

Out of the Depths

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“Out of the depths, I cry to you, YHWH. God, hear my voice.” My one and only summer as a camper at our regional Mennonite summer camp featured a “wilderness expedition” to the mountains of West Virginia. Throughout the course of our week-long camping trip, our group of six 13-year olds and two very brave and patient counselors got to experience the thrills of hiking, rock-climbing, white-water rafting, and . . . spelunking! While I enjoyed all the activities, this last adventure is the most vivid in my memory.

On the third morning of our trip, armed with kneepads, helmets, gloves and headlamps, we squeezed into a man-hole sized opening in a grassy hillside and entered the cool darkness of the world underground. Our counselors led us through increasingly narrow tunnels that twisted aimlessly and endlessly. First crouching, then crawling, then shimmying forward on our stomachs, we made our way downward. When the tunnel emptied into a small but high-ceilinged chamber of sorts, we took a moment to survey our surroundings and catch our breath. The air was cold and dense. The pale, weak light from our headlamps revealed muddy walls and slimy, slippery rock surfaces. I looked up, and saw only a solid ceiling of dark, jagged rock. No faint glow of light from above. No slight breeze. Only this dark chamber of dead air and cold, hard earth buried far below the sunlight and blue sky.

This week, as I read over and over the opening words of Psalm 130, I realized that these subterranean memories were some of my mental images of “the depths.” Well, according to people who know a lot more about the Hebrew scriptures than I do,

“the depths” of this psalm actually point to a different image, that of chaotic waters. These are the same dark and treacherous waters we hear of in another psalm, Psalm 69: “Save me, O God,” says the psalmist, “for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in the miry depths, where there is no foothold.” These watery depths threaten to swallow up, to overwhelm, to consume. Whatever our respective mental images of “the depths” may be, I suspect most of us have remarkably similar understandings of what “the depths” are. “The depths” are a place of despair, pain, fear. A place where hope is a foreign word. Where loneliness and death rule.

“Out of the depths I cry.” These powerful words have echoed through the centuries in music, art and literature. They remain with us, I think, because we are no strangers to the depths. Situations of hopelessness and death can be found across our nations, throughout our communities, within our own families and our own lives.

The two stories that intersect at the feet of Jesus in today’s gospel reading most certainly qualify as “tales from the depths.” First we meet Jairus, a leader of the synagogue. He’s a man of some power and prestige, an important figure within the community. And yet, here he is, caught in a parent’s greatest nightmare – his 12-year-old daughter is terribly sick and dying. Not even his significant resources and good connections have been able to restore his child to life. And so, out of options, this frightened father is desperate and determined enough to come to Jesus – Jesus, the thoroughly questionable “healer” who’s been going around getting himself in trouble with all the other synagogue officials. Jairus makes his way through the crowd and falls at Jesus’ feet. “My little girl is desperately sick.” Out of the depths, I cry.

And then there is another voice calling from the depths. This unnamed woman, Mark tells us, has been bleeding for 12 long and painful years. Whatever money she may have had at one point in her life is gone now, eaten up by costly treatments from various physicians who've tried and failed to cure her. Most commentators agree that the flow of blood suggests a constant state of menstrual uncleanness under Jewish law. And while we don't know for sure how strictly the purity codes would have been followed in her community, we can certainly imagine the stigma, the separation, the scorn she must endure in a culture that often views illness as a sign of God's retribution.

To the society in which she lives, this penniless, sick, unclean woman is utterly beyond hope, a lost cause unworthy of their concern. She is as good as dead. But she, too, makes her way toward the healer, in spite of the voices of resignation and indifference. "If I can touch even the hem," she tells herself, "I will be well again." Some translators have noted that in the original Greek there is a kind of repetitive action implied here, as if the woman is reciting this mantra over and over again to herself, building her determination, empowering herself to push ahead through the unfriendly crowd, to make contact. *I will be well again. I will be well.* "Out of the depths I cry to you. God, hear my voice."

And God does. The physical healing is instantaneous and complete, but Jesus stops in his tracks to seek out the one who has touched him. God in flesh reaches out to this nameless, voiceless nobody, and names her into life. "My daughter," says Jesus. Beloved child of God. You are nobody no longer. Your faithful determination has saved you. Go, and be healthy and whole once more.

I imagine that Jairus's desperate determination was also haunted by the outside voices of resignation and indifference. This dying child was, after all, a daughter, not a son, which was sadly a crucial distinction in this patriarchal First-Century society. And at a time when an estimated 60 percent of children died before their mid-teens, there were likely plenty of Jairus's acquaintances who thought, at least privately, that it was frankly time for this man to acknowledge a clear lost cause. Get the funeral arrangements in order, assemble the professional mourners and get ready to move on. When word came from home that the child had, in fact, died, I imagine there was a sense of vindication for some. You see? We were right. "Now why put this 'Teacher' to any further trouble?"

