

LIVING IN THE SHADOWS

The Shadow of Despair

Psalms 130:1-7

March 22, 2026

De Profundis. The Psalmist is writing from the abyss. *Out of the depths I cry to you...Lord, hear my voice.*

This is a desperate, ragged cry flung toward a God who may or may not be listening. This is prayer, stripped of everything but tears.

This season, we've been living in the shadows. Temptation assumes you still care about doing right. Fear assumes that there's something worth protecting. Worry assumes that there's a future worth fretting over. Even idolatry is a desperate reach toward meaning. But despair has stopped reaching. Despair dives deeper than sadness. Sadness clings to memory of purpose. Despair has let it go. Despair whispers in your ear, "It will always be like this. Nothing will change. No one is coming to help. Even God has turned away."

And sometimes it is hard to argue against despair when we see children pulled from the rubble of bombed-out buildings. When families flee devastation and find no refuge. *De Profundis.*

When, closer to home, the vulnerable are denied essential support and children go to school hungry in a land of abundance. When neighbors live in fear of arrest for having nowhere to sleep. My heart broke this week when a longtime member of this congregation told me he brings a passport to worship. Institutions we were taught to trust are failing in ways that once would have been unimaginable. *De Profundis.*

Underneath it all, there is something more insidious than grief. Philosophers call it nihilism. The internet prefers *LOL Nothing Matters.* We become a culture so wary of being deceived that it feels safer to hold nothing in your heart at all. Nothing matters. That is the new despair—a durable worldview built out of despair.

And who can blame them? They've been sold connection, meaning, and belonging in forms that will never be able to deliver them. In betting sites and gaming culture, online pornography that promises intimacy with no vulnerability, social media outrage selling the illusion of community absent the obligation of mutuality, AI companions that offer the feeling of being cared for and ask nothing from you in return.

Despair keeps furiously busy. But it is going nowhere. Perhaps you've heard the term "synthetic relationships." Engineered to feel a little bit like hope. But there is nothing there. And it is killing us.

Researchers call them deaths of despair—deaths by suicide, overdose, alcoholism. Chronic distress. Disconnection. The collapse of the very communities that once told people their lives were sacred. *De Profundis.* They are crying out.

Somewhere a teenager sits alone in the darkness. The screen offers the only light visible in the room. The algorithm is learning where he lingers to feed him more. More. More. He finds a community, not of belonging, but of a kind of shared rage, of despair—a place where violence is celebrated, archived, turned into iconography. This teen is not being recruited into an ideology. He is being confirmed in a feeling he already has: that nothing matters anyway, that no one sees me, that the only way to be remembered is to do something unforgettable, and acts of violence always make the news. *De Profundis.* He is crying out. And the darkness answers every time. Will we?

Friends, we are living in a spiritual emergency. Every day, shadows claim the lonely and the lost, promising belonging and delivering devastation. We must offer

another way. But before we get there, I want to stay in the pit a moment longer, because we know it not only from what we read about the world out there, but from what we experience right down here. I know I do.

Like all of you, I face shadows that I do not often mention from this pulpit. I look at the world careening toward techno-dystopia and meanness, and I wonder whether I'm offering anything more than a whisper into a hurricane. The contempt is so loud. The resentment is so deep-seated. The violence so constant. The disruption so relentless. Some days preaching feels less like courage and more like rearranging the furniture while the house is on fire. And there are children inside.

I think of my own sons. In the middle of the night, I dread the world they will inherit. I wonder what we can do to make it more bearable, more human. There are no answers to these nightmares. *De Profundis. Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord; hear my voice.*

The prayer of the psalmist belongs to us all. These words belong to the child in the rubble. To the exhausted soul running out of reasons. To the one who has done everything right and cannot explain why it all feels so hollow. The psalmist's prayer belongs to us all.

And then, the psalm shifts. *If you kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness.* Don't miss that. The one we cry to from the depths is not keeping score on us. Forgiveness is not an afterthought for our God; it is buried deep in the ground of divine being. And so, the Psalmist can sing, "I wait for the Lord...my soul waits...more than those who watch for the morning."

Wait. What? We don't wait. Not us. Not anymore. We refresh. We scroll. We increase the speed to 2x. Waiting feels like wasted time when you can fast forward through the commercials.

But the psalm suggests a vigil. You scan the horizon, desperately looking for the first hint of sunrise. Or maybe you lie awake to hear your teenager open the door in the middle of the night. Or perhaps you keep watch at the bedside of a dying parent. Or you pace

the waiting room floor while the surgery drags on hour after hour. Maybe you keep the phone close and pray for that one phone call that will signal safety. You stay at your post. You keep vigil. You watch because you know the one you are waiting to see. The one who gives your waiting purpose. *Wait for the Lord.*

Maybe you remember when Jesus kept his eyes open. It happened in Gethsemane, the night before his death. His friends all fallen asleep, unable to wait and watch, and Jesus prays there in the garden, "Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me."

We know that prayer. God, if it is possible, let this suffering, this pain, this sadness, this despair pass from me. Jesus pours his soul out, and in response, he hears nothing. Silence. He prays again. "Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass." Same words. Same silence.

The next day, from the cross, he cries the words of Psalm 22. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

De Profundis. The Son of God is in the abyss.

Listen to me. God is not waiting for you to climb out. God is there with you. *Hope in the Lord.* It is a verb. A decision to defy despair. Vaclav Havel called it an orientation of the spirit—a direction you choose before the destination is known. That's hope.

I run nearly every morning. And having heard that fact, you might assume that I love it. I don't. At least, not at first. Almost any runner can tell you that the first mile is never a pleasure. It's a negotiation. Everything in you wants to stop, to go back inside, to wait until I feel like it. But I never feel like it. And so, you go anyway. And somewhere around the second mile, something shifts. Not always. But often enough to get you up tomorrow morning.

I think that's what hope looks like. I think hope is a decision made before the evidence supports it. I think hope is the action that precedes the emotion. Hope is not optimism. Optimism is vibes—the vague affirmation that things will probably work out. Maybe, maybe not. Hope compels action.

Back in 2017, Maggie Smith wrote a poem that went viral. The title of the poem is "Good Bones." She wrote it for her children. And for mine. And for all children. It is about the impossible task of handing over a world you know is broken. She writes:

*Life is short and the world
is at least half terrible, and for every kind
stranger there is one would break you,
though I keep this from my children. I am trying
to sell them the world.*

So, like a realtor walking through a real dump, the poet points to the good bones. The poet closes: *This place could be beautiful, right? You could make this place beautiful.*

This is not an optional exercise. I want you to do this. Take a moment to think of someone who held the faith so it could reach you. Someone in your life who prayed you into faith. Someone who loved you enough to pass on the word of life that has a claim on your life. Who in your life is that person? Think of the people who prayed through plagues and wars and the collapse of institutions. Think of the people who kept the church alive in the catacombs and the labor camps and the burned-out neighborhoods. Think of those who sang spirituals in the deepest darkness. Who stayed at their post when the choice cost them everything.

They heard the same whispers: *nothing will change, no one is coming.* They cried out anyway.

I know there are moments when it feels like you've got nothing left. I know that. But you can't set this faith down now. Friends, you have no right to abandon the faith that was preserved for you at such sacrifice. Hope is the sermon we preach with our feet. I've seen it. In hospital rooms where no one knew what to say so we just stood in silence. In stacks of letters insisting hungry children are our responsibility. In the simplest acts of human decency—like a hand on a shoulder, a table shared with a stranger, a word of grace offered in a tense moment.

Friends, there is no algorithm for human compassion. It's on us to keep it alive. In the face of every force that says otherwise, we will make this radical claim: no person created in the God's image is without worth. Every human soul is sacred.

All along the way, the shadows of despair will creep in on us, offering identity built on lies, or belonging achieved through destruction. *Hold nothing in your heart.*

We will offer a living hope that this place could be beautiful. That we could make it so. It's that first mile run in the dark before dawn. It's that vigil kept through the longest night. It's the sacred song still sung despite despair. It's faith held fast, kept burning, and passed on.

This is the way. *De Profundis*. It is not only a cry of despair. It is a declaration of defiance. God is in the pit. You are not alone. Hope in the Lord. Amen.