

June 28, 2009
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Our Gospel reading this morning recalls a brief, yet significant incident in the busy life of Jesus. Surrounded by crowds clamoring for his attention, Jesus sets aside a few moments to travel to the home of Jairus, whose daughter is seriously ill. Unfortunately, Jesus arrives too late (or so it seems). The family is in deep despair. Their beloved, precious, 12 year old daughter is dead. Their hopes, undoubtedly raised very high by news that the renowned healer Jesus is in the neighborhood, are crushed. How very sad!!! If only he'd responded more quickly.

Jesus, however, sees things differently as he so often did. It's never too late for the power of God to reach into seemingly hopeless situations with compassion, love and healing power. Jesus assures the grieving family that the girl is only sleeping. There is no need for despair. "Do not fear, only believe."

The loss of hope is a devastating thing. It shatters the will to live, to fight on, to plan for the future, to feel joy and wonder in God's creation. When we get news that someone we love deeply has died; when we experience pain or illness that just won't heal or go away; when we feel trapped and tied up in knots by unceasing conflict; or when we experience a sudden reversal in fortune.....then, the loss of hope can sink us into a deep, black pit from which there may seem to be no escape. The future becomes oppressive and very scary.

The Gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry reveal a man for whom no situation was hopeless when viewed through the eyes of faith. For Jesus no one was too sick, too crippled or maimed, too crazy to be beyond the reach of God's love and healing power. For Jesus no man or woman was too sinful, selfish, or wrapped up in self-pity that they couldn't be enticed towards the light of wholeness and new life.

The healing of Jairus' daughter is much more than a story about the miraculous recovery of a young girl. It speaks of the power of hope in a seemingly hope-less situation. We would be naive and short-sighted to limit this story's message to a fairy-tale ending, "And they lived happily ever after." No doubt other serious challenges, setbacks, worries and anxieties beset all of those present that day. Misfortunes are, after all, part of the reality of our lives from which no one is immune. No one who loves is spared from pain. And strange as it may seem, that's a blessing, because pain is the sure sign of love and connection to others.

But for those who have faith, and with faith, hope, the reassuring words of Jesus to Jairus, "Do not fear, only believe" can give us strength to carry on whenever our lives are thrown out of balance. By not giving in to despair and by hanging on to hope, even when things seem mighty grim, the promise of new life emerging out of death (Resurrection power) is given an opportunity to take root and grow in us.

Call to mind some of the crises' we have lived through, and which now are but dim memories. Some of you may be able to think back 30 years ago to 1979. Ann and I had spent 3 weeks in England and returned to a gasoline crisis on the East Coast that had become desperate. People were spending hours in line waiting to purchase gasoline. Gas station attendants were being bribed and mugged. People were afraid to travel far from home for fear of being stranded. Many of us were deeply afraid that our way of life was in serious jeopardy. The future seemed bleak and uncertain.

If that seems too far away in the past, let's reflect back to last fall when the sub-prime mortgage crisis blew up and the stock market tanked. I along with many others wondered if the U.S. economy would ever recover. At Emmanuel we have lived through the deaths of some wonderful people, including Jeff Garber this past week. Their loss has led to deep sadness and grief, and the wondering if life will ever be the same again. In all of these challenges to our faith and hope, we need to listen carefully over and over again to Jesus' words to Jairus, "Do not fear, only believe."

Thankfully, crises come and go, but anxieties about the future continue to bubble up within us in a steady, ever-flowing stream. Threats to our environment, recession and inflation, personal illnesses, fears for our children and grandchildren. What's important for us as Christians, when we feel anxiety about an uncertain future is to ask ourselves, "What is the hope that guides our lives? Is it based on things eternal, or on a foundation of shifting sand?"

The experience of the Old and New Testament communities of faith was that God seemed most actively involved at the very times when hope for the future was most seriously called into question. For the Hebrew slaves in Egypt facing a lifetime of bondage, Moses was God's instrument of hope and salvation beckoning them towards freedom in the Promised Land. For the Israelite exiles in Babylon crushed by the destruction of Jerusalem, the prophet Isaiah was God's voice of hope, promising a return and restoration of the Temple.

It's not just coincidental that the greatest of the Old Testament prophets were visionaries who proclaimed a future bright with hope for God's Chosen People at a time when they were homeless and in exile. Through the eyes of faith, these prophets saw beneath the turmoil of their times to the abiding presence of God. They offered hope in troubling times by reminding the Israelites that God does not abandon those whom he loves.

For the disciples of Jesus, shattered by the crucifixion of their Lord, the Resurrection offered a hope that was beyond their wildest dreams and imagination. Through the years, Christian communities have been bastions of strength in the midst of persecution, famine, war and oppression, so long as they have held on to the hope for new life and restoration that is implicit in the Resurrection of Jesus.

The message we have to proclaim to all whose hope for the future is under assault is that God is truly an anchor in a raging storm when all else seems to be slipping away. "Do not fear, only believe."