



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Lenten Dialogues from the Desert #2

The Rev. Sharon K. Gracen and Bob Barnett

February 21, 2016

Sharon - Our second Lenten voice from the desert is Bob Barnett. He is a retired architect, an author, and the father of Clare, who has sprouted and grown up before our eyes. There has been more than one sojourn into the desert in Bob's life. Today's Psalm echoes with the fears and anxiety as well as the hope required to make it through the dry and desolate places.

Bob - Apparently one of the ways that my spiritual journey plays out is through depression. It can reduce you to a quivering, terrified mass but it can also make you stronger than you ever imagined. Early last spring it knocked me down, literally. I fainted and ended up in the hospital only to have the doctors tell me that my heart, blood pressure and all other markers were normal. They sent me home with an anti-anxiety prescription. Those pills were not enough to stave off the frightening panic attack that came soon after. My wife Patricia sat with me as I shook uncontrollably. I don't remember how long it lasted but it seemed to go on forever. Later my doctor added an anti-depressant. These medications felt like very small pebbles to sling at a Goliath.

In the meantime, I lost my appetite and my ability to sleep. The skinny, exhausted version of myself that I saw in the mirror was hard to recognize. Basic life activities, like being Dad for our daughter, were nearly impossible. Simple things like going to a grocery store were overwhelming. The panic would flood me until I became unsteady on my feet and close to passing out. More than once, I brought Clare to Godly Play but then couldn't stay here in a place that's always been such a haven. In the deepest, darkest days, I discovered that I couldn't understand what people were saying to me. Nor could I formulate my own thoughts. To put it simply, I was a wreck. By September my doctor told me that I needed to see a psychiatrist. Trust me, good ones are hard to find. I'm grateful to those friends who helped me find one. It was the beginning of the way out.

Sharon - "Hearken to my voice, O Lord, when I call; have mercy on me and answer me...hide not your face from me." In the bleak landscape of depression, or many forms of mental illness, things can be unrecognizable. Things you once counted on without question, your strength, intellect, motivation, suddenly dissolve as if they never were.

Bob - Some of you may know that my son Spencer died when he was 21. He had suffered from a heart-lung disease since birth, but lived a full life. No words can adequately describe that desert. But the work that I did to emerge from that grief, with good professionals at another place called Trinity, was a reservoir of strength and experience that I believe sustained me this past year. Patricia was a steadfast presence and lived the true meaning of compassion.. She understood and was willing to sit with me in my pain. It was hard on her and Clare but they loved me through it.

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That was also when the healing prayer ministry was getting started here at Trinity. I had made it to the first meeting as a participant but then turned to them in need. The prayers of this place were lavished on me. Another helping presence was our dog, Pawson. Petting him and walking him gave me some of my calmest moments. And some of the most hopeful moments came when it seemed that a great truth was spoken to me through a neighbor or a friend. Many shared with me their own experiences in the desert of depression and told me with great confidence that I was going to be ok. These moments in which they told me that, have become like crystallized images. I can remember what they were wearing, the exact words they used. I can still see their faces. I have to believe that these encounters are evidence of the Holy Spirit's presence.

Sharon - "What if I had not believed that I should see the goodness of the Lord, in the land of the living?" We pray all of the time "lead us not into temptation" or "save us from the time of trial." but we seem to end up there anyway. Perhaps that is because God is wiser than we are and knows that no life is complete without the crucible of challenge. Can we truly appreciate joy if it's all we have ever known? Do we understand the true sweetness of honey if we have never tasted bitterness? The thing that God does not want for us is hopelessness. The gift of the Holy Spirit was that we should never be left comfortless, even in days of despair. That gift is the hope that the desert is not our home.

Bob - The best image that I can use to describe where I was is that I was trapped in a thicket. I couldn't make my way out but I could always see a faint glimmer of light beyond the edges. Even though I couldn't reach it, I knew it was there. That was the grace that kept me going so that I could do the work that I needed to do.

I'd say that my healing has been made possible by a trinity; my family, the professionals who continue to help me along with medication and counseling, and my faith bolstered by this Trinity. I am truly grateful to them all. With this community of support, I have once again gone digging through my life to discover the source of the pain. Anti-depressants are not a cure, but they make it possible to do the work. Here's what I have learned.

Anxiety and depression are symptoms of deep, unacknowledged fear and anger. My emotional archaeology has helped me look at things that I have carried for most of my life, starting with a very early family expectation that all strong emotions must be suppressed. Little did I know that trapped inside they just become toxic. I have wrestled with my own highly developed sense of perfectionism along with a highly developed superiority complex. It has been humbling in a healthy way to acknowledge that we really are all the same - all of us have the same fundamental feelings. That bit of wisdom made me keenly aware of God as our common creator, which in turn became a liberating strength. I didn't have to maintain a false front as I learned to slow down, to relieve the pressure of being perfect or better than anyone else.

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Sharon - "tarry and await the Lord's pleasure; be strong and he shall comfort your heart." Bob's story has comforted my heart in many ways. First of all, that he was unquestioningly willing to tell this story and the fact that through all of it, the stigma so firmly attached to any form mental illness did not seem to be present. Truly, our hearts and minds are being opened in many ways. Bob's courage to share such a vulnerability is an example of authenticity for us to embrace. God was present through many people for him and now God is present for us through him.

Bob - It's true that there are many things that I would never have known about myself, many emotional and spiritual mysteries that I would not have known to pursue, without the dark experience of last year. The sense of shared experience that I have come to accept was an unexpected gift. And apparently one that I wasn't destined to receive otherwise. So, I am grateful for these gifts. I understand that God will use what God will use to get through to us. My plan is to do the work I have to do to be whole and healthy so that God will choose something else for my next lesson.

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