

“Faith in the Dark”¹

Sunday, June 2, 2013

I

There was a man named Jairus ... who somehow made his way to find Jesus ... and when he found Him, he threw himself at Jesus’ feet ... maybe touching his forehead to the ground in front of Him. Now it seems this Jairus was a synagogue official of some kind – an important man in any case.

But he doesn’t act right now as if he’s important. No, he acts right now like he’s desperate – close to hysterical with fear, horror ... God knows what. See, the reason for his fear is that his only daughter is on the point of death – 12 years old, slipping toward death. And since Jairus has heard that Jesus can heal - like no one’s seen anyone do before – he pleads, “Come and lay your hands on her, so she can live ... live, not die before she’s hardly had more than a glimpse of what it means to live.”

Now it’s a wonder that Jesus can even hear the man ask, with others crowding around, clamoring for His help. But somehow He does hear, and follows Jairus and his friends to Jairus’ house. Now before they all get very far, they run into some folks coming from the other direction. And with devastating tactlessness they come right out and say, “Your daughter is dead.” They’ve just come from his house where she died. They saw it with their own eyes. They know death. And she is dead. “Why trouble the teacher any further?”

Well at first, silence. And then Jesus speaks directly to Jairus. “Do not be afraid. Only believe, and she will be saved.”

Well, as someone’s said, believe what? Believe what when the man’s whole world has just blown up in his face? Believe that somehow life makes sense even in the face of a 12-year-old’s death? Believe that in some unimaginable way all will be well no matter what? Believe in God? Believe in Jesus?

But Jairus doesn’t ask what he’s supposed to believe in ... or how he’s to believe ... and Jesus doesn’t tell him either as they stand there in the road staring at each other. Only believe. Maybe ... I don’t know ... maybe “believe there’s nothing you have to be afraid of.”

Well anyway, when they finally get to Jairus’ house, it’s full of people “weeping and wailing” as Luke says later in the Gospel. Weeping and wailing ‘cause they maybe didn’t have it in them to pretend that the death of a child is anything but the tragic and unspeakable thing that it is.

And Jesus didn’t say anything to make them change their minds either - doesn’t tell ‘em it was God’s will or some other inane thing like that.

No, what he does say instead is something to the effect that she was not dead, but sleeping. Now what did Jesus mean by this? Is He speaking literally? Does He mean she's lapsed into some kind of coma? Or is He only trying to comfort her father with the thought that death is only a kind of eternal sleep?

Well, who knows what He means. But the folks in the house seemed to think Jesus is mad ... or a fool. I mean, they'd been there when it happened. They know death when they see it. And because the line between weeping and laughing is sometimes a very thin one, they stop their weeping and wailing and of all things laugh at Him. Laugh ... maybe 'cause they don't know what else to do.

Well, Jesus finally puts them all outside – all except His three friends who'd come with him and the parents of the girl.

Now imagine. Imagine the deafening stillness ... the silence of the room. Imagine it. There's the mother with her face buried in her hands; there's Jairus on his knees at the bedside; there's the child lying there ... still ... deathly still with no breath in or out.

Then Jesus speaks to the child. He reaches down and picks up one of her hands in His and in Aramaic says, "Talitha cum." "Child get up." And then, according to Luke ... and the other Gospel writers by the way ... "Her spirit returned and she got up at once."

Now of course, it wasn't just the child's life that had been given back. No, the lives of her mother and father - who stand there speechless. Her mother and fathers' lives have been given back also. I mean, the worst thing that had ever happened to them ... has suddenly become the best thing that's ever happened to them. And they are ... speechless.

All right. Now why did I tell you this story found in Luke's gospel ... just a little further on from this morning's reading? Why?

Well see, the story itself—whether the girl was actually in a coma or whether she was actually dead...it doesn't matter because either way Jesus performed a miracle. And either way, the story is about the power of Jesus' touch to make the blind see and the deaf hear and the lame walk.

Basically, it's about the power of Jesus to save. And I wanted to tell this story because not only is it powerful in itself, but 'cause it follows in a whole line of short stories right here in Luke's big story about Jesus' power to heal. And these scenes – as well as our Old Testament reading from First Kings and the Epistle reading from Galatians – all these readings are about faith in that saving power.

And we do, you and I, need saving, don't we? I mean, read the daily newspapers, listen to the evening news ... if you want to get depressed over something. Watch TV, read novels, read history books, go watch plays in the theater.

