



## Only Believe

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field  
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost~July 1, 2018*

### Wisdom 1:13-15; 2:23-24

God did not make death, and he does not delight in the death of the living. For he created all things so that they might exist; the generative forces of the world are wholesome, and there is no destructive poison in them, and the dominion of Hades is not on earth. For righteousness is immortal. For God created us for incorruption, and made us in the image of his own eternity, but through the devil's envy death entered the world, and those who belong to his company experience it.

### Psalm 130

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| 1 Out of the depths have I called to you;<br>O God, hear my voice; *<br>let your ears consider well<br>the voice of my supplication. | 4 I wait for you O God; my soul waits for you; *<br>in your word is my hope.                             |
| 2 If you were to note what is done amiss, *<br>O God, who could stand?   | 5 My soul waits for you, more than sentries for the<br>morning, *<br>more than sentries for the morning. |
| 3 For there is forgiveness with you; *<br>therefore you shall be feared.   | 6 O Israel, wait upon God, *<br>for with God there is mercy;   |
|  | 7 With God there is plenteous redemption, *<br>God shall redeem Israel from all their sins.              |

### II Corinthians 8:7-15

Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking. I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something—now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. As it is written, “The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.”

### Mark 5:21-43

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly, “My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.” So he went with him. And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, “If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.” Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, “Who touched my clothes?” And his disciples said to him, “You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, ‘Who touched me?’” He

looked all around to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease." While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader's house to say, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?" But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, "Do not fear, only believe." He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. When he had entered, he said to them, "Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha cum," which means, "Little girl, get up!" And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

The Gospels are full of miracle stories, powerful reminders that the world we see, the way things are, is not the way they will always be, that God can take chaos and bring order, take brokenness and bring wholeness—that God's will for us is abundant life. Pretty much everything Jesus does illustrates these truths. Pretty much everything Jesus does is an instance of the Kingdom breaking in and showing us a brief glimpse of the world as God intends it to be—perhaps as it already is in the mind and heart of God. And boy do we need to see glimpses of that in the world right now. Miracles, it seems, are in short supply. But if we look carefully they are still there: voices lifted together in the millions for justice and for respect for the dignity of every human being. There are still signs of the Kingdom breaking in—glimpses of the justice that exists in the mind of God. But then for the disciples and for us that instant is over. Gone. The disciples find themselves rowing on a now—calm sea, the once lame man trudges off to find steady work, and the previously dead girl reaches up to her mother to be hugged. And we wonder where our miracle is.

There have been times in my life I have been suffering and I would surely have loved one of Jesus' miracles. There are times I have sat helplessly next to people who are suffering and wished for, prayed with every fiber of my body, for a miracle for that person. But it never came. And on the flip side there are people who get miracles without appearing to ask, or even give God a passing thought. So what do we make of that? Some of us try really hard to figure out what the formula is. Maybe our prayer wasn't long enough, or maybe it was too long. We read and reread the stories looking for clues of what the people did right or wrong. We hate the seemingly random nature of life and desperately want to figure it all out, find the pattern, so we can do the right things and avoid the wrong things. Which is hard because there doesn't seem to be a real pattern to Jesus' miracles.

The story we just heard is a miracle within a miracle—a resurrection story with the story of a bleeding woman inside it. The dead girl was 12 years old and the woman had been bleeding for 12 years before she touched the hem of Jesus' prayer shawl, receiving healing but instantly making him ritually unclean and in need of a visit to the Temple to be purified. But rather than go to the Temple, Jesus trots off after Jairus to see his dead daughter, one unclean situation to another—scandalous. And Jairus was also being scandalous. Here we have a leader of the community, one always obedient to the Law, running after a now ritually defiled and rather crazy holy man and begging him, to come and heal his daughter. Two rule-breakers encountering each other in the public square.

