

## **“When the Flames Lick and the Demons Haunt”**

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Based upon Daniel 3:8-12, 19-27; Luke 8:1-3; 11:24-26

I wonder if Mary was consciously aware of her demons. Did she live with them so long she could call them by name? According to multiple gospels, Mary Magdalene had seven “demons” when she first met Jesus. Maybe one was a voice in her head that told her she was not worthy of love no matter what she did. Lots of people have that one. Maybe one was a voice which reminded her again and again of a tragedy that had befallen her or someone she loved, a loss that she could never quite get over. Maybe one was a worry demon which told her she did not have enough to get by, or a compulsion demon, which made her have to repeat certain behaviors over and over again, or drink more wine than she should have.

No one knows what plagued Mary, and although that hasn’t stopped the more misogynist elements of the Church throughout the years from filling in the blanks with the usual tired, unsubstantiated claims used against strong women in the Bible— that she was a prostitute or an immoral sinner who was healed by Jesus’ forgiveness— there is no textual or cultural reason to assume that Mary was a sexually immoral person or a worse sinner than any of the rest of us. When men in the Bible have demons that make them convulse or run off into graveyards, no one speculates that they must have been promiscuous or were unrepentant sinners. That is because “demon” talk in the Bible isn’t about morality, it’s about infirmities that the people in those days did not understand. Mary had some kind of a serious problem, a mental and/or physical affliction that was so all consuming that the best way that Luke could describe it was with the number 7, the Bible’s number for wholeness. She was completely consumed. But then she met Jesus and he set her free. Is it any wonder then she stayed by his side from that moment on? She was there when Jesus was arrested, was at the foot of the cross when the other disciples had fled, and was in the garden before everyone else the day that Jesus rose. Jesus was the means by which she stayed mentally and physically whole.

I’ve been thinking about Mary and the demons that tormented her ever since I heard in the news about a week ago that Route 50 was shut down for 20 hours because there was a potential jumper on the Bay Bridge. Protecting his privacy, the news reports don’t say what demons drove him to that desperate point, only that the authorities were eventually able to talk him down and get him some help.<sup>1</sup> Thank God! But given the state of our world today, it isn’t hard to imagine what might have driven him there. Maybe he lost his job or business and was going to lose his home. Maybe someone he loved died of the pandemic. Maybe he was an immigrant or a person of color, worn out from being afraid of being harmed or deported. As psychologist, Dr. Robert Leahy has observed, the current state of the world is like “a perfect storm for generating anxiety and depression.”<sup>2</sup> The risk for depression in particular, has arisen

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<sup>1</sup> Vitka, Will, WTOP News, “20 hours later, traffic begins to clear after Bay Bridge incident resolves safely,” Aug. 21, 2020, <https://wtop.com/dc-transit/2020/08/drivers-warned-to-avoid-bay-bridge-due-to-police-activity-heavy-delays/>

<sup>2</sup> As quoted in *Coronavirus Depression: How to Protect Your Mental Health*, Healthmatters.nyp.org, <https://healthmatters.nyp.org/how-to-avoid-depression-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak>. Dr. Robert Leahy is an attending psychologist at New York Presbyterian/ Weill Cornell Medical Center and a national expert on cognitive therapy.

102% since February, as has the related risk of overdosing for those who struggle with addiction.<sup>3</sup>

We are a nation facing a serious mental health crisis as well as the physical crisis caused by the virus, and it's not just those who have always had a problem with anxiety, depression, or addiction in the past who are struggling now. Unprecedented numbers of people who used to be able to cope with stress in the "before times" are now feeling unable to cope, be happy, or feel hopeful about the future in the current times. They are tormented in mind, body, and spirit, as Mary was when Jesus first crossed her path. And as was the case in her day, they are not all getting the help they need because of unfair and unwarranted shame associated with having these problems.

One of the factors that is contributing to the mental health crisis that affects all of us is the duration of the crisis. As science writer Tara Haelle explained in a thought-provoking article you can read on my Facebook page, human beings have something psychologist Ann Masten calls "surge capacity," using a term typically used to describe the capability of hospitals to respond to emergency events.<sup>4</sup> When we are faced by sudden extreme circumstances, there is a part of our brains which kicks into overdrive, enabling us to use a whole host of mental and physical adaptive systems to cope with the emergency circumstances that follow. These enable us to defer our grieving and deflect our anxiety in order to find food and shelter and help in the face of major threat and loss. But surge capacity is ultimately a short-term survival resource. No one has enough surge capacity to deflect anxiety and grief indefinitely. Yet the emergencies we are facing— the ongoing pandemic and the economic crisis it has caused— aren't anywhere near over. And some people, like those living in Louisiana and California now, are dealing with still other emergencies on top of these emergencies. This means that many people are "running on fumes" now when it comes to emotional resilience, and it means those who have already battled anxiety, depression, and addiction during better times are particularly overwhelmed. As Jesus observed in the second lesson from Luke today, when demons return to those they once haunted after having been chased away, they can be seven times worse.

