

October 15, 2017
Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Life Beyond Death: A Tale of Two Women”

The Reverend Melanie Marsh Baum



Pastoral Prayer

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Psalm 88:1–13

¹O LORD, God of my salvation, when, at night, I cry out in your presence,
²let my prayer come before you; incline your ear to my cry.
³For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol.
⁴I am counted among those who go down to the Pit; I am like those who have no help,
⁵like those forsaken among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, like those whom you remember no more, for they are cut off from your hand.
⁶You have put me in the depths of the Pit, in the regions dark and deep.
⁷Your wrath lies heavy upon me, and you overwhelm me with all your waves. Selah
⁸You have caused my companions to shun me; you have made me a thing of horror to them. I am shut in so that I cannot escape;
⁹my eye grows dim through sorrow. Every day I call on you, O LORD; I spread out my hands to you.
¹⁰Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the shades rise up to praise you? Selah
¹¹Is your steadfast love declared in the grave, or your faithfulness in Abaddon?
¹²Are your wonders known in the darkness, or your saving help in the land of forgetfulness?
¹³But I, O LORD, cry out to you; in the morning my prayer comes before you.

Luke 8:40–56

⁴⁰Now when Jesus returned, the crowd welcomed him, for they were all waiting for him.
⁴¹Just then there came a man named Jairus, a leader of the synagogue. He fell at Jesus' feet and begged him to come to his house, ⁴²for he had an only daughter, about twelve years old, who was dying. As he went, the crowds pressed in on him. ⁴³Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years; and though she had spent all she had on physicians, no one could cure her. ⁴⁴She came up behind him and touched the fringe of his clothes, and immediately her hemorrhage stopped. ⁴⁵Then Jesus asked, "Who touched me?" When all denied it, Peter said, "Master, the crowds surround you and press in on you." ⁴⁶But Jesus said, "Someone touched me; for I noticed that power had gone out from me." ⁴⁷When the woman saw that she could not remain hidden, she came trembling; and falling down before him, she declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him, and how she had been immediately healed. ⁴⁸He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace." ⁴⁹While he was still speaking, someone came from the leader's house to say, "Your daughter is dead; do not trouble the teacher any longer." ⁵⁰When Jesus heard this, he replied, "Do not fear. Only believe, and she will be saved." ⁵¹When he came to the house, he did not allow anyone to enter with him, except Peter, John, and James, and the child's father and mother. ⁵²They were all weeping and wailing for her; but he said, "Do not weep; for she is not dead but sleeping." ⁵³And they laughed at him, knowing that she was dead. ⁵⁴But he took her by the hand and called out, "Child, get up!" ⁵⁵Her spirit returned, and she got up at once. Then he directed them to give her something to eat. ⁵⁶Her parents were astounded; but he ordered them to tell no one what had happened.

"Life Beyond Death: The Tale of Two Women"

Psalm 88:1–13, Luke 8:40–56

"Faith has the power to transform us, even where hope has failed us..."

In exploring *Life Beyond* this fall, and particularly these last few weeks, as I've been thinking about healing, my mind has been on the notion of hope. Any conversation about healing in our modern context is, ultimately, a conversation about hope. Hope is the stock and trade of modern medicine. This is where many of us turn when we are in need of healing, when what we really want to hear is, "We can fix this. There is hope for your future. Things will return to normal". Hope is the wonder drug, the new experimental treatment, the brilliant surgeon, the heroic life-saving measures. It's all the things that promise to restore us, returning life to its intended track so that we can go back to whatever it was we were doing before things went off the rails.

But what do we do when hope fails us? Because let's face it. There comes a time when things just aren't going back to the way they were. Sometimes our lives go off the rails, and they stay there. This isn't just about our physical bodies. Our relationships, our careers, our finances, our plans for our future selves can all begin to break down and be in need of some kind of healing. If what we're really looking for in these times is hope, how do our spirits survive when the healing we seek does not meet our expectations, when our hopes are not realized?

The women in this story from Luke's gospel have experience of unrealized hope. When Jesus encounters them, each is at a point where all hope seems to have vanished. One is young, just beginning her life, with so much untapped potential. The other is older, and further along her journey, with so many years behind her spent outcast from her community. There is a sense of desperation in both the nameless woman, and in Jairus, the father of the dying young girl. But Jesus sensed something else in the nameless woman as well. He sensed her trust in him. This trust went beyond all reason. It was a trust so deep that she was willing to take bold and potentially disastrous action. She was unclean, she was an outcast, she had been told that she is incurable, yet she pushed through the crowd and reached out to take hold of Jesus' cloak. Perhaps it was the unexpected encounter with this woman that inspired Jesus to

encourage Jairus in his own wavering belief. Unlike the nameless woman, who had little left to lose in reaching out for Jesus' help, Jairus had risked everything to come to this man who was known for his acts of supernatural power. Jairus was a leader of the Synagogue, and this was the man who had opposed their rules and challenged their authority. Yet, he came to Jesus to beg for help for his dying child, and just as he drew near, he received word that all was lost.

