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Catch Your Breath in Times of Suffering

How do you thrive in a world with as much suffering and chaos as exists in our everyday lives? All we need to do is watch the news or check our Facebook feeds to see evidence of the suffering that is all around us. Mass shootings, suicide bombers, pollution that has reached toxic levels, and weather events like we've never seen before causing catastrophic devastation. We hear of friends and relatives who are battling cancer and disease, youth and young adults that are overdosing or battling addictions, physical and sexual abuse that causes emotional trauma for years to come.... How can we possibly stay hopeful in the light of so much suffering all around?

Have you ever heard the story of Viktor Frankl— a Jewish psychotherapist who spent the last few years of WW2 in ghettos, work camps, eventually Auschwitz concentration camp. During his time in the camps, Frankl served as a defacto counselor for a lot of the inmates. Ever the counselor and social scientist, Frankl was curious how people responded to the unbelievable suffering and atrocities they witnessed there, and he noted 4 different responses to the brutality of the world.

The first response was that people got brutal back. Nice people before the camps became hard hearted, cold, and cruel. They stole bread from others who were starving, and they did everything to survive, even if survival meant stepping over other people.

The second response is that people gave up. They lost all their hope. One day they would wake up and refuse to get up, or wash, or go to the parade grounds for inspection. The quite literally just laid down and died.

Some got brutal, some gave up hope.

The third group held out hope that life would be better after the camps. Frankl writes, "Many held on through the hope that if they stayed alive, their health, family, professional achievements, fortune, position in society, those things that had been their hope, would be restored.... if they just stayed alive, they would get their hope back. But after liberation, so many found when the day of their dreams had finally come, it was much different than they had longed for. You see, when the thing that they had hoped for, and put all their hope in didn't deliver, when they realized that their new reality couldn't compensate for all that they

had suffered through in the camps, they became severely depressed, and many even took their own lives.

But there was a fourth group, who even though they were brutalized, and dehumanized, even though they knew they wouldn't get their old lives back, they did not become cruel, they did not despair, they did not commit suicide... they remained humane, and courageous, and gentle and kind. They were never happy in the camps, but they did not become cynical. Their secret, Frankl says, is that they had hope, but not just any hope, because the third group had hope too... but what made this group unique was that they put their hope in something bigger than themselves, bigger than their circumstance... something that gave their life meaning and purpose, even in spite of all the suffering. When fellow inmates in the camp would come up to him and ask, "Dr, how can I handle this?" he would say to them, "Life only has meaning if we have a hope that neither suffering, nor circumstances, and not even death can destroy. If we are going to thrive in a world like ours, we need a hope like that. A hope that is bigger than our suffering or circumstances.

In our scripture from John's gospel, we hear of a lame man who is sitting near the healing pools of Bethzatha ... pools where people with health concerns, infirmities and handicaps would go to search for healing and restoration. Apparently, the pool was thought to possess special healing powers at particular times, when the water would begin to bubble up from underground pressures. There was a legend that an angel troubled the waters, and that bathing in them when the angel had been there would work miracles. It may very well have been a spring-fed pool with medicinal qualities, like some of the famous spas of Europe.

The image of such a pool, and of the many sick and crippled people who entered it to be well, reminds us that there are natural places of restoration in the world around us where people can literally limp in and then feel as if they are leaping out. I am thinking not just of spas and mineral springs, but of organizations and institutions that are in the business of helping us when we are feeling spent or ill or crippled — hospitals, rest homes, clinics, retreat houses, and the like.

Our lives are so overburdened these days, carrying such enormous pressures of stress and responsibility, that we easily become dysfunctional. "Sliding down the razor blade of life" is the way one person put it. Life is tough. Sometimes we break under the pressure. We begin to limp along. Then we go someplace for health — thank God there are such places! — and, when we are better, we leap out and go home.

But sometimes — sometimes we become so crippled by the burdens we are carrying that we don't even have the power to limp in. We know that we need to meet with a counselor to help us process our feelings, or we know that we need to get back to our AA or NA group and ask for help, we know that we have to go to the doctors and get that pain checked out before it gets worse, but we are simply so tired or so afraid to ask help, or in so deep, that we cannot resolve to do what we know we need to do and then do it.

A woman once described the state of mind she was in after a series of calamities had struck her. Her business was doing poorly, the bank was pressing her for repayment of a loan,

her mother fell ill and had to be hospitalized, and her nephew — who lived with her — had an accident on the freeway and totaled her car.

“I felt as if I were out in a swiftly moving river,” she said, “and the current was carrying me towards the falls. I kept waiting to go over the edge, and there was absolutely nothing I could do about it. I felt completely helpless!”

This is where the story of the John 5:1-9 speaks to us. He too was helpless. For years, probably, he had sat or lain near the famous pool of Bethzatha, watching others plunge into the waters whenever it stirred. It probably looked like opening hour on Black Friday at Walmart, with everybody pushing and shoving to get in. But he was too crippled to get in and didn't have anybody to help him.

When Jesus encounters him, he asks a simple question... “Do you want to be made well?” Hearing this question in passing, it almost seems insensitive of Jesus to ask... Of course, he wants to be made well!!! Why would he be there beside a healing pool if he didn't?!?! But the man has become so bitter, sitting there on his mat the he can't even say a simple, “Yes!”... It's almost like he can't even believe it's possible for him to be made well. The sick man answers Jesus, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.” The suffering and cruelty that he has experienced throughout his 38 years of illness has made him hard and bitter. In his helpless state, he has become overtaken by hopelessness. Embodying some combination of the first two responses to suffering that Frankl describes, the man has become both bitter and cynical, while at the same time seems to have lost all hope of being healed of his ailments.

But Jesus says to him, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” Don't give up hope... I see you, and you are important to me. I hear in Jesus' response to this man a word of hope and encouragement for us today too. No matter how beaten down and discouraged we are by the world... no matter how much we have suffered and been kept from experiencing healing... No matter how we've responded to the suffering we've experienced in our lives... God sees us and calls out to us, Rise up! God invites us to take our mat and walk, to not give up the fight, to never lose hope that a new day is dawning, and liberation and healing may be just around the corner!