

President Declares Opioid Crisis a Public Health Emergency

In the News

The recent declaration of the opioid crisis as a public health emergency follows the appointment of the president's Commission on Combating Drug Addiction and the Opioid Crisis (CCDAOC), under New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie's leadership, which reported about 142 Americans die every day from opioid overdoses, which amounts to a "September 11th every three weeks."

In 1900, about 1 in 300 Americans were addicted to drugs; today approximately 1 in 133 suffer from drug addiction. In 1970, at the height of a heroin epidemic, there were fewer than 3,000 overdose deaths; in 1988, during the crack epidemic, there were fewer than 5,000.

Compare those figures to more than 64,000 Americans who died from opioid overdoses last year, surpassing deaths by guns or car accidents. Opioid overdoses are now the leading cause of death for Americans younger than 50 years of age.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the number of deaths from opioid overdose quadrupled between 1999 and 2014. The government reported in 2016 that drug deaths involving synthetic opioids, mostly fentanyl (which is 50-100 times more powerful than heroin or morphine), had risen 540 percent in just three years.

Drug epidemics in the United States during the past 200 years have sometimes been fueled by marketers, pharmaceutical companies and physicians promoting excessive use of potentially addictive drugs for all manner of ailments.

Morphine, originally prescribed to ease the pain of wounded Civil War soldiers, turned many into addicts. In the 1890s, heroin was available in pill form for treatment of influenza and respiratory ailments. But when sniffed or injected, the drug provided a more powerful high. So, medicine that had been designed for curative or palliative purposes often led to the curse of addiction.

Since 1996, when the opioid OxyContin was brought to market, more than 200,000 people in the United States have died from overdoses of the painkiller and others like it. Thousands more died from overdoses after switching from a prescription opioid to a cheaper illicit drug such as heroin.

While opioids may be the appropriate treatment for some people with chronic pain and those with terminal illness, experts say the drugs have been over-

promoted and overprescribed; now the focus needs to be on preventing overdose deaths, helping addicts kick their habits and stay clean, and preventing non-users from becoming addicted.

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Isaiah 53:4-5

*Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.
But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed. (For context, read 53:3-6, 10-12.)*

This passage about the Suffering Servant has been understood by some Christian commentators and the New Testament writers as a reference to Jesus the Christ. He is depicted here as the sin-bearer, the one who offered to take the punishment for our sin upon himself, so that we might go free.

We can take comfort in this because in his willingness to suffer with us, we find that we are not alone, but that God joins us in our pain. So Jesus was given the name "Emmanuel" (which means, "God with us") at his birth (Matthew 1:23).

Questions: How does the knowledge that Jesus entered fully into our human experience, including our infirmities, diseases and afflictions, help us cope with those afflictions? What can we learn from the fact that Jesus came to suffer *with* us, and not *instead* of us?

Mark 5:3-5, 15

He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him any more, even with a chain; for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always howling and bruising himself with stones. ... [The people] came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion; and they were afraid. (For context, read 5:1-20.)

This passage records Jesus' encounter with a man with an unclean spirit who lived in a cemetery. The man recognized Jesus as the Son of God, but feared he had come to torment him. He was a danger to himself and most likely to others. He was effectively the tortured slave of the legion of demons within. Jesus ordered them to into a herd of about 2,000 hogs, who stampeded down a steep bank into the sea, where they drowned, leaving the man in peace.

We can only guess what happened when the man returned home to face his friends, as Jesus commanded, to tell them how God had been merciful to him. He had to build on the new beginning Jesus gave him by living out his transformation day by day. That started as he faced the pain of his past, sought to repair damaged relationships, and bore witness to the work God had begun in him.

Questions: How do you think the demoniac's condition is like or unlike that of someone addicted to powerful drugs? What do you suppose led the demon-possessed man to live among the tombs? What do you think his relationship was like with other people before his encounter with Jesus?

What do you think an addict needs in order to be whole again? What role can the church play in restoring those who are too dependent on drugs to health and wholeness?

Revelation 21:3-4

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." (For context, read 21:1-5.)

In John's vision of the new heaven and the new earth, the pain and suffering of this world are things of the past. The thought of God himself tenderly wiping every tear from the eyes of his people is riveting. The day is coming when those who have suffered excruciating agony will be freed from their pain.

Question: What does this promise mean to the believer who sees no end to pain here on this earth?

Prayer for the Victims of Addiction (BCP p.831)

O blessed Lord, you ministered to all who came to you: Look with compassion upon all who through addiction have lost their health and freedom. Restore to them the assurance of your unfailing mercy; remove from them the fears that beset them; strengthen them in the work of their recovery; and to those who care for them, give patient understanding and persevering love. *Amen.*