



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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When God Seems Silent

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Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words (Romans 8:26).

Lots of activities start up again this week in church: classes and Bible studies, small groups and youth groups, choirs and concerts, and mission outreach in the community and around the world. Most of these activities happen during the school year, but at least two things we do all year long: we worship God, and we offer care whenever our members and friends go through hard times. In that respect, the church is like a big extended family, and we often hear people say, “I don’t know what I would do without my church family.”

Healthy families care for one another, and the more we care about people the harder it is to see them struggle with sickness or loss of any kind. Some of those losses are sudden, as when a layoff from work comes without warning, or an accident happens, or somebody we love dies unexpectedly. Other losses stretch out over a longer time: some conflict that never gets resolved, a struggle with addiction, an illness that seems to last forever, or a period of grieving that just goes on and on.

In times of trouble, people of faith turn to God, and rightly so. We hope that’s not *just* in times of trouble, because faith is, or can be, a relationship with God, and relationships grow through good times and bad. The stronger our relationships are in good times, the better they see us through the hard times, and that’s as true of our ties with God as it is of any other connection.

There are some differences, though, between our relationship with God and other relationships. The most obvious difference is that we can see and touch our family and friends, at least in principle, even if they live far away. God, of course, is invisible; and though some of us say we can “feel” God’s presence, it’s not quite the same as being able to hug or hold onto another human being.

Another difference is that we expect God to be able to fix some things in ways that we don’t expect from our family and friends. We say God is all-powerful, and we’re tempted to think that means God can do pretty much anything we want. That’s especially true if what we want is not some silly self-indulgence but a legitimate longing for healing or the end of suffering for ourselves or someone we love.

And speaking of love, we also say that God is good, and God loves us, but ironically that leads to one of the oldest and greatest challenges to faith.

If we say God is all-powerful, then we think God should be able to do almost anything. And if we say God loves us, we believe God would want to do whatever we feel is good. But there’s obviously a great deal of suffering in this world, and much of it seems so undeserved and unfair. It seems, then, that all three things can’t be true at once: God cannot be both good and all-powerful as long as so much suffering exists. Either God is not good, or God is not all-powerful, or maybe there is no God after all. The problem is so obvious to anyone who thinks about it that from ancient times it has had a name. It’s called the problem of theodicy, from Greek words having to do with the righteousness or justice of God.

Instead of talking about the problem philosophically this morning, I'll do what the Bible does and tell you a story about Jesus, because Christians believe that we see God most clearly in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

One day Jesus is walking along the road and a man named Jairus comes up and falls at his feet and pleads for healing with all the fervor of a loving parent. "My little girl, my only daughter, is just twelve, and she's dying. Please come quickly. Maybe you can save her."

Jesus is always full of compassion, and not least for children, so he turns and starts to follow Jairus on the way to his house. Meanwhile, a crowd has gathered around Jesus. Everybody wants to be near him, hoping that something about him might rub off onto them. Among the crowd is a woman who's been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years – coincidentally, the same length of time that Jairus's daughter has been alive. A dozen years fly by quickly when we watch our children grow up, but those same years can feel like forever when we're suffering from some long affliction.

There may be another connection between this woman and Jairus, too, though we don't know for sure. Some people say that her bleeding might make her ritually unclean and unable to participate in the life of the synagogue, where Jairus happens to be one of the leaders. If that's true, then she's suffered a double affliction all these years: not only sick, but kept from some of the comforts of faith. Others say that might not be true; but either way, twelve years is a long time to suffer. We hear these stories from the Bible in a minute or two, and we know how they turn out, but then it's easy to miss the depth of suffering behind them. Twelve years is a very long time to be sick.

In any case, this poor woman presses through the crowd and stretches out her hand behind Jesus and touches the fringe of his clothing. And right then, immediately, her bleeding stops. Just touching the fringe of Jesus' garment makes this woman well.

Now Jesus stops and asks, "Who touched me?" Everyone near him says it wasn't them, and then Peter pipes up with his characteristic candor and says, "Well, Master, there's a whole crowd around you. Why do you ask who touched you?"

But Jesus says, "Somebody touched me; I felt power go out of me." And here, then, is a glimpse of how healing always happens. Because our world, of course, is made up of matter and energy and the order that arranges it, and now here's Jesus, who Christians claim is the Logos of God, the very Word through whom God made the world, giving off the energy that brings about this woman's healing – and healing, no matter how it comes about, is always the work of some kind of energy.

