

## ***When Things Get Desperate***

Mark 5:21-43

Rev. Stephen Wilkins  
Georgetown Presbyterian Church  
June 28, 2009

I want you to know it's good to be back in Georgetown, even though I always like to spend time in the holy land of Austin, Texas. I think it's only fair to you, since this congregation underwrites the majority of my continuing education and doctoral studies, to give you an indication of some of the things I'm learning. And so this morning I thought I'd share with you a few snippets from some of the articles and books I have been studying over the past couple of weeks:

“Most scholars seem to have forgotten that the introduction of gnosticism imposes smothering constraints upon the relevant dynamics of Luke-Acts.”

“From a strictly theological viewpoint, the eschatological structure adds considerable urgency to excessive use of the 19<sup>th</sup> century frameworks.”

“A formal analysis will quickly show that a liturgical perspective necessitates that urgent consideration be made of any attempt to introduce historical analysis.”

“Although Moltmann does not state it in so many words, the implication is clear that the meaning of major elements calls into question the unfortunate faux-pas of neo-orthodoxy.”

Had enough? Me too!

Actually, each of those statements is absolutely meaningless. They were taken from a four-column list of random phrases that, when one phrase from each column is selected, one can form sentences that sound profound.

I may not be much smarter than I was two weeks ago, but at least I can sound like I am!

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The two stories in our text from the gospel according to Mark make me uncomfortable. They make me uncomfortable, not because of anything that Jesus does or says, but because there are people who will make these stories say something that they don't mean. There is a temptation to look at this passage and conclude that as long as someone has enough faith, Jesus will heal whoever asks it of him. After all, the people in these stories are battling a thousand, aren't they--the healing of Jairus' daughter, and the healing of the woman with the unstoppable flow of blood. Both come to Jesus with faith, and in both cases Jesus does what they ask of him. Ergo, the logical conclusion we can come to is that you just have to have enough faith, and you'll get a miracle.

Only, you and I both know that's not the way it works. For every “daughter of Jairus,” there are millions of daughters or sons who don't get raised from the dead. For every miraculous cure of a person with an untreatable malady, there are millions for whom there will be no miracle. I can think of nothing more

cruel than to say to those who don't get the miracle, "O, if only you had enough faith..."

"The trouble with miracles," Barbara Brown Taylor says, "is that it is hard to witness them without wanting one of your own. Every one of us knows someone who is suffering. Every one of us knows someone who could use a miracle, but miracles are hard to come by. Not everyone who prays for one gets one, and meanwhile some get them without asking."<sup>1</sup>

These stories make me uncomfortable, because there is the temptation to think that we can manipulate an outcome through our faith. And you and I both know that's just not the case.

But the stories are about faith. They are about faith of people when things get desperate in their lives.

What do you do when things get desperate? To whom do you turn?

Jesus encounters two desperate people. Jairus is desperate because his precious little girl is deathly ill. Who can't understand the kind of desperation that Jairus must have felt? What parent can sit idly by when one of their children is critically ill? In his desperation, Jairus seeks out a stranger he has heard about, a stranger who works miracles. Maybe, just maybe, this stranger will grant a miracle for his daughter. Jairus is desperate. He'll try anything. Repeatedly he begs this man Jesus, "Please, just make her well."

In the same town there is a woman who also is desperate. She has had a hemorrhage for twelve years. There's not a doctor in town who has been able to do anything for her. To compound her misery and to add to her desperation, the bleeding has made her unclean according to the law of God; anything or anybody she touches will become unclean. And so she has been shunned from human contact, for 12 agonizing years. She is desperate for healing. Maybe this stranger has enough power to heal her. She won't even touch him; she'll just touch the hem of his garment...

What do you do when things get desperate? To whom do you turn?

Do you seek Jesus with a tenacious faith that can't be held back?

While we can't say that the stories promise a cure for everyone who has faith, we can say that the stories do tell us about a Savior who hears us and who cares about us and who comes alongside us in our times of trouble.

When things get desperate, Jesus hears our cries and comes to us. Mark says it so simply that we might easily overlook it. When Jairus repeatedly begs Jesus to come to his house and heal his daughter, Mark simply says of Jesus, "And so he went with him."

And so he went with him. We don't know where Jesus was originally going at the moment. He probably had somewhere he needed to be. But when he heard the cries of Jairus, nothing else mattered. Jesus went with him.

Meanwhile, neither does the hemorrhaging woman escape Jesus' attention. Even though the streets are packed with people clamoring for a chance to see this miracle worker, nevertheless Jesus knows when the woman has touched his garment from behind.

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, from *Bread of Angels: The Problem with Miracles*, quoted in John Buchanan sermon, "The Real Miracle", July 9, 2006, [www.fourthchurch.org](http://www.fourthchurch.org)

Some people think that God is too busy to pay attention to them. Some people think that there's no way God will notice them, not with everything else going on in the world. But the example of Jesus tells us otherwise. Jesus, who was willing to alter his plans to go and heal a little twelve-year-old girl, is willing to come to you in your time of trouble, as well. Jesus, who wouldn't ignore even the most timid touch from a desperate woman, won't ignore you either, when you reach out to him.

The psalmist cries out in his desperation, and it is a cry that emanates from our hearts, as well: "To you, O Lord, I cried, and to the Lord I made supplication: 'What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness? Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me! O Lord, be my helper!'"<sup>2</sup> And maybe the real miracle is not so much whether or not we get what we ask for. Maybe the real miracle is found in the fact that there is nothing that can prevent our Lord from coming to us in our time of trouble.

John Buchanan, pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, and former moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, says exactly that. He says that the real miracle is that "There is nowhere we can go that God's love in Jesus Christ does not go with us. There is no depth to which we can descend that the love of Christ cannot reach us. There is no earthly condition, no sickness, no debilitation, no alienation, no isolation, no loneliness, no self-imposed guilt, no depression that can prevent Jesus Christ from finding us and gathering us in and welcoming us to his kingdom, to our place at his table, to our true home."<sup>3</sup>

What do you do when things get desperate? To whom do you turn?

I began this sermon with a lighthearted sharing of some of what I have been learning during my Doctor of Ministry studies. In a more serious light, one of the gifts I have received through my studies is being re-introduced to Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer was a young German pastor who was active in the resistance against the Nazis. He was imprisoned and ultimately executed for his involvement in an attempt to assassinate Hitler.

He knew what it meant to live in desperate times. Yet never did he waver in his faith. I'm pretty sure he realized he wouldn't have a miraculous release from prison like the apostle Peter had in the book of Acts. Nevertheless, he never wavered, because he knew that no matter what, his Lord was with him. There was nothing that could separate him from God's love in Jesus Christ. Nothing.

Commenting on the 42<sup>nd</sup> Psalm, Bonhoeffer offers this advice: "Now be rid of all your care, and wait! God knows the hour of help, and it will come just as surely as God is God. He will be the help of your countenance; because he knows you and loved you before he made you. He will not let you fall. You are in his hands. At the end you will only be able to thank him for everything that has happened to you, because through it all you will have learned that the almighty God is your God. Your salvation is in Jesus Christ."<sup>4</sup>

What do you do when things get desperate? To whom do you turn?

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2 Psalm 30:8-10

3 "The Real Miracle", [www.fourthchurch.org](http://www.fourthchurch.org)

4 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Meditating on the Word*, translated by David McL. Gracie, (Boston: Cowley Publications, 2000), p. 61.

Have you thought of turning to Jesus? Amen.