

God's Downstairs Neighbour

Psalm 130; Mark 5:21-43

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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In our gospel text this morning, we encounter two stories of pure desperation.

Two stories involving two daughters: the daughter of Jairus, the synagogue leader, and the ritually unclean woman, the social outcast, the one Jesus names “daughter.”

I'm going to talk about both of these daughters this morning, but I'm going to begin with the daughter of Jairus. I suppose this is a natural move because this is a story that meets anyone who is a parent at the point of their deepest and most desperate fear.

There is no greater fear, for a parent, than fear for the well-being of their child.

I was thinking this week of the times when I have been most desperate and most afraid in my life. Two instances came to mind, both involving my kids.

The first story I've told before. It was the summer of 2015 when our family was in New York City.

To make a long story short, I lost my 6'3 fourteen-year-old son on the subway. In a moment of confusion about whether or not we were on the right train, I got off and he stayed on.

I have never felt as sick in my life as I did as that train disappeared into the dark underground tunnel.

I had visions of Nick emerging out of some random subway station in a sketchy corner of Manhattan, wandering alone. All manner of terrifying scenarios and scenes from all those crime shows (which are always in New York!) began to unfold in my panicked and suddenly quite irrational brain.

I caught the next train. He was waiting for me on the next platform. All was well. But it was a terrifying fifteen minutes or so.

The second scene was a few months ago. I was out in Abbotsford to pick up Claire after her term had ended at college.

We had dinner with my brother and his family and then Claire was off to hang out with friends on her last night there. We agreed to meet the next morning at a certain time and load up her stuff.

The next morning, I showed up at her apartment at the agreed upon time. I phoned her to let her know that I was there. No answer. I tried again. No answer.

I was puzzled. This wasn't like Claire. Like most member of her generation, her phone is more of an appendage than a device ☺. It's never far from her.

I kept trying her phone, over and over and over again. Eventually, I was able to get into the apartment building when someone else entered the building.

I knocked on her door. No answer. I knocked more urgently. No answer. It was now ten minutes past when we said we'd meet. I called her again. And again. And again. I knocked, slightly more urgently.

No answer.

This is the point of the story where rational Ryan checks out of proceedings and the desperate irrational father takes over. I began to replay every horror story I had ever read from parents whose kids had had something terrible happen to them.

Had she even come home last night? Had she been abducted? Had someone taken her phone? Had someone slipped something into a drink? Was she unconscious inside the apartment? Or somewhere else? Why, oh why, wasn't she answering her phone?!

I pounded and pounded on the door. At this point I didn't care what the neighbours thought anymore. Still, nothing.

After nearly twenty minutes of phoning and texting and pounding on her apartment door and praying with a desperation I can't recall since the subway station in Manhattan, I called her landlord. I had to get into that apartment. I was terrified of what I might find.

(Again, rational Ryan had left the building. It was all desperate dad now!)

The landlord came about ten minutes later to let me in. I crashed into her apartment like a maniac.

And there she was, fast asleep on her bed.

I shook her awake with a mixture of anger and profound relief! “Claire, why on earth haven’t you been answering your phone?!” “Oh, I turned it off,” she sheepishly said. “My alarm went off early and I wanted to go back to sleep.”

I felt very foolish. And, of course profoundly relieved.

These two stories speak of parental desperation at the thought that something terrible has happened to your child. In both cases, my overactive and irrational brain supplied the terrible scenarios (scenarios which remained hypothetical and seem laughable in hindsight).

In Mark’s gospel, Jesus encounters Jairus, a leader of the synagogue, whose situation is not hypothetical at all. His daughter is dying.

He is desperate. So desperate, in fact, that he is willing to set aside all propriety and resort to pleading at the feet of this troublesome rabbi that has been causing headaches for respectable religious authorities like him.

When it’s your kid’s life on the line, propriety goes out the window. *Please, come. Lay your hands on her so that she will live.*

Jesus goes with him. And, as always, he’s not alone. A crowd follows him.

And in that crowd, there’s another daughter. A daughter who has been suffering with unnatural bleeding for twelve years—the same number of years Jairus’ daughter has been alive.

(This numerical symmetry is interesting and while we probably shouldn’t read too much into it, it’s certainly worth pausing on. In the biblical world, the number 12 often symbolizes perfection or completeness or the power and authority of God. Think, the twelve sons of Jacob, the twelve tribes of Israel, the twelve disciples, etc.