Those who know Italian may recognize the words on the front of this morning's bulletin. They translate to, "Abandon all hope, you who enter here". These are the famed words written above the gates of Hell in Dante's classical poem *The Divine Comedy*. It's easy to hear those words as a warning, or a curse, because we often think that the only possibility when hope disappears is utter desolation. "Hopeless" is a word we use to describe the worst possible scenario: twelve years cut off from family and worship in social and spiritual isolation or a young only child on her death bed. This is what Dante intended for those words in his vision of Hell as a place defined by unending, unimaginable suffering. When all seems lost, when we are ready to give up, when fear and doubt and defeat threaten to overwhelm us, and all hope is gone, desolation and despair may seem to us like the only option.

But this is not the message of the gospel. Jesus reveals something different in this tale of two women: Faith. Faith is what he saw in the action of the nameless woman reaching for his cloak. Faith is what we see when Jairus steps outside the bounds of his religious constraints and duties to plead for his daughter's life. Faith works outside the duality of hope and despair that rules this human life. We might be used to thinking of 'hope' and 'faith' as similar – even interchangeable – words, but their definitions are actually quite different. Hope is defined as "a feeling of expectation and desire for a certain thing to happen". Hope is about what we want, what we've planned, what we expect from a particular situation. As Martin Luther once described it, hope rests in our own will, and relies on our own ability.

Faith is something else entirely. It is defined as "complete trust or confidence in someone or something." Faith is the light we walk by when we can see no other way to move forward. It does not answer all of our questions. It does not promise a return to normal. It does not long for the past or anticipate the future. It is the still, small voice of God that speaks to us within the chaos of right now, saying to us "Fear Not."

This cancer very well may kill you. Fear Not.

You may never be the same after that accident. Fear Not.

She's left you ... and she isn't coming back. Fear Not.

The stories of these two women in Luke do not offer the expected hope of our modern understanding of healing. Instead they open our eyes to the life altering transformation of faith. I'm not talking about a "what a friend we have in Jesus" kind of faith, that is comfortable, and soothing. This is more like 'Jacob wrestling with God until daybreak'. It is hard-won. It is this kind of faith, not hope, that draws Christ towards the two women in this story, and it is through faith, that their lives are restored.

In the spring of 2000, Penn was diagnosed with breast cancer. Two months earlier, Penn's dear friend Nancy had received word that her cancer – in remission for five years – had returned. This time it had spread. Nancy came from a family of cancer survivors. Of the five sisters and one brother in her immediate family, all but one had been diagnosed with some form of life-threatening cancer. One sister had died of breast cancer years before in her early 30s. Another had a tennis-ball sized malignant mass removed, and was mercifully now cancer free. The rest, including Nancy were in some stage of remission. This was a road that Nancy knew very well. She had beaten this thing before, and she would do it again. Penn was not so sure of things. For Penn, everything was new and uncertain. Her diagnosis was daunting: Stage Three. Nancy stood by Penn's side as she prepared to share the news with her husband and teenage children. We'll get through this, she promised.

As the two women both prepared for surgery, then radiation, then chemotherapy, Nancy decided that she and Penn should walk the journey of their illness together, the rookie and the veteran. Together they sat through hours of chemotherapy treatments. They shaved one another's heads as each woman's hair began to fall out. They tried on wigs together, and brought each other soup when their treatments made them weak and nauseous. They prayed for each other. Weeks and months went by. Penn got better, Nancy got worse. By the time Penn went for her six month post-op exam, where her cancer was declared in remission, Nancy was close to death. "We still prayed for each other every single day, right to the very end," Penn said later. "And you know what? I envied her, even as her circumstance became more and more hopeless. She was in so much pain, and at a certain point she began to lose hope that she

would get better, but her faith never wavered. Mine certainly did. We cried a lot, we were mad a lot, but she never said, 'I think we can stop praying now, it's not working'. She would pray things like, "Give me peace, oh God" or "Let my heart be filled with gratitude" Her prayers changed, but they never, ever stopped." Faith has the power to transform us, even where hope has failed us.