But Jesus responds differently. "Don't be afraid," he says to Jairus. "Just believe." And at the official's house, in the child's room, a moment of contact with the healer once again raises the dead to life.

"Don't be afraid. Just believe." Powerful, affirming words from a powerful, affirming story. And yet, I have to admit that as I memorized the text for this week and pondered these miraculous stories, I struggled with these words from Jesus. Each time I came to say them, they felt more flat and trite. My inner skeptic lashed out. "Believe *what*, exactly?" That death isn't real? That sickness and pain will suddenly vanish? That everything will always turn out well in the end? As beautiful and life-giving as these ancient miracle stories may be, my 21st Century mind simply wouldn't let me forget countless other stories from my own experience of the world – classmates whose too-soon-departed parents did not get up and begin to walk around, friends and acquaintances whose chronic illnesses have continued into year 13 and beyond. Was

their faithful determination not good enough? What ever happened to *their* miraculous ending? Where is Jesus the miraculous healer in our world today?

I'm not sure I've found a completely satisfactory answer to that question, a quick and easy way to reconcile such miraculous, hope-filled stories with the world we live in. Perhaps it helps to always remind ourselves that these stories are, first and foremost, stories – illustrations of God's love and healing intentions for us. And perhaps the answer also begins with the recognition that there was so much more to Jesus' way of healing than the physical curing of diseases and raising of the dead. At the heart of each of these healing stories is an encounter – a touch, a spoken word, a face-to-face exchange. And it seems to me that this is where some of the deepest healing takes place. Jesus stops to hear the woman's painful story and affirms her determination, giving her a name and a voice, calling her out of lonely anonymity. Jesus listens to Jairus' desperate pleas and offers words of hope, assuring him that his love is not foolish, remaining close by his side. Healing comes through Jesus' willingness to be present with each person, to listen to their pain and despair, and to stand, kneel, walk beside them. Healing comes through the ears that hear the cries from the swirling depths and the hands that reach *into* the dark caverns.

In the stifling 104-degree heat of last Saturday afternoon, I decided to brave the hot sun and visit the Smithsonian Folklife Festival on the National Mall. On display at this year's festival, as part of a focus on Crisis and Community, was a large segment of the AIDS Memorial Quilt. For those who aren't familiar with it, the story of the quilt goes something like this. In 1985, at a time when many in the U.S. government deemed the AIDS crisis unworthy of their attention and saw the communities it ravaged as unclean

and beyond hope, a crowd of gay rights activists marched to the San Francisco federal building, climbed up ladders and taped to the side of the building hundreds of placards bearing the names of friends and family members who had died from AIDS. The tapestry of names they produced reminded protest organizer Cleve Jones of a great hanging quilt. Jones and other volunteers began collecting hundreds and thousands of 3 by 6-foot memorial panels from all across the country and started piecing them together. The panels bore colorful patterns, words of hope and perseverance, creative pictures and – most significantly – names and faces of those who had died of AIDS. Two and a half decades later, more than 94,000 names have been sewn into the fabric of the quilt, which stretches to an area of some 1.3 million square feet.

The hands that stitched their time, talent, energy and love into the quilt reached *into* the swirling depths of the AIDS crisis, when so many had turned their backs and averted their eyes. The work of the quilt was the work of listening to and preserving the stories of those in despair, hearing and sharing in the pain of loss, standing with those living in the fear of illness, affirming the determination, love, hope. The quilt did not vanquish AIDS, homophobia or prejudice, though we continue to work towards that goal. But the work of the quilt was the miraculous work of healing, carried out by human ears and human hands, by beloved sons and daughters of the Great Healer.

And so, I suppose, we should ask ourselves, as members of the body of Christ, as the people of Hyattsville Mennonite Church, “Where is Jesus the miraculous healer in our world today?” Though we haven’t raised the dead recently, I think Jesus the healer is quite active among us. In the volunteers who showed up on a hot Monday morning to serve and eat lunch with 60 homeless and low-income individuals from our

community. In a march of solidarity with the sisters of the rebuked Leadership Council for Women's Religious. In the exploratory phases of a support group for those among us facing the challenges of caring for aging parents. And those are just some of things I've seen in my seven weeks here with you.

How else might Jesus the healer be at work in our world today? To what other situations of pain, fear, loneliness, despair – to what other lost causes might the Spirit be calling us, inviting us to participate in the listening-walking-presence-offering work of healing? Where might the Spirit be calling us to receive it? What are the depths that God calls us to reach into, believing in the power of the one who, through us, does infinitely more than we deemed possible?

I invite us to listen – in ourselves, in our relationships, in our workplaces, in our communities – for the voices that cry out from the dark and swirling depths. May we receive and participate in the miraculous love of Jesus the healer, the one who hears each voice.