I am not a psychologist or psychiatrist, so I can't tell you whether your feelings of sadness or worry have reached the point that you need to seek medical intervention. Sometimes medicine is necessary to correct what is partially a physical, biochemical problem; usually, at the very least, therapy is necessary to talk through your feelings. (See the bulletin for a list of phone numbers of agencies who can help you with finding one.) The problem of society-wide anxiety and depression is complex and not easily solved given that many of the factors causing this are ongoing. But as a pastor, I know to be true what Mary also knew to be true, and that is that human beings can endure and overcome all kinds of stresses when they have a clear sense that Jesus is with them. Even if the problems don't go away, knowing that God is with you breaks

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<sup>3</sup> Robinson, Bryan, "Upsurge in Depression and Suicide Among American Workers During the Pandemic and What Needs to be Done", FORBES.COM, Aug. 22, 2020, retrieved Aug. 25, 2020 from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/bryanrobinson/2020/08/22/upsurge-in-depression-and-suicide-among-american-workers-during-the-pandemic-and-what-needs-to-be-done/#5718a8cdb535>

<sup>4</sup> Haelle, Tara, "Your 'Surge Capacity' is Depleted— It's Why You Feel Awful," Elemental Medium, <https://elemental.medium.com/your-surge-capacity-is-depleted-it-s-why-you-feel-awful-de285d542f4c>

through one of the most damaging and dangerous parts of anxiety and depression, the feeling they generate that one is all alone and that the situation is hopeless. Thus studies have shown that people of faith suffer from mental illness less than people who do not believe in God.<sup>5</sup> Faith isn't a magic pill that prevents one from experiencing loss or pain, but it can prevent the feelings of isolation that lead to despair.

We see this happening in today's Old Testament lesson from the *Book of Daniel*. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were in many ways living in an apocalyptic nightmare. They, along with the other Jews in Judah, had lost their homes, their jobs, probably loved ones too. They were living enslaved in exile in Babylon. Then the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, made things even worse by requiring all of his subjects to worship an idol, a golden statue he set up in town. All who refused would be burned alive. The three men had to decide whether to embrace idolatry as a means of saving their lives or remain faithful to God and die in the fiery furnace. Amazingly, they chose the latter, and Nebuchadnezzar was happy to oblige. He had his flunkies heat up the furnace seven times more than customary. Notice that 7 again—this was a complete inferno without a cool corner to be found. Then the three faithful men were bound and thrown into the flames, which were so hot that they immediately killed those who threw them in. But miraculously, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego did not die along with them. When the king looked into the furnace, he saw them walking unbound and unharmed in the flames with a fourth figure who appeared like a God.

Now, since we know that a whole bunch of people are currently facing very real and extremely hot flames in California, I feel the need to say, as people do on T.V., “Don't try this at home.” If actual flames are licking at your heels, get out of there! All of the stories in the first few books of *Daniel* are considered more legend than fact in Jewish tradition. They aren't meant to be taken literally—they are made to be taken theologically because they convey the important truth that even when all seems lost, God is with us, and that makes all the difference in our ability to survive and cope. *Daniel* was written centuries after the time period it describes, when the Jewish people were facing horrific persecution under Antiochus “Epiphanes” IV in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E. Like his stand-in Nebuchadnezzar, Antiochus was requiring idol worship. Those who refused were slaughtered. He did everything he could to crush and kill the Jews, including forbidding them to read and share sacred scriptures. So, they wrote *Daniel* instead. Since it reads like a cross between a history book and a comic book, the authorities didn't realize that it was really an anti-Empire tract. But the Jews got the message loud and clear: “Stick with God because even though it may not feel like it, God is sticking with you.” Whoever wrote *Daniel* knew that it wouldn't be any comfort to the people to say, “Things aren't really that bad” or “Try to think positive!” Things really were that bad. Accordingly, *Daniel* does not say, “believe in God and you won't be thrown into the flames.” It says, “believe in God and even in the midst of the flames, you won't be alone.”

Knowing this is what makes a difference to people of faith. It gives us hope and enables us to have an amazing source of strength to draw upon even after our surge capacity has been

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<sup>5</sup> See “*Spiritual but Not Religious*” is Associate with Depression”, PSYCHOLOGY TODAY, April 21, 2018, citing a national study of veteran's health highlighting significant protective effects of religion; <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/psychiatry-the-people/201804/spiritual-not-religious-is-associated-depression>.

spent. But even the best of us can lose touch with this truth when we are feeling seriously depressed, and if we practice our faith in isolation, the risk of this is even greater. Studies have shown those who consider themselves “spiritual but not religious” are more vulnerable to depression than those who are active in faith communities.<sup>6</sup> This makes me wonder if this is part of the perfect storm we are now seeing. Right now, the people who are suffering the most from depression are millennials, thirty-somethings, and new mothers.<sup>7</sup> The folks who are actually at the highest risk for harm from the virus, people over 60, have the lowest numbers of depression. I’m sure the new mothers are struggling in part because they have been cut off from their communities by the pandemic, and that the younger generations are struggling in part because they are the ones who are having to juggle finding and keeping work and parenting young children. But since younger generations also tend to be less religious and more isolated, I wouldn’t be surprised if faith played a part in this too. They don’t have the rituals of faith, or the community of faith God created to remind us of God’s presence.

St. Teresa of Avila once wrote, “Christ has no body but yours,/ No hands, no feet on earth but yours,/ Yours are the eyes with which He looks/ Compassion on this world,/ Yours are the feet with which He walks to do good,/ Yours are the hands, with which He blesses all the world./ Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,/ Yours are the eyes, you are His body.”<sup>8</sup> Our faithful and loving God is invisible. But we are not. In times of darkness and difficulty, therefore, it is all the more critical that we both work to stay connected to the faith community that can remind us about God, and that we work to be that body of Christ for one another. I suspect that one of the reasons that older generations are faring better mentally these days, besides the fact that they have more years of experience in which to develop resilience, is that they do this work. They practice the rituals which remind them of God’s presence, and they tend to the relationships that allow them to remain near to the body of Christ when they feel all alone, and to be part of that body for others. But regardless of age, we all need community now more than ever.

There is a story in the *Book of Acts* about one of the many times that Paul was imprisoned. (Acts 16:16-40). He and Silas were arrested on false charges and thrown into prison. During the night, God provided an earthquake to open their cell doors. When the guard who had been sleeping was awakened by the quake and saw that the prison doors were open, he assumed that the prisoners had escaped. Overcome by shame and fear that he had failed in his job, he took out his sword to kill himself. But just then Paul called to him in the dark, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.” (Acts 16:28). I think this is what we as Christians are called to say to others with our words and our actions. “Do not harm yourself, we are all here.” I’ve lost four people I care about over the years to suicide, and I would have given anything to be able to say that to them. But I didn’t know they were in trouble before it was too late. So, let me say this to all of you now and then you can pass it on to others: “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here. We in

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Gajewski, Misha, “Moms Are Not Okay: Pandemic Triples Anxiety and Depression Symptoms in New Mothers,” FORBES, June 19, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/mishagajewski/2020/06/19/moms-are-not-okay-coronavirus-pandemic-triples-anxiety-and-depression-in-new-mothers/#2fe8a62d48ce>; see also “These Age Groups Most Affected by COVID-Related Depression, Anxiety,” Hartford HealthCare, June 29, 2020 <https://hartfordhealthcare.org/about-us/news-press/news-detail?articleid=26831&publicId=395>, citing Census bureau statistics.

<sup>8</sup> As quoted at <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/poemsandprayers/692-teresa-of-avila-christ-has-no-body>

the church are here to help you if you are struggling and feel all alone and consumed with anxiety or sadness. We may be able to help you financially if you are hurting because of the economy, and if we can't, then we can help find someone who can. If you are a new mother feeling overwrought from sleep deprivation and isolation, we can help. If you are an immigrant or person of color feeling scared, if you are feeling like you aren't lovable, if you are worried about taking a drink, or are unable to conceive of a future with hope, know that you are not alone. Although the world has gone virtual and the church building is closed, we are still here, and so is God, and together we can find a way forward. Do not despair."

In his book Against Depression, author/ psychologist Peter Kramer says that "the opposite of depression is not happiness, it's resilience."<sup>9</sup> I'm not sure about that but I do know that some of us are born naturally more resilient than others. There is no reason to feel ashamed if you don't feel like you have much resilience left these days. The world is objectively overwhelming right now. But try not to get so low in the emotional fuel department that you lose sight of the sources of strength outside yourself that can help you. God is with you and so is the community of faith. So, do as Mary did. Look for God and stay as closely connected to God as you can. And if you can't feel the Lord's presence, look for the body of Christ. We aren't perfect but we're here. Now more than ever we all need to reach out through phone calls and emails and texts so that the connections God had forged will stay strong, and we all will remember we are not alone. Don't wait for someone to tell you they are in trouble to call, and don't hesitate to call if you are in trouble. Together, with God's help, we will find our way through this difficult time, and into a future with hope. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>9</sup> As quoted in Borchard, Theresa, "6 Steps Toward Resilience and Greater Happiness", PSYCHCENTRAL, <https://psychcentral.com/blog/6-steps-toward-resilience-greater-happiness/>.