

## Wearing the Dark Veil: Lamentation and Depression

Psalm 13

March 27, 2011

In 1837, Nathaniel Hawthorne, one of America's most renowned native authors, wrote a short story entitled "The Minister's Black Veil." In this piece which he called a parable, Hawthorne told the story of a village parson who one day showed up to worship wearing a black veil made of crape over his face that hid all of his features except for his chin and mouth. Because it was gauzy, people knew he could see out of it, but they also knew that he must have been living out the apostle Paul's words when he wrote in I Corinthians 13 about seeing the world darkly.

The story begins as Parson Hooper stood in the pulpit. Needless to say, his strange appearance caused people to pay more attention than usual to his words. I even thought about trying it out this morning.

{Hawthorne wrote: "Mr. Hooper had the reputation of a good preacher, but not an energetic one; he strove to win his people heavenward by mild, persuasive influences, rather than to drive them thither by the thunders of the Word. The sermon which he now delivered was marked by the same characteristics of style and manner as the general series of his pulpit oratory. But there was something, either in the sentiment of the discourse itself, or in the imagination of the auditors, which made it greatly the most powerful effort they had ever heard from their pastor's lips. It was tinged, rather more darkly than usual, with the gentle gloom of Mr. Hooper's temperament...}

The next day, the whole village of Milford talked of little else than Parson Hooper's black veil...." Hawthorne describes how people felt whenever they ran into the masked preacher in town. "How strange," said a lady, "that a simple black veil, such as any woman might wear on her bonnet, should become a terrible thing on Mr. Hooper's face!"

"Something must surely be amiss with Mr. Hooper's intellects" observed her husband, the physician of the village. "But the strangest part of the affair is the effect of this vagary, even on a sober-minded man like myself. The black veil,

though it covers only our pastor's face, throws its influence over his whole person, and makes him ghost-like from head to foot. Do you not feel it so?"

And most people in the village avoided the pastor if at all possible because of the doom and gloom he brought with him.

"But there was one person in the village unappalled by the awe with which the black veil had impressed all beside herself.... As his plighted wife, it should be her privilege to know what the black veil concealed. At the minister's first visit, therefore, she entered upon the subject with a direct simplicity, which made the task easier both for him and her....

"No," said she aloud, and smiling, "there is nothing terrible in this piece of crape, except that it hides a face which I am always glad to look upon. Come, good sir, let the sun shine from behind the cloud. First lay aside your black veil; then tell me why you put it on."

Mr. Hooper's smile glimmered faintly. "Elizabeth, I will," said he, "so far as my vow may suffer me. Know, then, this veil is a type and a symbol, and I am bound to wear it ever, both in light and darkness, in solitude and before the gaze of multitudes, and as with strangers, so with my familiar friends. No mortal eyes will see it withdrawn. This dismal shade must separate me from the world; even you, Elizabeth, can never come behind it!"

"What grievous affliction hath befallen you," she earnestly inquired, "that you should thus darken your eyes forever?"

"if it be a sign of mourning," replied Mr. Hooper, "I, perhaps, like most other mortals, have sorrow dark enough to be typified by a black veil.... [But] Have patience with me, Elizabeth!" cried he, passionately. 'Do not desert me, though this veil must be between us here on earth. Be mine, and hereafter there shall be no veil over my face, no darkness between our souls! It is but a mortal veil—it is not for eternity! O! you know not how lonely I am, and how frightened, to be alone behind my black veil. Do not leave me in this miserable obscurity forever!"

“Lift the veil but once, and look me in the face,” said she.

“Never! It cannot be!” replied Mr. Hooper.

“Then farewell!” said Elizabeth.

From that time no attempts were made to remove Mr. Hooper’s black veil, or, by a direct appeal, to discover the secret which it was supposed to hide.” (“The Minister’s Black Veil” by Nathaniel Hawthorne. United States in Literature. 1979. Pg. 253-258)

The story ends with Rev. Mr. Hooper, a lonely old man, being buried with his veil still on having worn it all his life.

Hawthorne’s short story, like all parables, had several different purposes and meanings to it. On one level, he lifted up the fact we all wear masks which hide our secret sins. The author condemned the hypocrisy of “good” Christian people who hid their sins behind the masks of false righteousness. He was obsessed with the idea of honestly acknowledging that we all have secret sins, and he expressed that obsession in this writing. Though Pastor Hooper’s mask didn’t reveal the specific secret that he held, it still symbolized his open confession that he was a sinner—just like a scarlet letter A did in another of Hawthorne’s books.

On another level, though, this parable also symbolized Hawthorne’s own struggle with a mask he wore himself—the mask of a depressed life which seemed to darken how he saw his world.

Biographers have stated that the cause of Hawthorne’s depression could have been the fact that one of his ancestors was involved in the persecution of witches in Salem, Mass in the 1690’s, and Hawthorne, born in Salem, was haunted by this ancestral guilt. In the introductory essay to his most widely acclaimed work, The Scarlet Letter, Hawthorne proclaimed that he took his family’s shame upon himself, and hoped to thereby dispel the curse on them.

Beyond that part of his family tree, Hawthorne’s own life was a difficult one. He was the son of a shipmaster who died when the boy was 4. Brought up in a

disciplined household where his mother took all her meals in her room by herself, he acquired what he called the “cursed habits” of solitude. His best friend and kindred spirit, Herman Melville, who wrote the famed novel Moby Dick, wrote of Hawthorne “In spite of all the Indian-summer sunlight on the hither side of Hawthorne’s soul, the other side—like the dark half of the physical sphere—is shrouded in a blackness, ten times black.” (Ibid., pg. 273).