It’s interesting that both daughters in this story are associated with the number 12.)

At any rate, this other daughter is also desperate. Desperate for healing from her affliction. Desperate for relief from her loneliness and social isolation (she would have been ritually unclean for twelve years and thus a social outcast). Desperate for *some* kind of hope!

She reaches out and touches Jesus. That's it. Just a touch. And she's healed.

Jesus notices. Not just that power has gone out of him. He also notices *her*. He sees this woman in a way that perhaps no one has in twelve years.

She grovels at his feet, trembling in fear. Jesus raises her up. He calls her "daughter." He tells her that her faith has healed her. He tells her to go in peace and to be freed from her suffering.

It's possible that this woman has not heard a kind and hopeful and dignifying word in over a decade. Jesus' healing is far more than physical.

And it's worth remembering that Jairus is looking on this whole time. The synagogue leader. The man who works within and maintains the systems and structures that kept women like this in their place, kept them safely outside where they couldn't contaminate others.

What must he have been thinking? *My daughter is dying! Why is Jesus stopping to ask these strange questions to this nobody?! Why is he asking who touched him in the middle of this jostling crowd? My daughter doesn't have time for this!!*

But Jesus *did* have time. Jesus always had time for those who, for whatever reason, found themselves on the outside.

Perhaps in addition to everything else he was doing, Jesus was gently reorienting Jairus' priorities, his understanding of who God is and where and how God loves.

At the very least, it's interesting that the respectable religious man has to wait while Jesus attends to the outcast. We might ponder what this means in our time and place.

Who are the outcasts that Jesus might be busy attending to while we feel like we're waiting for him to get to us and our needs? What might this have to say about who *we* ought to be attending to in the meantime?

We don't know what effect Jesus' strange priorities had on Jairus.

He did get his happy ending, though. His daughter was, eventually healed. This we know from our reading.

Jesus entered a house of sadness where it was assumed that death had claimed another daughter and spoke words of life. *Little girl. I say to you, get up.*

We don't hear from Jairus again. What effect did this experience have on him? Aside from the astonished joy of having his daughter alive and well, what did he learn?

I read one commentator this week who speculated thus:

I hope that when Jairus embraces his resurrected daughter, he also embraces a new vision of who God is, and what God values. In Jairus's story, Jesus demands that we not see death where he sees life. In the bleeding woman's story, he demands that legalism give way to love every single time. In each story, Jesus restores a lost child of God to community and intimacy. In each story, Jesus embraces what is "impure" (the menstruating woman, the dead body) in order to practice mercy. In each story, a previously hopeless daughter "goes in peace" because Jesus isn't a pronouncer of death; he is a giver of new life.

We are not all desperate in the ways described in our text this morning. But I think we all go through times in our lives where we feel desperate for something from God.

Perhaps it's for a new start, a second chance. Maybe it's for the ability to forgive someone and move past some pain in our lives.

Maybe we're desperate for God to silence our doubts and confusion.

And maybe we're desperate for healing. Maybe we've been struggling with some affliction (physical, mental, spiritual) for years and years. Maybe we're tired of praying, tired of hoping, tired of pounding on heaven's door and hearing only silence.

What do we do with this God whose healing seems so unpredictable and unmanageable? Why are some healed and not others? How long do we have to wait? What if we don't have twelve years?

I could launch into some theology at this point. I could talk about divine providence and the mystery of prayer and how human suffering interacts with the goodness of God.

I could talk about examples in Scripture and church history where people have to contend with the silence of God and don't seem to get their happy ending.

But I'm not going to do this. I might bore you and it's getting hot in this sanctuary. But more importantly I don't think any argument is an adequate response to human pain.

So, I want to close with a story. Last week, Naomi directed my attention to the story of a certain contestant on the popular TV show American's Got Talent.

There was a thirty-year-old contestant named Jane Marczweski from Zanesville, Ohio. Her stage name is "Nightbirde."

Before she performed her song as she was interacting with the judges, she almost casually dropped a reference to the fact that she was living with cancer and had a very low chance of survival.

She then proceeded to deliver an incredible performance and received something called "The Golden Buzzer" which Naomi informed me means that you get to bypass a bunch of stages of the competition and go straight to the final or something.

