other's support priceless.

In the face of depression, those of us who understand ourselves as the body of Christ have the same role as our crucified Lord. We take up our cross and follow him

all the way to hell, whose gates cannot withstand our peculiar assault. Our weapons? By our faithful presence, and with words of assurance and hope, we preach to the spirits who languish in prisons where indictments of all kinds have stomped joy to death and hope has fled. Even if silently, we embody the assurance, "You are not alone. We will get through this."

Those closest to me who have survived lengthy times of depression, anxiety and insomnia say that along with the faithfulness of friends who provided gentle, nonjudgmental support, several precious metaphors created sanctuaries and places of respite during the slow process of rising from the pit. One person found great comfort in the image of God's care for beaten-down, badly weathered souls like hers as a kind of dragnet that God hauls through the uncharted depths where no light seems to reach. Like every net, it's made of crosses; the fellow crucified who have been through these same depths before are all tightly bound together, and the net lets no one slip through. Eventually, by some strength that lies outside ourselves, we will all be hauled ashore.

The truth that all of us live out our lives in the wilderness, not just some few who don't measure up or can't get their act together, has proven to be another life-giving metaphor. For those who grow up believing that moral, competent and worthy people are always happy and energetic, or at least should be despite occasional setbacks, it comes as liberation to take up residence in a place where everyone knows bondage and no one dwells in the carefree land of milk and honey. In such a place, one can thrive on the simple things God provides. The daily ration is *manna,* Hebrew for "What is it?" What it is, of course, is enough. Enough strength, enough hope, enough sense of direction. Barely enough, but enough.

Worried, would-be helpers who feel powerless in the face of another's depression can find comfort in the same metaphor. In the empty wilderness of someone else's darkness we have no cures or magic. By grace, however, we may be like the manna on the desert floor. God makes of our simple, steady acts of accompaniment a measure of "enough." Not much to look at, perhaps, and difficult to describe. But for today, enough.