Nathaniel Hawthorne was like so many people we know—or perhaps may be—men and women who walk through this world with a dark gauzy veil through which we look—the veil of depression.

Now of course, we all have those blue days every now and then. It’s a normal part of life to have days—or even weeks—that don’t go as we expect them to go—where challenging and hurtful situations cause our moods to dip down, then up. Most of us experience those periods much as another poet, Henry Van Dyke, once said, “Because you have occasional low spells of despondence, don’t despair. The sun has a sinking spell every night but it rises again all right the next morning.”

But there are others who seem to be unable to rise up out of the gloomy night of their existence—who walk through their days in a haze of despair—like the Psalmist of today’s scripture who cried the anthem of many in our world—“How long, O Lord? Wilt thou forget me forever? How long wilt thou hide thy face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all the day?...Lighten my eyes lest I sleep the sleep of death...”

This scripture is depression’s lamentation, and as we know, there are so many different reasons for people to suffer from depression.

Next week, Nathan will focus on a primary cause of depression—grief and loss through the death of a loved one.

But this morning I want us to be aware of the laments we all have for either ourselves or others who we know who see their world through a dark veil as did Rev. Mr. Hooper.

First, some of us are born with a proclivity for chemical imbalance that affects our moods. Our bodies are a part of God's chemistry lab—and sometimes for unknown reasons, the chemical mixture doesn't work as it was intended to. Modern psychiatric science has put names to the resulting imbalance—bi-polar disease, schizophrenia, chronic depression.

The good news is that in the last 100 years we are discovering more and more about how our brain chemistry works, and what is needed to balance out our moods. I know most people who have been diagnosed with these infirmities wish they didn't have to take medication, but how fortunate it is that we have the science to help alleviate the psychic pain now. Medication that allows us to have more "peace of mind" are gifts of God's wisdom shared with the world. They are not a stigma of weakness.

Second, there are some of us who have had situational challenges that have mired us in the muck of depression. Some of these situations have felt so shameful because of the larger culture's vocal judgmentalism that we have kept our perceived shame secret—wearing a smile to veil the pain. Over many years of counseling, I have heard the pain of those who come in depressed, who finally have the courage to reveal the fact that when they were children, someone took advantage of their vulnerability and touched them sexually, inappropriately. Usually the adults who perpetrate such acts are the results of having been victims themselves when they were young.

I have heard the agony of men and women who are gay, lesbian or bi-sexual who have been brought up by their family and their faith tradition hearing the word "sin" associated with who they feel born to be. Many have tried to hide it behind the mask of heterosexual marriage, and end up not only hurting themselves but their spouses. Many have tried to ignore, push down, deny who they are by escaping through addictions of one kind or another—not the helpful drugs I mentioned in the first point, but the harmful ones that destroy life.

There are many more situational causes for depression—most of which results of something for which we feel shame, a secret we feel we need to hide from the world. As long as we hold on to it, we sink ourselves in the mire of depression's muddiness.

Third, there are crisis events that happen that lead us to wrestle with post traumatic stress disorder—from something as simple as a car accident to those things for which we feel repetitively beaten—like how the folks in Japan must be dealing with their world. These events overpower our ability to cope, and we need the skill of a trained therapist to help guide us through the dark valleys and back into the light.

We know how important it is, whatever the reason for the depression, to find help from others to make our way through. If left unattended, or hidden behind our dark veils, like Rev. Mr. Hooper we might drive away the ones we love the most, and end up in an endless cycle of misery.

Thank the Lord, we live in times where attention through research is being done to help focus on how to help one another to take off the dark veils of depression.

Duke University did a study on the factors that lend to people living with “peace” of mind. They are:

1. The absence of suspicion and resentment. Nursing a grudge was a major factor in unhappiness.
2. Not living in the past. An unwholesome preoccupation with old mistakes and failures leads to depression.
3. Not wasting time and energy fighting conditions you cannot change.
4. Force yourself to stay involved with the living world. Resist the temptation to withdraw and become reclusive during periods of emotional stress.
5. Refuse to indulge in self-pity when life hands you a raw deal. Accept the fact that nobody gets through life without some sorrow and misfortune.
6. Cultivate the old fashioned virtues—love, humor, compassion and loyalty
7. Do not expect too much of yourself. When there is too wide a gap between self-expectation and your ability to meet the goals you have set, feelings of inadequacy are inevitable.
8. Find something bigger than yourself to believe in. Self-centered egotistical people score lowest in any test for measuring happiness.

(Christianglobe Illustrations.)

As we have pointed out in all of our Lenten lament sermons thus far, it seems the Psalmists knew well this last point. After honestly laying out the complaint and the pain in prayer to God, the Psalmist recognized God's power, and his need to rely on it. "But I have trusted in thy steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in thy salvation. I will sing to the Lord because he has dealt bountifully with me."

In spite of everything that seemed to weigh the heart, body and soul of the psalmist down, he allowed himself to be lifted up by the mighty power and love of a God that is so immense—so omnipotent.

That's the power of faith—it offers a deep well of light that burns away the dark veil of depression.

One of my favorite Presbyterian poets, Ann Weems, who lived through a dark depression after the nightmare of the murder of her 21 year old son, manages to capture that gift of hope and offers it to all of us this morning as a closing word.

In the godforsaken, obscene quicksand of life,  
there is a deafening alleluia  
rising from the souls  
of those who weep,  
and of those who weep with those who weep.

If you watch, you will see  
the hand of God  
putting the stars back in their skies  
one by one.

(Ann Weems, Psalms of Lament, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995) pg.xvii)

This is the job of the church, to help people take off their dark veils and see the light of love through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen