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## THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

*Don't Be Afraid* | Luke 8.40-56 | November 15, 2020

Jerry Seinfeld has an old joke about fear. It goes that surveys show that many people's number one fear in life is of public speaking, and that their number two fear is death. Which he says means that some people would rather be in the casket than giving the eulogy. I know that's a little dark but if this year has shown us anything it's that a fear of public speaking may no longer top our lists of things we're afraid of.

There is a lot to be afraid of these days. Health scares, job loss, isolation, uncertainty on levels our generation has never faced. But what are we afraid of most? What shadowy puppet master makes all those other marionettes dance? In the end there is really only one answer for every living creature, human beings included, and that is a fear of death. We might like to fool ourselves into thinking we're more afraid of public speaking or job loss, but a fear of death lurks behind it all. Tolstoy called death *"the inevitable end of everything"* which confronts us *"with irresistible force"*. Death is the one thing none of us can do anything about. So we're terrified of death, and yet we're usually reluctant to own up to it and would rather make jokes. It's like Woody Allen famously said, *"I'm not afraid of death. I just don't want to be there when it happens."*

The more I hear the story of Jesus' healing of the women with a blood hemorrhage, and the raising of a young girl from the dead, the more I am convinced this is one of those stories in the gospels that deals with our fear of death head on. It might be uncomfortable to say out loud, because we'd rather avoid talking about death or just make jokes about it, but we may as well be honest about it. This story quite literally asks us to stare death in the face. But it also asks us to stare hope in the face.

## Source of Life

What we've seen in the surrounding stories to this one is not a plush-toy version of Jesus, but instead a character full of power and authority. The question this story asks us today is: *how much power, how much authority? Does Jesus have what it takes to handle our most primal fear of death?*

Remember that Jesus has just exercised calm control over natural powers, the wind and waves. He's demonstrated calm control over evil powers in the story about a demonically possessed man. The gospels are full of stories which unveil Jesus to us. Turning our attention to these two interwoven stories, of the woman with the blood hemorrhage and the young girl on death's door, who is the character being unveiled? Well we meet a character of which you only need to brush up against so that you stop leaking life. We meet a character who goes in to see a young girl who has died and to him it's like she's only sleeping, even though everyone around him laughs at such a ridiculous idea. But to Jesus the wind and waves aren't a formidable threat; a host of evil spirits are no competition. What about death?

That's the kind of question people of faith shouldn't be afraid to ask, because if we're not asking these sorts of questions together about fear and death then I'm not sure what our faith is for. Here's a few questions I think that emerge from today's story: *First, what frightens us? Second, what do we do about that fear? And third, what is faith?*

First, **what frightens us?** We identified earlier what lies at the heart of all human fear which is death. That's the fear carried by the characters we meet in this story. The woman with a blood hemorrhage is fighting for her life, doing everything she can to ward off death, so she budes through the crowd in desperation and grabs at Jesus. The religious leader can't stand the thought of his young daughter dying, so he rushes to Jesus in a panic. They're both afraid of death just like we are. But as the

story goes they have no reason *to be afraid of Jesus*. In fact, it's the opposite. They have reason to hope.

It's important to note, however, that lots of people were afraid of Jesus following some of the miracles. You'll remember that fear was the reaction to Jesus on the other side of the lake after Jesus' freed the man filled with evil spirits, and so they begged him to leave. But the gospels make clear that Jesus didn't go around showing off, intending to overwhelm people. In fact, he often tried to avoid attention. In the case of the demon possessed man it seems as though Jesus didn't have much of a choice. He was simply confronted by darkness, and light always evicts darkness, sometimes dramatically. The towns' people perhaps saw the muscle but missed the mercy, and were afraid. So maybe that's why at the end of *this story*, about the raising of the young girl, Jesus tells her parents to keep it quiet so as to not attract the wrong kind of attention. Maybe Jesus is shy about showing off his power because it gives people the wrong impression. If we fast forward to Jesus' crucifixion and death we get a much clearer picture of the impression God wants to give the world through Jesus - that of humility, service and sacrifice. Jesus isn't out to overwhelm people, but to seek and to save what is lost - that's the heart of Luke's gospel in a nutshell.

So if miracles can at times be distracting, why does Jesus do them in the first place? Well back to the story. When this woman reaches out in desperate hope of healing, a miracle seems to just tumble out of Jesus, and he has to ask who touched him. This is one of those delightfully strange moments in the gospels as there's a feeling of absurd abundance at play. I've heard someone describe these kinds of moments in the gospels as *flashes of compassion*, almost like Jesus can't help himself, or control the mercy he's full of. Then, when Jesus and the man with a sick daughter learns she has died while on route, what does Jesus say? "*Don't be afraid*" and then he raises her up. I know that's a lot to take in, but the point Luke is making here is that it's only natural to fear death, but we needn't be afraid of Jesus.

This is because Jesus isn't a fear causer, but a hope carrier. He defies death because he is the source of life. There's a mercy and light in Jesus that spills out wherever he goes, and so shocking is this mercy, so bright is Jesus' light, that people in darkness can at times be startled by it. Maybe that's why he's wary of people wanting him to show off his power, or why he sometimes downplays miracles. Jesus doesn't want to give the wrong impression that God shows off in order to scare people into obedience. Instead he shows people that God is someone who invites us to trust and to hope in mercy.

It's important in hearing these stories to say that miracles like the ones in Luke eight are glimpses into future hope, just as the healings we might experience today. We can make rules for miracles, but many times they just can't be explained. One thing we can say, however, is that miracle is a kind of *temporary solution* because all of us are going to die, should Christ not return first. This is a weak simile, but I've come to think of miracles this side of heaven a little like that early gift some people give their children to open up on Christmas Eve before Christmas morning arrives and real party starts. The celebrations, the healing, the life, is breaking in, bubbling over. But it's nothing in comparison to the hope of a new heaven and a new earth. The Christmas Eve pajamas are great, but Christmas Day is coming.

That picture of an absurdly generous Jesus, brimming with life, simply doesn't square with a view of God as a power hungry, abusive or absent figure which many of us tragically cling to. Part of hearing the gospel stories is coming to grips with *Jesus as a relentless hope-carrier* in the deep places of our being. So these stories tell us that God needn't frighten us because at the heart of God's character, on show through Jesus, is compassion and mercy in abundance.

That leads us to our second question, **what do we do about our fear of death?** Anyone who's had to face the fear of death can tell you that there are no pithy quotes about endurance or finding the strength within that can help. Death brings us

to our knees as human beings, just like these characters in the story. So what do we do with our fear?

As people of faith, this is again why our vision of Jesus needs to be clear. If Jesus is just a super-prophet or a character with a bunch of nice teaching, he doesn't help us with the problem of death and the fear it carries. But Jesus has the audacity to tell the man who's just lost his daughter *not to be afraid* but to have faith. That's not a nice bit of advice, or a coping mechanism - that's an invitation to trust.

Now in hearing Jesus' tell the worried father not to be afraid, I don't think we're being told we shouldn't feel things, or even that it's *wrong* to be afraid of death. Part of being healthy person is owning and expressing our feelings. As a therapist friend of mine likes to say, ignoring our feelings is like ignoring an upset stomach. Something is going to come out whether you like it or not. So I don't think Jesus is telling this man not to feel fear. It is to say that Jesus is confident enough in himself to tell the man that fear doesn't have to be his dominant narrative. That's because for Jesus death doesn't get the last word, he does. Jesus simply doesn't believe that Tolstoy's description of death as "*the inevitable end of everything*" applies to him.