So while this story is about Jesus it is also about Jairus. A man so desperate he was willing to break every single rule in order to save his little girl's life. Desperate enough to throw himself at Jesus' feet and beg—in front of everybody. And it appeared to be all for naught. He had been down on his knees, begging, only to find out it was too late—the news taking his breath away, and all the while, ringing in his ears was Jesus' voice saying, "Do not fear; only believe." On one level that seems hard to swallow, it almost sounds like Jesus is saying if you just have enough faith everything will turn out right. Of course, that is exactly what happened for Jairus. And for the bleeding woman. The woman stopped bleeding, the little girl got up. The Kingdom was visible.

But most people don't get a miracle like that and, sadly, one of the things religious folk sometimes do with that is blame the person suffering. Blame them for a lack of faith. I have heard people talk about someone getting sicker because they mustn't have prayed hard enough, or had enough faith. And when that happens what the sick person gets is not comfort but a side of shame to go with their antibiotics or chemotherapy.

One of the problems, that goes back at least as far as when the writer of Revelation wrote his witheringly accurate letters to the churches in the ancient world, is that we, the churches, tend towards different misunderstandings. Some take the bible too literally, some use God to give a stamp of approval to any fear based opinion they have, and some, like the white liberal churches of America, like us, seem to think that God is a nice, but probably unnecessary addition to a moral life. And that we are the only agents of change in the world—if we work really hard the world will automatically become better and better. God is either unengaged or a fantasy. And, while I am the last person to preach apathy or lack of engagement in social justice, in Gospel justice, I think we sometimes forget God. And we thus have low and/or misplaced expectations of God. God is not a nice addition to faith, God is the source, the ground, and the object of faith. And God is the God of love, and the God of miracles. And, if we buy that miracles happen at all, we are confused about what causes them. We think faith makes miracles happen—that miracles are therefore something we can control. If you are not getting better, you must try harder. If our nation is getting sicker, we must try harder. Pray more. Pray differently. Work harder. Do something to impress God and your miracle will come. Understandable, but putting all the power in the wrong place—desperately trying to figure out a formula in which we are in charge of our own lives rather than knowing the truth that life itself is a free gift from God. Faith does not work miracles. God works miracles. To work hard on praying better, or stronger, or with a specific formula is to practice magic, not faith. Focusing on the strength of God is to

practice faith. This is the difference between believing our lives are in our own hands or believing they are in God's.

Jairus' daughter in all likelihood did not have faith in Jesus. She probably never even heard of him. Mark never says Jairus had faith. Jairus followed this odd holy man home and let him do his thing, but he never utters a word about faith. The crux of the story is not about Jairus' faith, or his daughter's faith, but about Jesus' encouragement "do not fear, only believe." Because the truth is that if Jairus was able to do that then whatever else happened, whether his daughter got up or whether he had to start making funeral plans, whatever miracle did or did not come his way, then he could, he would survive. Belief is about hoping, trusting in God, even when all the evidence is stacked against it and even when there is no miracle in sight.

Jesus himself prayed for a miracle that did not happen. The night before he died he asked God to "take away this cup". But God didn't. And Jesus died. Did Jesus not have faith? I don't think so. And I think there was still a miracle. And that is that he drank the cup, believing in the power of God more than in his own power. Believing that, though he could not see it in that instant, that ultimately God was with him. The miracle happens every time we understand that God is God and we are not.

I don't expect any of us to stop praying for miracles. I'm not going to stop praying for miracles, because we need all the miracles we can get-especially now. And every single time you hear of one, you see one, remember that what you are seeing is a sneak peek at the Kingdom, the world as God wills it to be, the world as it one day will be. Remember there is no formula for success, and be glad in that, glad that it does not ultimately depend on you or me. Yes, we are called to do what we can, where we can. To be agents of God's justice and reconciliation. But our deepest call is to place our ultimate trust in the God of radical inclusive irrational love. Do not fear; only believe. That is what we are called to do. And the rest is up to God.