And you know, at times I think ... at root ... we're our own worst enemies. See, as a nation we stockpile new weapons – enough to blow up civilization eight times over. We fly drones and kill kids as collateral damage. I know. I know. And I mean I don't want to get political here, 'cause I know it's not just us ... it's ... unfortunately humanity itself at war with itself ... eating up itself ... maybe destroying itself ... in the end.

And of course not just nations, but as individuals we do much the same, don't we. We stockpile weapons for defending ourselves against not just the things and people that threaten us but we also stockpile weapons for holding each other at arm's length, for wounding sometimes even the ones who are closest to us. And as for hostilities – toward other folks, toward ourselves, toward God – oh you can name your own hostilities silently to yourself.

And then you wonder where God gets the patience to put up with us at all. Which I think brings us back to the heart of faith – which, is after all, our topic this morning. And I think – when you get right down to it - when you can speak of faith, you're speaking of faith in the dark for the most part.

And I also think that to speak of the “darkness of faith” is a way of saying that whatever else God is, in a world like ours, God is not obvious. In fact, God – for the most part - is deeply hidden, hidden by our human limitations, hidden by our sin. No the God we meet in the pages of scripture is a hidden God, a God who dwells in deep darkness. Scripture says “Truly thou art a God who hides Thyself.”

See I think the Bible is very realistic about the deep hiddenness of God in a world like ours ... with its darkness that makes faith the most challenging of adventures. I mean, even in Luke's story about Jairus' daughter's healing, the passage ends on a curious and puzzling note, with Jesus telling the family not to tell anyone about what He'd done. Why?

Luke doesn't tell us. So the story ends in a question ... a question for us to figure out as best we can.

No, the Bible never pretends for a moment that God is easily known in a world like ours. I mean, whatever else life is, it's not an open book in which you can read clearly the ways and works of God.

So how do you look at the world? How do I? 'Cause let me suggest that if it's through rose-colored glasses, sooner or later the world will knock them off your face. Like it happened to Jairus and his wife; like it happened to those unlucky enough to run the Boston Marathon to the finish line; like it happened to the parents of those Newtown kids; like those living in the path of Oklahoma's latest tornado terror.

Oh in a world like this faith does not come easy. It never has; it never will. Not real faith in a terribly real world ... clinging for dear life to a deeply hidden God in the midst of the darkness of a sometimes appalling world.

III

And yet. And yet.

I do believe there is something else that is deeply real – more real - beneath all the horror. ‘Cause in the midst of this darkness I think you can catch glimpses of glory like glimpses of fireflies on a summer eve ... strengthening again your grasp on the deepest truth of your life – that God does have power to save ... that life is stronger than death, that none of us can ever say for sure that everything is over ... for you ... or for me.

Let’s end by circling back to Jairus’ story.

Now who knows what kind of story Luke is telling here. But for me the enormously moving part of it is the part where Jesus takes the little girl’s hand and says, “Talitha cum” – child, get up.”

And suddenly I myself am that child ... and maybe you too. Little ones. Old ones. Young ones. Old ones with high blood pressure and arthritis, young ones with tattoos and body piercing. You who believe, and you who sometimes believes and sometimes don’t believe much of anything ... and you in between who hang onto fragile faith by a thread ... you who would give almost anything to believe if only you could.

“Get up! Rise!”

You happy ones ... and you who can hardly remember what it was like once to be happy ... who can hardly get out of bed in the morning and face another day. You who know where you’re going and how to get there, and you who much of the time aren’t sure you’re getting anywhere.

“Get up. Rise.”

He says, all of you - all of you! And I believe the power that is in Him is the power to give life not just to the dead like Jairus’ child, but those who are only partly alive, which is to say to folks like you and me who much of the time live with our lives closed to the wild beauty and miracle of things, including the wild beauty and miracle of every day you live, every day you get up out of bed ... the miracle of your own breathing self.

See, it’s that life-giving power that’s at the heart of this shadowy story about Jairus and the daughter he loved so, and that I believe is at the heart of all our life stories – the power of new life, new hope, new beginnings, that whether you know it or not - it’s that power that I think keeps you coming to places like this week after week, year after year in search of that power – coming to a community that sustains you and holds you up when your knees are about to buckle.

It's the power to get up, even when getting up isn't all that easy for you anymore, the power to keep getting up and going on and on toward whatever it is – Whoever it is, that all your life long reaches out to take you by the hand ... even in the dark ... and says to you ... "Rise up!"

Amen.

1. Resources used: Luke (Interpretation Series) by Fred Craddock; Lectionary Homiletics for June 2nd; "A compassionate healing" in Synthesis, June 2nd. "Faith" and Jairus's Daughter" by Frederick Buechner (Secrets in the Dark); "The Darkness of Faith" by Allen McSween.