

“WHO IS THIS MAN?” SERIES

Victory of the Lamb Lutheran Church

Don't Despair; Just Believe!

Sermon Text: Luke 8:40-56

Far away, in a rather superfluous corner of the internet lies a website called despair.com. This website makes purposefully demoralizing posters and products which help you fall into despair. Here's a quote about the rationale behind their products, "When we started Despair.com, we had a dream. To crush other people's dreams." Sounds nice, doesn't it? One of their posters is simply a picture of a ship sinking, with the caption: "Mistakes. It could be that the purpose of your life is only to serve as a warning to others." Pretty brutal! I'm not exactly sure I'd want this printed on a t-shirt, but many of their demotivators are pretty funny. But despair isn't often thought of as funny. In fact, for those in real despair is a terrible reality. As we continue our "Who is This Man?" sermon series today we are going to hear a fascinating account from Luke chapter 8, two interwoven stories that shed light not only on who Jesus is, but also on the temptation of despair and faith's response.

As Luke begins this narrative Jesus is at a high point of popularity in his ministry. News of Jesus' miracles had been spreading throughout Judea. And now as he sails back across the Sea of Galilee to the region Capernaum, his home base, a large crowd waits for him on the shore. Now I can't say for certain how large this crowd was, but this account takes place only a few weeks before Jesus feeds a crowd of over 5000. So think big here with this crowd on the shore. Many people wanted to witness a miracle or learn from this "great prophet" [7:16], but in the crowd that day were also two people who had an extremely urgent need to see Jesus. We meet the first person in verses 40-42:

⁴⁰ Now when Jesus returned, a crowd welcomed him, for they were all expecting him. ⁴¹ Then a man named Jairus, a synagogue leader, came and fell at Jesus' feet, pleading with him to come to his house ⁴² because his only daughter, a girl of about twelve, was dying. Jairus was a synagogue leader. This is important to note because he would have been well-known and respected. But none of that mattered right now. Jairus gets through the crowd and falls at Jesus' feet, pleading with him to come to his house. We don't see the synagogue ruler here, we see a helpless father trying to save his little girl, his only daughter, just 12 years old, who is lying at death's door. Jesus, of course, agrees to go with him and as they are on their way we are introduced to the second person who needed to see Jesus.

As Jesus was on his way, the crowds almost crushed him. ⁴³ And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years, but no one could heal her. Luke tells us that this woman was subject to bleeding. Now we aren't exactly sure what kind of bleeding this was, but is often thought to have been hemorrhages. No matter what the specific issue was, she should not have been in that crowd. You see by law she was considered unclean [Leviticus 15] because of her bleeding. If she touched someone they would become unclean as well and she would face punishment. And yet there she was in this massive crowd bumping into many people. This was risky! What a terrible disease to live with! And for 12 years she had suffered from it! Luke tells us that no one could heal her, which disease, but that's almost an understatement. Mark's gospel adds a little more. **"She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse."** (Mark 5:26) I don't even want to imagine what Mark means when he says that she "suffered a great deal" at the hands of those ancient doctors. I don't want to know what primitive methods or techniques they had tried to use, but none of them worked. In fact, she spent all she had on those doctors and her condition only grew worse. This poor woman had been like this for 12 years. For 12 years she was unclean; for 12 years unable to live among normal society; for 12 years unable to have an intimate physical relationship, for twelve years unable to worship at the temple. *12 years!* Why would God let her suffer like that? Waiting that long and spending all her money as year after year and cure after cure proved hopeless! What went through her mind? God, do you even care about me? Why do I have this burden? How often was she tempted to give up on God? Yes, I think despair must have been a strong temptation. And yet what she had heard about this Jesus somehow gave her hope.

⁴⁴ She came up behind him [Jesus] and touched the edge of his cloak, and immediately her bleeding stopped. This poor bleeding woman somehow manages to push her way through the crowd and touches the edge of Jesus' cloak! She had faith, however unreasonable it may have seemed to others, that simply touching Jesus could heal her. And she was right! Luke says that **immediately her bleeding stopped**. The disease that had been plaguing her every waking moment for 12 years was suddenly and completely gone. But she didn't have much time to enjoy it, because as soon as she

touched him, Jesus stopped and questioned the whole crowd, ⁴⁵ **“Who touched me?” Jesus asked. When they all denied it, Peter said, “Master, the people are crowding and pressing against you.”** Good old Peter, someone had to say it. How odd would this be? Imagine walking in a huge crowd of people, constantly rubbing elbows, bumping into people, and then you stop and ask who touched you? It would be a ridiculous thing to do unless you are Jesus.

