

Do Not Fear, Only Believe

Mark 5:21-43

Do you know what the most common command in the Bible is? Some of you might guess that it's a command to love, since Jesus spends a lot of time telling people to love God, love their neighbors, and love their enemies. Others of you might guess it's a command to be humble, since pride is the source of many of the greatest sins.

The most common command in the Bible is the command to not be afraid. "Fear not" are the first words of almost every angelic messenger, from when God made his covenant with Abraham, to the angels that appeared to the shepherds the first Christmas. From David to Elijah, from Isaiah to Jeremiah, God continuously reminded his people not to fear. When Jesus charged the twelve disciples with their responsibility, He told them not to be afraid of those who would seek to harm them for proclaiming the truth. To the women gathering at the empty tomb and to the disciples seeing the resurrected Jesus, the message was the same: do not be afraid.

In every instance, people faced legitimate fears. Things out of the ordinary were happening, big changes were coming. But each time God's message remained consistent. One scholar notes there are 366 "fear not" verses in the Bible – one for every day of the year, including one for a leap year!

There's a lot to be afraid of in our world. As we hear about storm damage in southern Iowa, of mass shootings like the one at a newspaper in Maryland, of more chemicals that cause cancer, we're made to be afraid. Of course, the stories that make us afraid are the ones that make the news. We hear more about fear of crime, even as crime rates of all kinds have dropped across the board. We hear about fear on the international stage, even as in some ways we're in a time of peace. We hear how we should fear those who don't look like us or act like us. Over the next few months, we'll hear more messages of fear, as candidates and political parties tell us about all the horrible things that will happen if their opponents are elected.

But our lesson today talks about a more personal kind of fear. The fear of a parent losing a child, being unable to do anything to help. Jairus is a ruler of a synagogue,

a powerful, respected, probably wealthy man. Yet he's unable to do anything in the face of his daughter's illness. He's afraid of what will happen to her, and so he uses his power to make his way through the crowd to Jesus, for the possibility he can help her.

And then Jesus is delayed, and his fears that Jesus would be too late come to pass. But the interruption is itself a story of fear. The woman who has been bleeding for twelve years has nothing left to be afraid of. Her condition would have left her unclean, untouchable, unable to be a participating member of society. She'd spent years, and whatever wealth she had, chasing after a cure. She's afraid to try one more time, to reach out one more time, to experience failure one more time. She's afraid of braving the crowd to get to Jesus, a crowd that would recoil from her in fear if they knew who she was and what was happening to her. They'd be afraid of catching her condition, catching her uncleanness.

Yet she braves her fears, makes her way through the crowd, reaches out and touches Jesus. Her moment of faith is rewarded, and she is healed. But her fears arise again when Jesus feels the healing power that had left him, and he searches the crowd for her. She comes before him in fear and trembling, knowing she is unworthy to be in the presence of such a rabbi, such a teacher, such a healer.

Her fears, though, are erased. Instead of addressing her angrily, he calls her "daughter." She has been healed; she has been brought back into the community that had ostracized her because of her condition. Jesus healed her and restored her.

Jairus' worst fears are realized, though, as the report comes from his house that his daughter has died. If there had been the possibility of healing for her, it was gone now. She was gone now. There was nothing anyone, not even Jesus, could do to reverse death.

Yet Jesus tells him, "Do not fear, only believe." It's a call for intense faith. Jairus had exercised faith when he came to Jesus in the confidence that he could save his daughter. He had witnessed the healing of the woman, seen the relationship between faith and divine help. But

he was now asked to believe that his child would live even as he stood in the presence of death.

Which would be more frightening? To know your child had died, or to hope she could live again? Fear of death has been with us since almost the beginning, but it was at least known. If Jesus wasn't just a great healer, if Jesus could raise the dead, that would be something new. That would be something frightening. That would mean everything had changed.

“Do not fear, only believe” might not be the best translation. It should rather be read as something like “Stop being afraid,” and “Go on living by faith.” The present tense of both verbs calls attention to the transforming power of Jesus' word to change our lives from fear to trust.

Yet Jairus has faith. They go to the room, and to their amazement watch Jesus touch the girl, take her by the hand, and tell her to get up. No rabbi would ever willingly touch a dead person and become unclean! Yet Jesus does, and yet again, instead of Jesus catching the uncleanness of sickness or death, those around him are healed.

But Jesus knew he couldn't just go around healing and raising the dead one by one. That only affected the symptoms, not the disease. His healings, even raising others from the dead, didn't defeat sin and death. And so he set his face towards the cross, despite knowing what awaited him. He bravely followed the path to the cross and the tomb. But like those he raised, he didn't stay dead. He was raised to show that everything had changed, that those who believed in him didn't need to fear death, because it had been defeated once and for all.

The disciples and the women who followed Jesus reacted to that first Easter with fear. Even Peter, who had seen Jesus raise others from the dead, is afraid when he first hears the report of the women of the empty tomb. He runs to the tomb and finds everything just as the women had said. His fear changes into something else, marvel. He marvels as he realizes the world wasn't as it used to be, and that was a good thing.

Jesus healed the woman who was bleeding, and raised Jairus' daughter from the dead, releasing them from their fears. Their lives were given back to them, and

what could have been the worst day of their lives became the best. Their lives were changed from fear of what could happen to trust in Jesus who had radically reoriented their lives. Such faith is radical trust in the ability of Jesus to confront a crisis situation with the power of God.

Jesus calls us to stop being afraid and live in faith. That doesn't mean that he's taken away all the sources of fear. Sin and death are still in the world. Chronic illnesses still make outcasts of many. Parents still pray at the bedsides of their sick children. There are still things to fear that separate us from others. But we can also live in faith and trust in our risen Savior who has overcome sin and death. He lives to silence all our fears, and wipe away all our tears. He lives, and because of that, we need not fear. We can stop being afraid, and live by faith.

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