Now for people who've had to face death through sickness, or the loss of a child, or something gut-wrenchingly tragic, this kind of language from Jesus isn't the least sentimental but is deeply personal. And it may not be easy to hear. Some of you have faced those kinds of tragedies. Some of you are coming to grips with death today and are trusting that God will bring about life in the end and that death won't get the last word. We heard Dave say last year that the story of every Christian is that even though death is ahead of us, because of the hope of the gospel it is also behind us. And that's what stands out to me most in this story.

So what do we do with our fear of death? Well first we take it seriously. We ask our questions. We face it and own it. One of my favourite preachers is described as someone who preaches as if she knows she is dying. In other words, she's faces the

truth. But when it comes to facing the truth about death as a people of faith, we also face the truth about Jesus as the source of life. We listen to the one who has the last word and tells us to have faith. To have faith that even if death comes, in the end death can't stop the hope of life Jesus has in store for all of creation - you and me included.

That leads us to our third question, **what is real faith?** Faith has sadly been misunderstood by many people in Christian circles. That's because some people insist on faith having to look heroic or be something that depends on us. Ironically, that's the opposite of faith - at least the kind of faith Jesus speaks of in stories like these. "*Just have faith*" Jesus says to the man. What does he mean? Well it doesn't sound like he's telling the man to muster up some kind of heroic delusion, or to prove to Jesus how much faith he has in order to earn a healing. As we see in stories like this one faith is about trust.

So polluted has that word "faith" become in some Christian circles that it might be helpful to substitute it now and then for that other word: *trust*. Jesus says to this woman, "*Your desperate trust in me is well placed. You've been healed.*" He says to the man who's lost his daughter, "*don't be afraid, just trust me.*" and they continue to his home. So at the heart of these intertwined stories we hear that *faith is trust*. Trust in a person who is the source of life itself and promises what we hear in John's gospel that he has "*come to give life and life in abundance.*" So real faith, in the deepest Christian sense, is a trust in the God we needn't be afraid of because in the end he's generous with life. Real faith is trust in a God who makes dead things live again one day.

The more I pour over stories like this, and the more people I meet who are learning to trust God through the most horrible stuff life can throw at them, the more I think a good definition faith is this: *Faith is desperately trusting God without conditions.*

## Trust & Hope

When I was fifteen a school friend of mine died. She was killed by her only sibling, her brother. That was a terribly confusing and dark time in my life. Our friend group didn't know what to do with ourselves. There was no healing for my friend, no rescue from the agency of evil she faced as life was ripped from her. Some of us have sat with the dying or the grieving in homes and hospital rooms. We've felt the hot tears, the tremors of loss that shake another person's body as we hold them. And in those moments there are only two things we can really say to one another that make any difference as people of faith: the first is, *"I'm with you"* as to hold on to the other person, and the other is *"I'm going to trust God with you"* or maybe in the darkest of moments *"I'm going to trust God for you."*

We're just a couple weeks away from the beginning of Advent, and as one preacher put it, *"Advent begins in the dark"*. As much as we'd love to rush into the sparkly tinsel of Christmas we're moving into that dark time of year. But in the dark is where we trust and dare to hope that light is coming.

So if you're in the dark today, if you're daring to trust and hope that God will come through in the end - then please hear Jesus' words today *not to be afraid but to trust him in the dark*. To trust without conditions that Jesus is the ultimate hope-carrier. It's far too early, and I'm breaking all my holiday rules in doing this, but the carol says it better than I can:

*Light and life to all He brings,*

*Ris'n with healing in His wings:*

*Mild He lays His glory by,*

*Born that man no more may die;*

*Born to raise the sons of earth;*

*Born to give them second birth.*

### ***DISCUSSION QUESTIONS***

1. How does death lurk behind our other fears?
2. What do the miracles in the Gospels tell us about God's character as seen through Jesus?
3. What have you done with fear, or fear of death in the past?
4. What does it mean to trust Jesus as a hope-carrier, or to trust God without conditions?