⁴⁶ **But Jesus said, “Someone touched me; I know that power has gone out from me.”** ⁴⁷ **Then the woman, seeing that she could not go unnoticed, came trembling and fell at his feet. In the presence of all the people, she told why she had touched him and how she had been instantly healed.** ⁴⁸ **Then he said to her, “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace.”** What a powerful scene. The woman steps up in front this huge crowd of people and confesses not only how she was healed, but also why she had touched Jesus. That means she told everyone that she had been unclean for 12 years, which would have been punishable since she had most likely touched many people in the crowd that day. But Jesus did not rebuke her or condemn her. He said, **“Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace.”** Jesus said that her faith healed her, not because her faith was so strong, or so educated, or so pure, but because that faith—no matter how much it may have been struggling at the time—had latched on to the Son of God whose mercy, compassion, and power knows no limits, for he and for us.

It seems as if all is well, but just as Jesus speaks those beautiful words of comfort to the woman, someone comes with a far different type of message for Jairus. ⁴⁹ **While Jesus was still speaking, someone came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue leader. “Your daughter is dead,” he said. “Don’t bother the teacher anymore.”** Wow. Put yourself in Jairus’ mind for a moment. Your daughter is dying rapidly; you go to Jesus and desperately put your faith in him, then as time is running out Jesus decides to stop walking and asks about who touched him. I would have been screaming, “We have to keep going! My daughter is about to die!” And yet as worried as you are you can’t help but let your hopes rise when this woman steps forward and tells how Jesus healed her instantly! And just as you dare to believe that your little girl might live, that Jesus really could heal her, you hear four brutally blunt words, **“Your daughter is dead.”** These words of Jairus’ servant reek of despair. **“Your daughter is dead. Don’t bother the teacher anymore.”** The servant was being reasonable. He saw no hope of healing the girl anymore, so he figured Jesus had better things to do—more teaching, other people to heal—he didn’t need to come all the way to Jairus’ house just to watch a funeral. “Nothing else can be done, Jairus, but at least Jesus can go help others now. Your hope has run out. The only reasonable thing to do is send the prophet on his way and mourn for your daughter.” Despair must have been a strong temptation for Jairus in this moment.

But despair isn’t just a temptation for a father whose daughter has died, or a woman who has been sick for 12 years. To a greater or lesser extent we all face the temptation of despair. The devil finds many ways to bring despair into our lives, our relationships, and our faith. And he doesn’t always wait for hope to be gone, most times he simply says, “Be reasonable.” Perhaps he even says it through the mouth of those near to us, like Jairus’ servant who told him to stop bothering Jesus, or perhaps one of the woman’s friends who may have advised her to stop wasting money on all those doctors. “Be reasonable. Give up your foolish hope.” No one ever tells you to despair, but that’s what despair is: the absence of hope. If you give up hope you will fall into despair.

And the worst part of despair is what it leads to. If you lose all hope in the context of a diet, despair leads to the bottom of a family-size bag of potato chips. If you lose all hope in a game of chess, despair leads to laying down your king-piece or swiping your arm across the board. And while it doesn’t look too serious when we despair of more trivial things, in other contexts despair shows itself to be much worse. If someone gives up hope in their future possibilities despair may lead to paralyzed inactivity. If someone loses all hope in human interaction, despair may lead to a TV or computer screen that never shuts off. If you lose hope in your marriage despair may look like a divorce settlement. And if someone loses hope in an extreme case, despair may lead to an empty bottle of pills with a note beside it. While all of these outcomes are horrible, in the moment, for that person they seem reasonable. You may never think you would do something, but without hope some horrific things seem rather rational. This is the danger of despair. And finally, if we listen to the devil’s temptations and give up hope in God himself we will spend eternity in despair.