The ancient Psalmists prayed. In joy and in sorrow, they cried out to God. Their prayers may have changed, as their fortunes waxed and waned, but they never stopped crying out to God. Even when they were clearly saying, "My God, I cannot feel your presence now... I cannot tell if you are listening... still, each morning, they came before God with their prayers. They did not lose faith. When we lose our faith, crying out to God becomes pointless. But when we abandon hope, when we let go of our own will and begin to trust, it is at that very moment – always – that we are prepared for transformation. That is the place where miracles happen. That is the point where life beyond healing begins. Though the miracle we receive, or the restoration that comes to us, may not be what we wanted or expected, transformation can move our lives in ways we never thought possible.

Exhausted, and with only the few provisions that had washed ashore with him, the sole survivor of a shipwreck sat in despair on an isolated Pacific island. Every day he scanned the horizon searching for any sign of salvation, but there was no hope in sight. One afternoon, he spied a ship far out at sea. He lit a torch to try to signal the ship and ran toward the shore, waving the small light frantically along the water's edge, but with little success. The ship passed along at a distance, and vanished out of sight. As he attempted to signal the ship, the unthinkable happened. Stray embers from his torch landed in the fronds of his make-shift hut, catching it on fire. Before long, the shelter, his small cache of food and supplies were engulfed in flames the smoke rolling up to the sky. He watched, stunned, as all that stood between him and death was destroyed. He collapsed onto the sand, overcome with grief and anger and loss, knowing that this was the end, and certain that he would perish alone on this beach. Several hours later, he was awakened by the sound of a ship approaching the island, and he saw the crew sending out a small boat toward the shore to retrieve him. Once on board the ship, the man asked his rescuers, "What brought you here? How did you know to come for me?" "We saw the smoke from your signal fire," they replied.

Sometimes the very thing we look upon as a disaster brings about our salvation. Sometimes our plans and expectations and hopes fail us and we are at the point of descending into despair. In those moments, there is another way: the way of faith. In the midst of the chaos, if we are able to abandon hope, we might hear the still, small voice of God whispering, "I am here. I am Here. Fear Not."

Amen.

Pastoral Prayer of Thanksgiving, Intercession, and Petition

The Reverend Amy Starr Redwine

Gracious God, we hope and we have faith that our prayers have the power to bring about change. Today we pray for change in our world, which continues to be filled with suffering and division. We pray that poverty would be changed into abundance, that swords would be changed into ploughshares; that anger and fear would be changed into compassion and trust. We pray that human beings might live in harmony with the planet you created and gave us to steward, and we pray for all those mourning losses in the aftermath of disasters both natural and human-made.

Healing God, we hope and have faith that even as we seek change, we will be changed; that prejudice would change into humility; that bones would mend and hearts that are broken would become stronger in their scars; that cancer cells would change and become harmless; that mourning would, in the right time, turn into dancing. And when we do not receive the outcomes we hope for, when healing does not fit our definition, transform our vision that we might recognize your work, your infinite love, and your abundant grace all around us.

We pray today for those in our community and beyond whose needs we know: Judy, Andrew, Akeya, Rich, Gabe, Eliseo, Anne Marie, Hawthorn, Rachel, Elizabeth, Olitana, Robert, Tom, Rory, Liam, and Doug. We pray for Tommy and Rachel as they transition into parenthood, and for Mia as she grows. May she be surrounded by love that nurtures and sustains her. We pray that Kristine might finish her race safely and with increased awe in the capacity of the body you have given her.

We also pray for those who have left requests in our Carpenter's Box this week: for Victoria who is living without a home, for the togetherness and happiness of K and D, for an injured child, for the citizens of Puerto Rico, for a healthy pregnancy for Megan, successful surgery for Carol, and peaceful marriage for Ryan; for Joseph, that he might find wholeness and healing; and for David.

God of all people, we pray for our neighbors, for those who live here, that you would open our eyes to all they have to offer; for those who work here, that you will give them strength and wisdom for each new day; for those who come here to seek healing, whether for themselves or for a loved one; and for the students around us, who both live and work here and often bear enormous stress. Grant all of these neighbors your love and the peace that passes all understanding.

Finally, holy God, we pray for this church and for the church universal. In this time of transformation and uncertainty, we ask for the guidance of your Spirit that we might be aligned with your will for the future. We pray for our members, participants, staff, and leaders as we discern how to live out the gift of discipleship in word and deed. We pray for the members of the Ministry of Finance today as they draft the budget for 2018, that they might make decisions with confidence in the abundance of your provision and in our capacity to be wise and joyful stewards of our resources.

Holy and Loving God, we hope and have faith that you do hear our prayers. And we trust that in hearing them, you take them into your immense heart, and shower light and love into these people who hurt and these people who rejoice and these people who wonder.

Hear us as we speak the words Jesus taught: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen