Facing Times of Isolation

Our society is facing an epidemic of isolation and loneliness
“According to a recent large-scale survey from the health care provider Cigna, most Americans suffer from strong feelings of loneliness and a lack of significance in their relationships. Nearly half say they sometimes or always feel alone or “left out.” Thirteen percent of Americans say that zero people know them well. The survey, which charts social isolation using a common measure known as the U.C.L.A. Loneliness Scale, shows that loneliness is worse in each successive generation.”

We see the isolation epidemic at its worst in our military and veteran communities.
“American soldiers are ripped from a tribe-like community where they eat, sleep, and fight together, and then suddenly dropped back into a disconnected one, Junger pointed out. Aside from small family units, we're very isolated from one another. In a 2014 TED Talk, he honed in on alienation as one of the main reasons veterans sometimes miss being at war — a phenomenon that's difficult for civilians to grasp.”
- Soldiers returning home are faced with a heartbreaking problem most people don't understand, Business Insider https://www.businessinsider.com/veterans-face-a-huge-problem-most-people-dont-understand-2015-11

(For an interesting take on the issue: https://www.ted.com/talks/sebastian_junger_why_veterans_miss_war?language=en)

Take this example of Army infantryman, Josh Martell as told in the Atlantic
Martell spent just over three years in the Army, including a 15-month tour in Iraq as an infantryman. Now 27, he has since left the military, and his second daughter was born earlier this year. He juggles his welding job and family with a full load of courses at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, where he majors in communications.

He doesn't talk about his encounter with a jury-rigged bomb -- or any war stories for that matter -- with his classmates. Most of them were worrying about prom dates and acne while Josh trudged through open sewers, took sniper fire, and saw his fellow soldiers mangled and killed. He definitely doesn't mention the time four roadside bombs detonated next to his Stryker assault vehicle in rapid succession, where each explosion felt closer to the one that would tear open the steel underbelly like a sardine can and vaporize the men inside.
But it's not just the discussion of war he omits from other students. He has quarantined himself almost entirely. He shows up for class, takes notes, and leaves, most of the time without communicating with students or professors.

The challenge of societal reintegration after war has mystified soldiers throughout recorded history. The saying "War changes people" is a profound understatement of the issue. It also displaces the sense of belonging to any number of groups, from peers to the countrymen who stayed behind. When Odysseus returned home after 20 tumultuous years of battle and incredible journeys, a sense of unfamiliarity overtook him: "But now brilliant Odysseus awoke from sleep in his own fatherland, and he did not know it, having been long away."


It maybe that our soldiers are once again on the frontlines, this time of our isolation epidemic, but feelings of isolation are a part of our human condition.

The Bible is full of characters who express there sense of not fitting-in and feeling isolated and alone.

- Moses fled alone into the wilderness
- Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers
- Ruth lost her husband and was forced to care for her mother-in-law in an unknown land
- Paul often talked about bearing ministry in isolation
- And John wrote his book of revelation in exile on the island of Patmos

But on this day, as we honor our military members and veterans and as we attempt to bring awareness to their challenge of isolation, it’s hard not to think of the great warrior David and the ways isolation often developed in his life.

David might be one of the greatest military heroes in all of the Bible

- Of course there is the remarkable feature of defeating Goliath, but that was just the beginning of David’s military career.

- 1 Samuel 18:5-7
- When the men were returning home after David had killed the Philistine, the women came out from all the towns of Israel to meet King Saul with singing and dancing, with joyful songs and with timbrels and lyres. 7 As they danced, they sang: “Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands."

- David is a hero by his sword and sling, but also in his words of faith.
When the Israelite army hid from the Philistines, it was David alone who stood before the invading army and declared that God would not abandon His people.

But for all of David’s success and fame, he couldn’t escape repeat bouts of isolation and loneliness.

3 Kinds of Isolation and 3 Lessons We Learn From It

1. Forced Isolation

There are times that isolation is forced on us. Transitions like many in the military face back into civilian life but also changes in where we live, career, or relationships can leave us feeling alone.

In David’s story, it was actually his success that lead King Saul to begin to despise him. Saul became so enraged by David’s fame that Saul plotted and attempted to assassinate David.
- David was forced to abandon everything he had and feel alone into the wilderness.

- David actually writes a Psalm about these very feelings of isolation.

- Psalm 31:9-12
  Be merciful to me, Lord, for I am in distress; my eyes grow weak with sorrow, my soul and body with grief.

  My life is consumed by anguish and my years by groaning; my strength fails because of my affliction,[b] and my bones grow weak.

  Because of all my enemies, I am the utter contempt of my neighbors and an object of dread to my closest friends—those who see me on the street flee from me.

  I am forgotten as though I were dead; I have become like broken pottery.

2. The Isolation of Disengagement
Eventually, Saul was defeated by his enemies and David would return to become the next king, but if you think regaining success meant feelings of isolation were done, you would be wrong.

- As David’s success grew, David began to isolate himself.

- 2 Samuel 11:1
“In the spring, at the time when kings go off to war, David sent Joab out with the king’s men and the whole Israelite army. They destroyed the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. But David remained in Jerusalem.”

