Message: Desperation

I looked up the meaning of the word “desperado,” and one meaning is a “desperate person.” It has come to refer to someone so desperate that he/she makes criminal choices, an outlaw. The word “desperate” refers to someone who has an urgent need, to someone has reached a point where he has no hope. She is at the end of her resources. I have been there. I have been desperate. What about you? Not sure? Well, here is a definition that might help. You are in a situation where you cannot possibly make it without outside help. You don’t have enough power; you don’t have enough resources; you don’t have enough smarts. Without the intervention of God or someone else, you have no hope; You won’t make it. I have sensed this kind of desperation on many occasions. Let me share a handful with you.

When I was 9 or 10, our family took a trip to the Ocean for the very first time. It was a beach in North Carolina. Seeing the ocean for the first time was breathtaking. My brothers and I could not wait to get into that water. We took our little Styrofoam surfboards into the surf, which tended to drown out my parent’s warning that we not go out too far. The story is predictable. I did go out too far. A wave swamped me, and suddenly I could not feel the sand beneath my feet. I looked toward the shore, which suddenly looked miles away. I began thrashing about and screaming out for help. I was powerless. Drowning is one of the most powerful images of desperation. We use it as an image of desperation: “I’m in over my head.”

I went through an awful period when I was in seventh and eighth grade. I had temptations I couldn’t control. I had feelings I couldn’t understand. I didn’t feel like I could talk to a soul. I thought God hated me, and I certainly hated myself. I had guilt and frustration and fear/terror that I could not control. I was terrified just to go to bed at night. I was absolutely powerless. I wasn’t drowning in water; I was drowning in hopelessness.

I’ll never forget another desperate moment when I was in my mid-30’s. As a pastor, I get various calls from people in need. I was talking to a man whose marriage was in serious trouble. We were talking on the phone when the doorbell rang. When he came back to the phone, he was distraught. He had just been served divorce papers. I was clueless what to say or do. I was desperate, and I can’t even fathom how desperate that weeping husband was.

I had another phone call from a gal who asked me to talk her out of committing suicide. What do you say? There’s no seminary class for that.

At age 41, I lived in Massachusetts and taught full-time at a small school making $400/wk. I did some remodeling work on the side. I remember when the remodeling work began to dry up and the bills began to pile up. Our mortgage got behind, seriously behind—90 days late. If you’ve never been there, banks do not like 90 days late! I faced a desperation of resources; I was resource-less.
Desperation has different faces: no resources, no power, no clue.

Where do you feel desperate today? What is your point(s) of desperation? For some of you, it is financial. You have bills (medical, housing) you can't pay. As we watch the news, what some of us are feeling is an impending sense that desperate days may be coming. Others of you may be facing an illness you can’t beat. For others of you, it is an illness you can’t fix or beat. Some of you may be grappling with a deteriorating relationship (with spouse or child or parent or friend) that you are powerless to fix. You may be facing a perplexing question for which you have no answer. Still others of you may be encountering emotions or desires that you simply cannot control. I know that I am speaking to desperate people.

God has many things to say to desperate people. The Bible itself was written by desperate people, and the Bible tells the story of one especially desperate dude, a guy named Paul. For kicks, there’s this place in the Bible where he details a few of the desperate situations he encountered. Listen to this list:

> Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. 25Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, 26I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. 27I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. 28Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. (The Bible, 2 Corinthians 11:24-28 NIV)

I think Paul officially qualifies as a desperado. Compared to him, my desperation is almost boring. But Paul shares some wisdom about desperation that is pure gold. God has Paul write some things that desperate people need to hear. They have changed the way I look at desperation.

We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. 9Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. 10He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, 11as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many. (The Bible, 2 Corinthians 1:8-11 NIV)

There’s another good definition of desperation: “We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure.” We were at the end of our abilities, our power. It was so bad that we concluded that we were going to die. We were powerless to save our lives. Our only hope was a God who raises the dead. You know you are in serious trouble when you figure your only hope is a resurrection!
Paul notes that there was a purpose to the desperation they faced: “This happened that we might not rely on ourselves.”

I don’t know about you, but I hate desperation, and I’ve come to see why. Desperation is this depressing reminder that I am not God. I am limited in power, in knowledge, in resources, in everything. I need outside help. God does not need outside help; that is attractive to me. I don’t want to need God, and frankly, I don’t want to need you. But that is not my reality. I do need outside help... desperately...and repeatedly! God does not rely on anyone but himself. I want to be that way and way too often I try to live that way. Desperation stops me in my tracks. Desperation has this message: Stop relying on your own strength. Stop trying to be God.

Instead, turn toward God, the limit-less one, the One Who raises people from the dead. This is a great statement. When it comes down to who you are going to trust—you or God—the criterion should be this: Which one of you can raise people from the dead? He should be God in your life. Have you ever raised anyone from the dead? (And being a Red Sox fan in 2004 does not count.) No, you haven’t. So, you should be relying on the One Who does. Desperation reminds us that we aren’t God, but we certainly need God.

Desperation, then, almost always drives us to call out to God. It’s almost reflexive. At age 13, when I was drowning in guilt and fear, I prayed a lot. When that lady told me on the phone that she was planning to commit suicide, I began to silently pray. I prayed through the whole conversation: “God, you have got to help me, I have no idea what to say.” I don’t remember if I had prayed much earlier that day, but I made up for it on that phone call!

Now, here’s the funny thing about desperation. You are desperate all the time; you only recognize it sometimes. In other words, you cannot possibly make it today without the intervention of God. In reality, we are absolutely dependent on God in every moment of this day. A few minutes ago, when we sang the words, “God, I’m desperate for you,” we were speaking the truth. Unfortunately, I have gone through entire days and hardly given Him a thought, much less spoken to Him. But I talk to God when I’m desperate. When I feel my desperation, I live like I should be living all the time: talking to God, listening to God.

Desperation allows God to show up in your life in significant ways. I remember a guy I recently read who said, “Most of us want God to show up in our lives; we just don’t want to be in a place where He has to.” That’s me. I’d love to see a resurrection, but I don’t want to be dying. I want to experience one of those amazing “check in the mail” stories, but I don’t want to be two days from foreclosure. I try to avoid desperation at all costs, but in the process, I end up insulating myself from the blessing and power of God.

When you are desperate, you tend to live like you should be living all the time: talking to God, listening to God, obeying God, leaning on God. Desperation
graciously forces your hand. Paul says that it taught him to lean hard on God rather than himself. But Paul, the desperado, shares one other vital lesson he learned in desperation.

*To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.* 8Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. 9But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. 10That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.  (The Bible, 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 NIV)

Paul says that he encountered a thorn, something painful that tormented him. We are not told what the thorn is, nor where it came from. He calls it a messenger of Satan. We aren't told the thorn came from Satan, but we are told he tried to speak to Paul through it. Satan will always try and speak in your desperation. Basically, he will call you to turn from God. He will point to desperation as a sign that God is not there or that God does not care.

Well, Paul does not buy that lie. He turns toward God, not away. He cries out to God in prayer. He begs God repeatedly to deliver him from his desperation. Take it away, God! And why not? God has repeatedly delivered him from desperation. God has stepped in with power and saved his life time and time and time again. Once again, desperation causes him to put his trust in God, but this time he learns that God doesn’t always remove the desperation. Sometimes, He gives you the daily strength to bear up under it.

Paul learns that when he cries out to God, God will intervene in one of two powerful ways. Sometimes, he powerfully removes the crisis; he heals the person we love, he resurrects a marriage; He restores a friendship; He sends the check in the mail. He shows up in power and delivers us from our desperation. Other times, He walks with us in our desperation with a sustaining grace, whose power we underestimate. Sometimes, He brings the healing; sometimes, He walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death. Sometimes, he miraculously provides for our financial need; Sometimes, he forces us to rely on people around us in our time of need.

When I cried out to God to help me talk to a suicidal woman; He delivered. She decided not to take her life. Her mother called me the next day, profusely thanking me for talking to her daughter. When I cried out to God to take away vexing temptations and depressing thoughts, He didn’t remove them. Instead, He gave me the grace to hold up under them. I can’t tell you how many times I have thanked God for sustaining me through those dark days.

And God still has not removed those temptations. At times, I feel as powerless as ever, and I cry out to God. He doesn’t eliminate them, but He meets me in them. It has only been in the last few years that I have realized what a blessing that is. These desperate temptations help to keep me in a place where I need to be all the
time, leaning hard on God—the God who delivers and the God Who sustains. It has changed my view of desperation, just like it changed Paul’s view of desperation.

Watch what he says. “...for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

As much as I hate desperation, it is vital for me, and it is vital for you. Desperation is a good thing. The tragedy you are going through is not a good thing. Divorce and illness and betrayal and temptation and failure are not good things, but the desperation they produce is a good thing when it drives us to lean on God rather than ourselves. I know this sounds really odd, but desperation is really good for us, and I’m coming to see that more and more. I have seen God do things I would never have seen otherwise. I am a much better person for the desperation that God has carried me through.

What would happen if you started seeing desperation more as a benefit than a liability? You’d move more toward it. I’ve realized that a good part of my life has been devoted to avoiding desperation. I want to keep everything safe and risk-free. I want to be in a place where I’m in control, where I never feel desperate. God continues to speak to me about this.

God nudged me about this recently in regard to my giving. God reminded me that I don’t give at a level that keeps me desperate for God. I give a “safe” amount. Now, if I told you what I give, you’d probably be pretty impressed. It’s beyond that 10 percent thing. But God nudged me that it was safe giving. Most of us are so locked up in debt and financial obligations that if we gave 10 percent of what we make to God and needy people, we’d be desperate. God would have to “show up” for us to make it. “Seek first the kingdom of God…”

Sometimes, we avoid talking to people about the grace of God because we fear we’ll encounter a desperate moment where we don’t know what to say. Let’s stop acting like we’re God and start trusting in the God who raises people from the dead. Let’s move toward our desperation rather than from it. Let’s start living like God is God and we aren’t.

There is this powerful instruction in the Bible from God: "Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth." (The Bible, Psalm 46:10 NIV)

I’m told that these words “Be still,” carry the idea of putting your arms to your side, to stop flailing about. The call here, then, is to stop our frantic efforts to try and control our world and to put our trust in the God who controls the world. Surrender to the reality that He is God and we aren’t. I am going to finish this morning with a time for each of us to simply “be still.” In the stillness, here are a couple of thoughts to consider:
Where is your point or points of desperation today? Some of you know exactly what it is. You are right in the middle of desperation. In that desperation, God wants you to call out to Him and trust His power and heart.

Others of you don’t feel desperate today. Warning: You are a vulnerable place. You will be tempted today to act like don’t need God or anyone else. Don’t buy that lie. I urge you to call out to God as much today as you would in crisis.

There may be someone here today who, truth be told, doesn’t really think you need God. You’re a pretty good person; you’ve never turned to God for grace and forgiveness because you don’t feel desperate. More than anything in the world, you need to be reconciled to God, but now you feel no sense of desperation about that. Don’t let your sense of control right now fool you into thinking you don’t need God.

**Quiet reflection time**

**Songs: I Surrender All, Precious Lord Take My Hand**

**Prayer**