

Deadly Sins and Life-Giving Virtues: Sloth and Hope

Isaiah 40:28-31 Luke 22:39-46

As we wrap up the series on the 7 deadly sins, we come to my personal favorite: sloth. Reminder: “deadly”= harmful to love. The goal of the Christian life is to have the flow of God’s love moving into and out of our lives. And so, in a study of the 7 deadly sins we’re acknowledging and confessing what blocks that flow, and asking God to open up channels of love.

Here is a Holy Week text (Thursday evening, after their Passover dinner).

Luke 22:39-46

He came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him. When he reached the place, he said to them, ‘Pray that you may not come into the time of trial.’ Then he withdrew from them about a stone’s throw, knelt down, and prayed, ‘Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.’ Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground. When he got up from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief, and he said to them, ‘Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial.’

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

Sloth. It’s a funny word. The first thing that comes to my mind is that cute nocturnal creature that moves very slowly and mostly lives in tree branches.

Which is an inaccurate picture because sloths aren’t actually ‘slothful,’ as we think of it. They’re slow and deliberate, which can often be a good thing.

We typically associate sloth with laziness. We might picture someone lounging on the sofa in their pj's, remote control in one hand and a bowl of chips and salsa in the other (which sounds like me some nights!). Sloth *could* look like that, but that's not what sloth is—because sometimes we need to rest on the sofa and enjoy a good show!

Sloth is hard to define exactly, but we know it when we see it when a person begins to sleepwalk through life; caring about less and less, or becoming apathetic about what's going on around them, and *in them*.

God desires us to become awake to his love and to his purposes—in our lives and in the world—like we just heard, as Jesus told his disciples to 'wake up!' in the garden when they were falling asleep: Come awake! Be alert! Jesus says.

God calls us to a living hope that awakens us to his ways and purposes in our lives and in the world. This is a big role of the Old Testament prophets, btw. The prophets of the Old Testament have been described as God's alarm clocks, to wake up the people who had become sleepy and complacent in their faith. And Jesus is firmly in that prophetic tradition of calling people to come awake, and become aware of God's activity and purposes in the world.

Historically, our spiritual fathers and mothers over the centuries described sloth as a kind of spiritual melancholy. This is not describing the occasional

melancholy or sadness that we *all* experience—that acute feeling, say, after a loss, or a change in our health or our circumstances that was unforeseen and difficult, where faith and hope eventually pull us through it. This isn't clinical depression, and it isn't the occasional blah day, or series of days that we all have when our bodies just don't respond the way we want or need them to. We all have those times, and that is not sloth. That's being human! We all need down days—or weeks—and we all need rest. Rest is built into the rhythm of creation, and it's good.

Spiritual melancholy describes a *state of being*, or an attitude, over a period of time where a person just doesn't see God doing much of anything, or has stopped caring, and responds to it with, "Meh, whatever."

Melancholy is what Solomon has in the opening chapter of the book of Ecclesiastes: "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity" (NIV: "meaningless... everything is meaningless"). Then he says, "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun." That's a direct quote from Eccl.1:9, and a lot of the book of Ecclesiastes reflects this type of attitude: "whatever." Meh. Do whatever you like, for tomorrow we die; trying to figure out what's going on is nothing but a headache and a vexation.

And when that type of melancholy sets in, I begin to develop a belief system around an absent or disinterested God, and I begin to live in a state of disinterest or discouragement, rather than hope.

This type of sloth can set in when I look at what's happening in the world or in our country and say, "The world is going to hell in a handbasket," and I'm tempted to believe that God has either given up on the world, or doesn't care. Or... *I don't care any more.*

When this type of sloth sets in, we're tempted to stop praying because, what good does that do—for me or for the world? And Scripture, it just seems like a burden to me to read, full of promises, but I don't see any results! And we then choose *not* to act where God and the Scriptures call us to action, because, again, we think: what good does that do? So you can see a real absence of hope in this type of sloth.

This type of sloth (spiritual melancholy) can lead to a mindset that is a danger for many Christians today: ***nostalgia***—a sentimental longing for the past, for the good old days; you know, I remember when... This isn't the same as looking back with gratitude, and then moving forward—the Bible actually commands that: remember God's faithfulness to you! That's what communion is—we remember and give thanks, and say, "God has been faithful." And let that

faithfulness encourage you toward the future. Nostalgia, rather, is looking back with a wishing that we could *go back*.

The word “nostalgia” was actually coined a couple centuries ago as a medical diagnostic term, and it was seen as a painful form of melancholy. The word comes from the Greek “nostos” (meaning ‘return’) and “algos” (meaning ‘pain’). In fact, any English word that we use today with the suffix ‘--algia’ on it describes a painful medical condition, like fibromyalgia or neuralgia. So, nostalgia could be described as a *painful* wanting to go back. When the desire to return to the past actually hurts.

I like to playfully describe nostalgia as like riding a horse, but being mounted on it backwards. The horse is trotting forward, into the future so to speak, and the rider sees the past getting farther and farther behind them, while the future is whacking them on their backside. Nostalgia is a hope-killer because it focuses on the past, without hope for the future. And hope is *always* forward looking. If we find ourselves longing for the good old days, or saying things like “It was better back then,” we need to turn around (literally “repent!”—turning of your mind, and therefore your vision & direction). Get on the horse facing forward.

It isn’t helpful to say “It was better back then.” For two reasons:

1. Because it isn't true. Things may have been somewhat *easier, for us*, or at times more *enjoyable, for us*, but not necessarily better. Because if we say "it was better back then," we need to ask ourselves: better for whom? For us middle class white folks, we have the luxury of thinking that it was better. But it wasn't better back then for black Americans; it wasn't better for most women; it wasn't better for young men and women who were trying to come to terms with their identity and sexuality.

2. That statement is an indictment against the ways God is at work *now*. As if God did better back then, and has stopped doing good now.

We are called to be awake and alive to the work of God *today*, and try to live in the present and affirm it, even if that's difficult. And it *is* difficult to try to live in the present, I'll be the first to admit.

It's great to have positive memories—to circle back the horses occasionally to see where we've been and give thanks, to go back to those grand vistas and be grateful. *And then... adventure forward*. Those remembrances of how God was at work in the past are meant to be a faith springboard for the future, a reminder of God's faithfulness. And to assure us that God will be with us and guide us in days ahead, even if we're not sure exactly what that looks like yet. And even though it looks and feels different.

A good Biblical example of nostalgia at work (spiritual sloth) is the Israelites, in newfound freedom, out of Egypt, heading toward the promised land, but saying all along the way, “We want to go back to Egypt. It was better back there.” Which is (1) not true, because, hello!, they were slaves back there; and (2) it’s an indictment against the way God was presently at work leading them into their hopeful future; even if they didn’t know exactly what God was doing or where they were going. And even if it was a bit uncomfortable being on a years-long camping trip.

What does Moses say to them? “Go forward! Have faith! Strengthen yourselves. God is with you! God is at work!” The hope of the promised land is held out to them. He encourages them! But their journey had to be one day at a time, which required a lot of trust, and hope—for their future, and the future of those who would come after them.

So the answer to sloth is hope. Hope. Because we all struggle with sloth, in one way or another. Who has not grown weary or sometimes disinterested, or nostalgic, or preferred that God just give me an easy and comfortable road on this pilgrim journey? We’ve all been there, we all go there, and some of us might be there right now. I’ve been there from time to time the last few years! From politics to a pandemic, we could throw one big sloth party and be content. And

there has been so much going on *just this past week*, and there will be more in the weeks to come, that could provide material for us to feel like we want to give in.

God, however, calls us to hope.

What is hope? Here is my personal definition of hope (so take it with a grain of salt! And think of what hope might look like for you): *Hope is choosing to take steps toward God, instead of away from God, in every circumstance of life, and no matter what's happening in the world.* Hope is choosing to believe in God's promises, even when I may think that God's promises are for someone else, or they aren't true—when God's promises sound like a bunch of platitudes to put into calligraphy and mat and frame and hang on the wall, rather than substantial words of truth that God will fulfill in his time. Hope is choosing faith over feelings, the path of discipleship and action over comfort. Hope is being alert and prayerful when I would rather numb out and sleepwalk through life. Or, when I would rather watch the news, or doom scroll through my news feed on my device, and decide that it's game over (like Solomon... if he had a smart phone I could picture him doom scrolling through his news feed and saying "Meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless...').

Hope is believing and knowing that there are more people of good will in this world and in leadership, than people of ill will, and trying to be one of those people of good will.

Hope *is* looking back and remembering those times in your life when you *did* experience great faith. Where God's promises *were* fulfilled for you. When God was fully real to you and you felt fully alive. Remember those! This is not nostalgia; this isn't wistful or sentimental longing to go back, but prayerful recalling of God's faithfulness to you on your journey, and letting those testimonies, those remembrances, be the springboard for your future hope and faith and action.

And to remember that God has always moved the world forward in life-giving ways. Remember, history moves in cycles, not in a straight line where it's all progress and one victory after another. History is better looked at as like the seasons of the year, with spring and summer seasons of growth and flourishing, then fall and winter seasons of change and diminishment, then growth again.

God encourages his people and gives them hope through the prophet Isaiah (40:27): "Why do you say, O people, 'My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God?'" In other words, why do you say "God doesn't care" or "God isn't active"?

Then we are given this beautiful call to hope in the HUGE creator God, who himself never grows tired or weary. God gives power to the faint, and strength to the weary. And Isaiah punctuates all of this with that wonderful promise: *those who hope in the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.*

The eagle is a powerful symbol: strength, beauty, majesty. For the ancient Hebrew people it had additional meaning, however, because... the eagle molts—it sheds and re-grows its feathers annually. So the eagle also became a symbol of God's renewing power on an ongoing basis. Re-read this passage in light of that—those who hope in the Lord shall *renew* their strength, they shall mount up with wings like an eagle's. In other words, there will be shedding, and then there will be regrowth. Renewal!

Perhaps a good reflection this week would be: What is molting in your life right now? And what might regrow, to renew your strength? That might be something to ponder this week as we approach Easter.

The disciples, in the garden with Jesus, became sleepy. Luke tells us it was because of grief—they were overwhelmed and checking out. And we know that there had been discouragement, confusion, and even pushing against Jesus about what was happening, and what was about to happen. And who can blame the

disciples for their response? There was a lot going on at the beginning of Holy Week; and during the course of events that week. I know I would've been overwhelmed.

But what the disciples didn't know yet, was that on the other side of confusion and discouragement; on the other side of betrayal; on the other side of trial; and even on the other side of crucifixion and death, was resurrection and life. And Jesus encouraged them to hang in there, to stay awake and hold onto hope, because discouragement doesn't have the last word; death doesn't have the last word. Resurrection and life have the last word. Love always has the last word. And that's what we celebrate at the Lord's table this morning.