- That introduction sets up the scene of David alone on his palace roof. It’s in this moment he saw Bathsheba and began his downward spiral into sin and loss.
  - It’s worth noting that it began with David’s self-isolation from his military and his responsibilities.

Psychologistes have long observed and debated the cause of what is called the “disengagement theory.” The theory recognizes that as we age, especially men, begin to disengage from relationships and complexity.
  - Our isolation can often be self-inflicted.

3. Isolation from Loss

David would face yet another time of isolation during the rebellion of his son Absalom
- David was forced to fight send his army against his own son. Though he requested that Absalom’s life be spared, Absalom was defeated and killed in the battle.

- David was devastated. It’s the source of his famous line, “O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom!”

- Even as David’s army returned victorious, David couldn’t bring himself to welcome them home. He sat alone and in tears. Even surrounded by an army in celebration, even int he midst of his own victory, all David could feel was alone.

3 Lessons We Learn From Our Isolation

1. We Find New Friendships
What’s interesting to note is that in all of David’s times of isolation, he was actually surrounded by people.

- In the loss of his son, it was his general Joab who urged him out before the troops
- During his sin with Bathsheba, God sent the prophet Nathan to guide David
- And even alone in the wilderness, mighty warriors began to follow David.
  - Now those are not always the kinds of friends you might ask for
    - Joab could be insensitive
    - Nathan spoke a hard word from God
    - And most of the men that followed David were, like him, rejected form society.

- But those friendships became a foundation for David’s entire life.
- We must be very careful, that in our feeling of isolation we don’t overlook the people God is surrounding us with.

2. We Develop Character

Character is never a group project. We develop character in times of our aloneness.
- As David sat alone and wrote his psalms, what formed was character.

- You can see it in the way he ended the psalm we read earlier about his isolation.
- The Psalm opens with David’s deep feeling of loneliness, but by the end, David has began to develop a deeper sense of God at work.

- Psalm 31:21-24
  Praise be to the Lord,
  for he showed me the wonders of his love
  when I was in a city under siege.

In my alarm I said,
“I am cut off from your sight!”
Yet you heard my cry for mercy
when I called to you for help.

Love the Lord, all his faithful people!
The Lord preserves those who are true to him,
but the proud he pays back in full.

Be strong and take heart,
all you who hope in the Lord.
There is a final discovery in your isolation.
This maybe the most important and unexpected point.

As helpful as new relationships and character might be, they can’t ever solve your feeling of isolation. The most important thing we learn in isolation is that we are never truly alone.

3. We Discover God’s Constant Presence

“Many people seek fellowship because they are afraid to be alone...let him who cannot be alone beware of community. He will do harm to himself and to the community. Alone you stood before God when he called you; alone you had to answer that call; alone you had to struggle and pray; and alone you will die and give an account to God. You cannot escape yourself, for God has singled you out.” — Dietrich Bonhoeffer

In the times of isolation, we come to realize that God has singled us out for his purpose.
- We are not alone, we are in his presence and his hand is carefully at work.
- Realizing that God’s presence is active in your isolation, that is a revolutionary discovery.

“Through all this ordeal his root horror had been isolation, and there are no words to express the abyss between isolation and having one ally. It may be conceded to the mathematicians that four is twice two. But two is not twice one; two is two thousand times one.”
— G.K. Chesterton, The Man Who Was Thursday: A Nightmare

When you recognize Christ, you have gained more than the benefit of a single friend, you have gained more than 1,000 friends.

Jesus’s presence is the force that allows you to be truly alone and never be lonely.
- Jesus is the only way to escape the debilitation of your isolation.

You can know this because Christ faced an isolation greater than you ever have to.

On the cross, Jesus faced not just an isolation from friends, or family, or society, Jesus faced isolation from God himself.
- Jesus, the son of God, who had known God’s presence for all eternity, suddenly found himself completely alone.
- He cried you, “My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me?”

Jesus was actually quoting form one of David’s Psalms
My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from saving me,
so far from my cries of anguish?

My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,
by night, but I find no rest.

But that wasn’t the end of David’s prayer.
David continued, and I think Jesus was pointing too…

For God has not despised or scorned
the suffering of the afflicted one;
he has not hidden his face from him
but has listened to his cry for help.

From you comes the theme of my praise in the great assembly;
before those who fear you I will fulfill my vows.

The poor will eat and be satisfied;
those who seek the Lord will praise him—
may your hearts live forever!

On the cross, Jesus faced a kind of isolation from God that would complete crush us.
- Jesus took on a kind of isolation that we would never be able to face.
- And by his grace, that is an isolation you will never have to face.

- Christ has made a way of friendship that can radically multiply your sense of belonging and being known
- Knowing Christ offers a kind of courage and hope that can life you out of any loneliness or isolation.

- With Christ there is no isolation that can not be transformed into character and friendship and worship

- That deep belonging is offered to you by faith alone.
  - Believe in Christ.
  - Confess him as your hope.
  - And find yourself never alone again.