Anyway, it was a compelling and powerful video to watch.

I thought of her as I read these stories of being desperate for healing this week. I did some digging around online to learn more of her story.

I found a blog post that she had written on March 9 of this year, months before she became a celebrity on America's Got Talent. I want to read a bit of it for you:

I have had cancer three times now, and I have barely passed thirty. There are times when I wonder what I must have done to deserve such a story. I fear sometimes that when I die and meet with God, that He will say I disappointed Him, or offended Him, or failed Him. Maybe He'll say I just never learned the lesson, or that I wasn't grateful enough. But one thing I know for sure is this: He can never say that He did not know me.

I am God's downstairs neighbor, banging on the ceiling with a broomstick. I show up at His door every day. Sometimes with songs, sometimes with curses. Sometimes apologies, gifts, questions, demands. Sometimes I use my key under the mat to let myself in. Other times, I sulk outside until He opens the door to me Himself.

I have called Him a cheat and a liar, and I meant it. I have told Him I wanted to die, and I meant it. Tears have become the only prayer I know. Prayers roll over my nostrils and drip down my forearms. They fall to the ground as I reach for Him. These are the prayers I repeat night and day; sunrise, sunset.

Call me bitter if you want to—that's fair. Count me among the angry, the cynical, the offended, the hardened. But count me also among the friends of God. For I have seen Him in rare form. I have felt His exhale, laid in His shadow...

If an explanation would help, He would write me one—I know it. But maybe an explanation would only start an argument between us—and I don't want to argue with God. I want to lay in a hammock with Him and trace the veins in His arms.

I remind myself that I'm praying to the God who let the Israelites stay lost for decades. They begged to arrive in the Promised Land, but instead He let them wander, answering prayers they didn't pray. For forty years, their shoes didn't wear out. Fire lit their path each night. Every morning, He sent them mercy-bread from heaven.

I look hard for the answers to the prayers that I didn't pray. I look for the mercy-bread that He promised to bake fresh for me each morning. The Israelites called it manna, which means "what is it?"

That's the same question I'm asking—again, and again. There's mercy here somewhere—but what is it? What is it? What is it?

I see mercy in the dusty sunlight that outlines the trees, in my mother's crooked hands, in the blanket my friend left for me, in the harmony of the wind chimes. **It's not the mercy that I asked for, but it is mercy nonetheless. And I learn a new prayer: thank you. It's a prayer I don't mean yet, but will repeat until I do.**¹

I love this image that she uses of being God's downstairs neighbour banging on the ceiling with a broomstick.

This is the desperation I see in the stories like the ones from our gospel reading today. A desperate father whose daughter is dying. A woman who has been suffering (physically, socially, mentally, spiritually) for twelve years.

In their own way, they bang on the ceiling. *Jesus, help! I'm out of options here.*

¹ <https://www.nightbirde.co/blog/blog-post-title-three-2rjnk>

They get their happy endings and for this we thank God. As I said last week, we must never stop praying for miracles to the one who stills the storm.

But sometimes, as Nighbirde alludes to in her article, we get not the mercy we asked for but mercy, nonetheless.

Maybe it's a new insight into the love of God who is present in our pain. Maybe it's a blessing deferred that we can't see at the moment.

Maybe it's a hard road that we wouldn't have chosen but which is defining and refining us in ways that we will only be able to see with the benefit of hindsight.

Maybe healing is coming. Maybe we're only a few years into our "twelve years" and we simply have to keep banging on the ceiling, keep being God's persistent downstairs neighbour.

In my online digging around on this story, I came across the reason why Jane Marczewski chose the stage name "Nightbirde."

Apparently, she had the same dream multiple nights in a row where birds were singing outside her bedroom window in the dark. The first two times were, in fact, dreams. The third time ended up being real.

She writes:

The birds were singing as if it was morning but there was really no sign of the light yet... And I wanted to embody that. Being somebody that could sing through a dark time because I was so full of hope and assurance that there would be a morning."²

May God help us to be those downstairs neighbours who never stop banging on the ceiling, never stop desperately seeking the One in whom the truest and deepest healing is found.

May God also help us to be those who are so full of hope and assurance that we can sing, even through dark times.

Amen.



² <https://www.goodhousekeeping.com/life/entertainment/a36676470/who-is-agt-nightbirde-jane-marczewski-golden-buzzer-2021/>