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Lake Street Church

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“The Shadow of Loneliness”

Isaiah 43: 1-5

Loneliness is an epidemic in our culture. Loneliness isn't just something that only affects those who live in isolation; it's present in people who live in families, work with others, and have friends. Some lonely people have everything luxury can buy, but all their luxuries can't provide what is missing. Many times, people who suffer from loneliness don't even know why they feel this way. From the outside their lives look fine, but inside they are enclosed in the shadow of loneliness.

Recently in the news we've been hearing about rich and famous people who have ended their lives. One of these famous people left a note with an incredibly simple explanation – he was unbearable lonely.

After the death of her husband Albert, Queen Victoria of England said, “There is no one left to call me Victoria.” Even though she was a queen, she knew what it meant to be lonely.

H. G. Wells said on his birthday, “I am 65, and I am lonely and have never found peace.”

The Psalmist said, “I am forgotten by them as though I were dead; I have become like broken pottery.” (Psalm 31:12, NIV).

Loneliness is an unhappiness brought on by the feeling of being disconnected or out of touch. It's a loss of intimacy or the sense of belonging. Solitude, On the other hand, is a time of pulling away from everything to be alone, to talk and listen to God, and to be rejuvenated in mind and hearts. Many of us need alone time but what we mean by this is that we need some solitude for a short period of time.

It has been said that an individual can live forty days without food, four days without water, four minutes without oxygen, and about four seconds without hope. We were created for fellowship; we long to share our lives with others who accept us as we are. Though all of us enjoy occasional times of solitude, and though a few people may choose to live utterly segregated from all social contact, we know intuitively that we were created for companionship. When we are deprived of fellowship, we grow melancholy, mournful, morose. The Psalmist David, who Karen read for us this morning, had reached such a point; his situation was one in which he experienced utter loneliness. He had no friend to bear a portion of the sorrowful load.

When a shadow replaces the light of the sun it is usually momentary. However, when a shadow of loneliness lingers for a long time, it becomes the atmosphere in which some people live. It's like being in a dense fog that leaves us feeling disconnected from others. This is accompanied by a sense of isolation, unimportance, emptiness, purposelessness, and inadequacy.

People who are generally happy are content with their relationships and feel a sense of belonging and satisfaction, but those who live in the shadow of loneliness are unable to find satisfying relationships on a human level and end up feeling abandoned. Although loneliness may seem like an inescapable condition, it's possible to get through it and even conquer it when one is willing to be honest with oneself and God.

Perhaps you have been in precisely such a situation. Or, perhaps you know someone who has hit the bottom because they are in a desperate situation. It is highly likely that each of us will one day face a situation where we believe ourselves bereft of friends, cast off by those to whom we would normally look for encouragement, believing ourselves utterly alone in the world. Undoubtedly, it will be beneficial, if not at this moment, then eventually, for each of us to prepare for

that day, or to be prepared to lift others when they face that day. In order to equip the people of God for such an eventuality, I point you to the 142nd Psalm—A Maskil (a person versed in Hebrew or Yiddish literature) of David.

David cries out, “No one cares for my soul.” Is that not a pitiful cry? It wasn’t accurate, but it did seem that way at the time David wrote this Psalm. David spoke out of his feelings, and not out of his faith. If you are guided by feelings, you will similarly cry out. Each of us has cried out in precisely such despair at one time or another. We may not be living in a cave like David was at the time, but we can live in a condo or house in Evanston or a nearby community and still be terribly lonely.

Few times are more distressing than to be in emotional trouble and to be entirely alone! When we encounter troubles, it is almost inevitable that we will face our trials alone. Even if we have dear friends or family members to stand with us, we will still face the necessity of ultimately making decisions alone. If we are mentally competent, only we can decide which medical decisions are best for us or where we should live or how best to make use of our gifts and talents.

We teeter in relationship with God when life doesn't make sense. C.S. Lewis, well-known author of the Narnia fiction series for children, wrote after the death of his wife, “Where is God? ...Go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double-bolting on the inside. After that, silence.” Lewis articulates what many of us feel when our world appears to be falling apart.

We are dangerously tempted to desecrate our relationship with the Divine when tough times are upon us. It happens to the best-intentioned people, even people of outstanding character and commitment. Author John Ortberg captures our dark night that leads us to desecrate relationships. He writes, “When it is so easy to see God all around me (in trees, in birds, in nature), why is it so hard to feel

God's presence – especially when I need God most?" He goes on to speak of the winter of the soul, saying, "We need a way of holding on to God when it feels as if God has let go of us... The hardest part of winter is that God seems gone." We crave God but God seems absent.

So, this is our challenge – to hold on to God and also to each other.

One activity I enjoy when I have the time is to study the origin of some of our favorite hymns. It shouldn't be surprising that many of our favorite hymns are written in times of need. The hymn "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms" is one such hymn.

The idea for this song came from Anthony Showalter, principal of the Southern Normal Musical Institute in Dalton, Georgia. Showalter took a personal interest in his students and enjoyed keeping up with them as the years passed. One evening in 1887, he was leading a singing school in a local church. After dismissing the class for the evening, he gathered his materials and returned to his boardinghouse.

Two letters had arrived, both from former pupils. Each of the young men were heartbroken having just lost his wife. Professor Showalter went to the Bible, looking for a verse to comfort them. He selected Deuteronomy 33:27, "The Eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms." After pondering that verse, these words came to mind:

Leaning, leaning safe and secure from all alarms;

Leaning, leaning, leaning on the everlasting arms.

He scribbled replies to his bereaved friends, then, reaching for another piece of paper, he wrote to his friend, hymnist Elisha Hoffman. "Here is the chorus for a good hymn from Deuteronomy 33:27", his letter said, "but I can't come up with any verses." Hoffman wrote three stanzas and sent them back. Showalter set it all to music, and ever since, these words have cheered us in adversity and loneliness:

*What have I to dread, what have I to fear, leaning on the everlasting arms.
I have blessed peace with my God so near, leaning on the everlasting arms.*

The Divine is our support at all times, especially when we are sinking into deep loneliness. And there are seasons when we sink quite low. People of the spirit, even when you are at your lowest, please remember that underneath us all are the everlasting arms of God.

Blessed Be.