That’s why we need to read the rest of the story. **While Jesus was still speaking, someone came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue leader. “Your daughter is dead,” he said. “Don’t bother the teacher anymore.”** ⁵⁰ **Hearing this, Jesus said to Jairus, “Don’t be afraid; just believe, and she will be healed.”** As soon as Jesus hears what the servant says to Jairus, he comes quickly to him and says, **“Don’t be afraid; just believe, and she will be healed.”** “Just believe, have faith in me, and your daughter will be well.” There is tenderness in Jesus’ timing. He does not give the sprouts of fear and hopelessness a chance to grow. Right away he comforts and strengthens the faith and therefore the hope that was being tested. And Jairus listened. He believed Jesus and they continued to his house. ⁵¹ **When he arrived at the house of Jairus, he did not let anyone go in with him except Peter, John and James, and the child’s**

father and mother. ⁵² Meanwhile, all the people were wailing and mourning for her. “Stop wailing,” Jesus said. “She is not dead but asleep.” ⁵³ They laughed at him, knowing that she was dead. In their Jewish culture of that time, public mourning was expected when someone died. Many people were even paid to wail loudly outside of a home when a loved one passed away. But Jesus would not have any of it. He told them to stop wailing because, as he said, “She is not dead but asleep.” And they laughed at him! I wonder if they were really so sad about this girl’s death, could they have managed to laugh at someone coming to visit her? We find out in the other gospels that Jesus actually made them leave the house after they laughed at him. So finally he, along with Peter, John, and James, and Jairus and his wife, alone, go in to see the dead girl. ⁵⁴ But he took her by the hand and said, “My child, get up!” ⁵⁵ Her spirit returned, and at once she stood up. Then Jesus told them to give her something to eat. ⁵⁶ Her parents were astonished, but he ordered them not to tell anyone what had happened. Who is this man? Who can tell the dead to rise except God himself? Jesus saved the little girl and proved more than worthy of the faith Jairus placed in him.

My friends, faith in Christ always has hope. This message is extremely relevant to our current times. There’s a lot being said and written about having a positive mental attitude or being self-confident no matter what. And these aren’t bad in and of themselves, but they really boil down to optimism that is based merely on probability. In other words, this positive attitude only exists if there is reasonable hope to support it. But that won’t avoid despair! Because what happens when no hope is found? How can you remain positive? Jairus’ servant who reported the little girl’s death thought there was hope as long as she was alive. But once she died, he saw no hope. When Jesus said that the girl was only asleep, the mourners laughed in unbelief. They saw no hope. But Jairus’ faith, reinforced by our Lord’s encouragement, and the bleeding woman’s example, indicate that faith in Christ has hope when all human optimism is gone.

And that’s because our faith connects us to the faithful promises and power of God himself. And therefore, our faith in Jesus, however strong or weak, creates hope even in the bleakest situations! We don’t despair when all human hope is gone, because our faith always produces hope. In fact, if you really think about it, despair is actually quite unreasonable for a Christian. Despair may seem reasonable to others, but we believe in the Lord Almighty, for whom nothing is impossible. And when all other hope is gone we still have a Savior who is more than worthy of the faith we place in him.

We have a Savior who never despaired over us. No matter how many times we’ve given up hope, no matter how many times we’ve doubted him, no matter how many times we have fallen into despair, Jesus refused to give up on us. Jesus never said, “These people are hopeless!” No he went all the way to the cross and prayed, “Father, forgive them.” He points to his sacrifice and knows that his blood covers up all our sins, even those times when we’ve despaired. He tells each of us here today that we are not hopeless because of what he did in our place. His perfect record of hope is now yours through faith. Through faith we are beacons of hope in eyes of God our Father.

Finally, my friends, Jesus not only raised Jairus’ daughter, he himself woke up from the sleep of death so that we might never despair of our salvation. Yes, not even death can hold us anymore! We have certain hope heaven because of the death and resurrection of our Savior Jesus. And that hope is ours regardless of how hopeless this life gets. When the devil comes to you and tempts you to despair, hear the words of your Savior as he rushes to your side, “Don’t be afraid; just believe.” Then go forward, living in peace, knowing that Jesus has made you well, that he always has hope for you, and that one day when you fall asleep in death you will awake to the sound of your Savior’s voice saying, “My child, get up.” Don’t despair; just believe!

Amen.