After a minute or two, when no one fesses up to touching Jesus, finally the woman comes forward. She falls at his feet, just as Jairus did, and confesses what happened, but she's trembling – not knowing how a man with so much power might respond to her surreptitious touch. But Jesus says, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace." You see how he calls her "Daughter." She's a child of God, whether or not she's fully engaged in the life of her synagogue, and now, having felt the presence and power of God, she finds healing and peace at last.

But just as this marvelous healing occurs, a runner comes from Jairus's house and says the most horrible words

a parent can hear. “Your daughter is dead,” he says. And then he adds quietly, “There’s no need to trouble the teacher now.”

What happened here? Was it Jesus’ delay that made the difference? Was the Son of God distracted, so that caring for one daughter of God let another one slip away? Are there only so many things that even God can do at once?

“Don’t be afraid,” Jesus says to Jairus. “Only believe, and she will be saved.” But what is there to believe now? The girl is gone. Maybe there will be some resurrection of the dead at the end of the age, as the rabbis say, though the Sadducees deny it, but that’s not much comfort now. Everybody knows that death is the last word in this world.

Still, Jesus and his disciples make their way to Jairus’s house, and when they arrive, only Peter, James, and John are allowed in, along with the girl’s mother and father. Everyone outside is weeping and wailing, because death is always awful, but the death of a child is almost too terrible to bear.

But Jesus says, “Do not weep; for she is not dead but sleeping.” And to that, most of the people around him just laugh. Not the kind of laughter that comes when things strike us as funny, of course, but that nervous laughter that distracts us from pain, because what Jesus says sounds so absurd, it just feels better to laugh than to cry, if only for a moment.

Now Jesus takes the girl’s still, small hand and he calls out, so that others can hear, “Child, get up!” Then her spirit returns, and she gets up. Then Jesus says, practically

enough, “Give her something to eat,” partly no doubt to break the tension of the moment, and partly because the girl is recovering from whatever took the life out of her, and people need to eat in order to live after all. Her parents are amazed, and glad beyond belief, but Jesus asks them to keep all this to themselves for a while. He has other people to see.

It’s hard to imagine that Jairus’s family and their neighbors really do keep the story to themselves, but in any event Jesus’ disciples clearly remember. By the time another convert called Paul writes his letter to the church in Rome a couple of decades later, stories like these are part of what sustains them in the face of opposition from religious and secular authorities alike. Paul himself has been beaten up and thrown in jail for the sake of the gospel – this good news of healings like these, but also and especially the amazing story of the unexpected death and resurrection of Jesus himself.

Paul has met the risen Lord on the road to Damascus, on his way to trying to stamp out the church there, in fact, before Jesus got a hold of him and turned his life around. Paul knows what suffering is, both because he’s caused so much suffering for others and because he’s felt more than a little himself. But he tells the church in Rome, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.” Paul expects to see Jesus again soon enough – if not in this life, then on the other side of death, where Jesus has already gone and life there is everlasting.

Paul knows – as the woman with the long sickness knew, and Jairus and his family knew, and everybody who has struggled a long while with sickness and suffering and

loss knows – that God can seem silent at times. We don't know why that is, and we're better off not making up stories to explain things we really cannot know. People often make matters worse when they try to defend God by conjuring up explanations when no good explanation exists, and when what people who are hurting really need more than answers to questions is the power of a loving presence.

What we do believe, though, is that, as the psalmist says, “Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.” One way or another, here and now or in the fullness of time in God's heaven, the blind will see, the lame will walk, the dead will be raised, and creation itself will be delivered from the bondage of suffering and decay.

Even if Christ seems to be delayed for a while, he comes sooner or later, “risen with healing in his wings,” as the Easter song says. In the meantime, whenever we're too sick or weary to pray for ourselves, we pray for one another, asking Jesus to let a portion of his power bring comfort and peace and strength to the suffering, as well as physical healing itself sometimes. And while we're doing that, the Holy Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. The Spirit of God prays for us, even when we don't know how to pray for ourselves.

And so we live in hope, even if hope requires patience, because, of course, we only hope for things we have not yet seen. But one day we will see. One day Christ will come to us, or we will come to Christ, and when that day comes, all will be well at last.



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