

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
St. Francisville, LA
1 July 2018

Mark 5:21-43

Have you ever been really afraid? Let me tell you of a time when my wife and I were terrified. We were pretty new at Grace and one day as we were exiting our kitchen we saw a big snake right outside our door, just waiting for us. We closed the door very quickly, my wife jumped on the kitchen counter, and I did what most city slickers should do in these cases, call a Southerner. In our case, I called Mrs. Anne Klein. We were both looking out of our window when we saw Mrs. Klein come into our porch with a broom, gently allow the snake to climb on it, and then, as though everything was right with the world, she walked it to the far edge of the yard and swung it away. The snake got the message and quickly went into the ditch at the edge of the property. We were at once deeply relieved and deeply ashamed.

We have a very interesting passage in the Gospel of Mark today. In fact, we have two stories for the price of one. But before we talk about these two stories, let me set them up in their proper context. The section we are in in the Gospel of Mark begins with a story about home on 3:13 and ends with another visit of Jesus to his home town, which begins on 6:13 with the calling of the 12. In between these two stories of home, we have 4 different stories where the themes of fear and faith are clearly presented. Even during the opening bookend that begins at 3:13 we can detect some fear. Mary and the siblings hear that Jesus is in town, acting crazy, and they immediately run to where he is, we presume, out of fear for his safety and for the family's honor and reputation. We also see in this story the idea of faith. Jesus says, "Whoever does the will of God, they are my brothers and my sisters." The assumption is that to have faith in Jesus as Messiah is to do the will of God.

Now, let us recall briefly the four stories given to us between the bookends. (1) After the teaching at his home town, where he preaches in parables, Jesus decides to go to the other side of the Sea of Galilee to preach. At some point, a wind storm arose and the boat was about to capsize. The disciples are terrified (seized with fear). Jesus calms the storm and rebukes his disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" (4:10). Jesus proceeds to calm the storm. As if to prove the point that they are afraid and don't yet believe Jesus is the Messiah, Mark ends the passage with, "They were terrified and asked each other, 'Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!'" (4:41).

(2) When Jesus and his party arrived at the other side, Jesus heals a man possesses of 2,000 evil spirits, which call themselves "Legion". At his encounter with Jesus, the possessed man is terrified because, ironically, he recognizes Jesus for who he is. He exclaims, "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? In God's name don't torture me!" (5:7). Jesus orders the evil spirits into a herd of pigs and the owners, "were afraid." They asked Jesus to leave the area.

The story ends with the expression, “And all the people were amazed.” But, there is little indication that this amazement led to faith in Jesus. In fact, we could say that it is fear and lack of faith that led the people to ask Jesus to leave, even after witnessing the greatest event they had ever witnessed in their lives.

(3a) Jesus and the disciples cross again to the Galilean side, a great crowd was waiting for him, including one of the leaders of the Synagogue. He has desperate request for Jesus. His little daughter is at the point of death. He begs Jesus to come to hear and heal her. I find this gesture of faith very refreshing because up until now most of the leaders, Pharisees, Herodians, and others have been watching Jesus carefully and have been plotting against him. We are told that Jesus agrees to go to Jairus’ home with him.

(4) Mark loves giving us a story within a story and this is exactly what happens today. As Jesus and the crowd are walking to heal the girl, a woman who is the absolute opposite of Jairus touches the hem of his robe. Whereas Jairus is a powerful man, this woman is disposed, has a blood disorder, and holds absolutely no standing or power in the community. Whereas Jairus is an honorable man who is well respected in the community, this woman most likely has been reduced to begging, after spending all her money on doctors. She is not allowed in the Temple, most likely she lives at the edge of the village, and is seen as unclean and a sinner because of her ailment and beggar status. She is terrified of acknowledging what she has done because it was improper for her to touch or approach a man, especially in a public setting. Jesus addresses her, calls her ‘daughter’, praises her faith, and sends her off with the promise that her illness will be completely cured. Once again, we have the dual themes of fear and faith. In this case, as in the case of the demoniac, faith in Jesus’ ability to heal made all the difference. Now, as Jesus speaks to the woman, Jairus is confronted with a great test to his faith.

(3b) Jairus receives news comes that his daughter has died. We are not told what his reaction was, but we can anticipate complete shock, grief, sadness, and even anger. Jesus tells him, “Do not fear, only believe.” In fact, a more literal translation would be “Stop fearing, continue believing.” As with the disciples in the storm, Jesus calms the storm of emotions Jairus is feeling and encourages him to remain strong in his faith that Jesus has the power to heal. Mark gives us another ironic twist. Those present at the home laugh at Jesus when he claims the girl is just asleep. As a response to their ridicule and disbelief, Jesus only allows 3 of his disciples and the parents of the child into the room, where he proceeds to heal the girl. The people in the room are overcome with amazement and Jesus orders them to keep the healing a secret.

What do we make of these running themes of fear and faith in all these stories? I believe these themes bring us great hope today. Jesus heals without regard to gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity, race, and even religious background. Remember that the demoniac lives in Gentile territory and may very well be a Gentile. Jesus heals without regard for age or profession. To him, a poor female beggar, despised and disenfranchised is as worthy of healing as the daughter of a powerful man. To him a deranged man confined to living among the dead, held in place by heavy chains is as much as child of God as the leader of a synagogue in Galilee. Jesus means good news for the whole world regardless of any barrier, line of demarkation, or wall we may build between the “us” and the “them”. All that is required is that we believe in him.

I don't know about you, but I believe fear is a big problem in our lives. For all of our technology, medical advances, entertainment options, and progress many in our country are pathologically worried all the time. The increase of anxiety and depression over the last 20 or 30 years is an indication that as a society we are quite unsettled. To be reminded on a day like today that Jesus has the power to heal for those who have faith is truly good news today. Now, when we speak of healing, we always have to think of healing of body, mind, and soul. Unfortunately, we live in a broken world and our human bodies are incredibly fragile. I know that God listens to our prayers for healing and, even when our diseases advance, I often see great spiritual and emotional healing. Jesus is Lord even over our pain and anguish. A deep faith in Jesus makes the difference between the isolation, loneliness, and fear we often feel and a life filled with joy and hope.

I don't know about you but I worry a lot. I worry about my children, about our church, our country, etc. Jesus' words today, "Stop fearing, continue believing" is a reminder that Jesus is in the boat. We are not alone. He walks alongside us and, with him in our lives, all things are possible. May he continue to bless you. Amen!