

## IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend David J. Powers  
Sunday, January 28, 2024

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Friends, this day we will continue in our sermon series that's leading us through Epiphany on the Power of the Kin(g)dom. We're actually going to get to that parenthetical G today. Perhaps you've been wondering why we decided to make the sign look like that, and every time we've noted it in our emails, noting it as we have. So we'll get to that this day. We'll also continue in the Gospel of Mark. The interesting part, one of the interesting parts about the Narrative Lectionary this entire springtime, is that we get to move through this gospel very intentionally together, and that is a gift to us. It actually allows us also to accomplish at least one additional thing in our time together, and that is a deeper understanding of scripture together in the arc of the story of Jesus in the Gospel. So we're actually growing in our literacy of scripture as well. We're going to read from chapter five, a little bit later than the passage that we read last week. You'll notice though that there is a pretty significant gap that we will move past this day. Jeanene spoke to this actually. The part of this text that we will not read this morning has to do with Jesus's interaction with a woman who has experienced hemorrhages, and so we will not speak to that this morning, but it is important for us to understand everything that is happening in this fifth chapter of the Gospel of Mark. There's a lot that is going on. Jesus is really at work in this time, and so when we leave the scripture this morning, we'll have that interaction with Jesus; and when we come back to it, that interaction will be coming to an end. If you brought your Bible or if you have your Pew Bible open, we're going to read from the fifth chapter, beginning the 21st verse. Before we do, let us go to God in prayer.

Gracious Spirit, fall fresh upon us this morning. Fall fresh and bring your peace. Let your peace quiet us that we might hear your word for us this day, and that in hearing we might respond. So may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Beginning in the 21st verse—Jesus crossed the lake again, and on the other side a large crowd gathered around him on the shore. Jairus, one of the synagogue leaders, came forward. When he saw Jesus, he fell at his feet and pleaded with him, “My daughter is about to die. Please, come and place your hands on her so that she can be healed and live.” So Jesus went with him. And a swarm of people were following Jesus, crowding in on him.

Then later in verse 35 – While Jesus was still speaking with her, messengers came from the synagogue leader’s house, saying to Jairus, “Your daughter has died. Why bother the teacher any longer?” But Jesus overheard their report and said to the synagogue leader, “Don’t be afraid; just keep trusting.” He didn’t allow anyone to follow him except Peter, James, and John, James’ brother. They came to the synagogue leader’s house, and he saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly. Jesus went in and said to them, “What’s all this commotion and crying about? The child isn’t dead. She’s only sleeping.” They laughed at him, but he threw them all out. Then, taking the child’s parents and his disciples with him, he went to the room where the child was. Taking her hand, he said to her, “*Talitha koum*,” which means, “Little girl, get up.” Suddenly the young woman got up and began to walk around. She was 12 years old. They were shocked! He gave them strict orders that no one should know what had happened. Then he told them to give her something to eat.

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The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

Sometimes a story comes along in the gospels that allows you to have a particular connection to it. Often in stories in the gospels there... there's one character and Jesus, one figure and Jesus, but not this one. In this story we have a unique opportunity this morning to connect with a number of different important characters in the story of God, and I wonder if we might imagine ourselves this morning as...as one or maybe multiple characters in this story. The Gospel of Mark lays out for us that there is a...a father, a parent desperate for the healing of their child. Maybe this morning you feel like a parent, maybe because you're desperate for the healing of your child, or maybe simply someone that you care for deeply. We also encounter in this story, about halfway through it, a small group, a contingent that has been at the home of Jairus, the leader of the synagogue, who intercepts Jesus and Jairus on their way back to his home, and says, "Your daughter has died. Let's not bother the teacher any longer." So maybe you might situate yourselves this morning amongst that small group of people, the skeptics, if you will, skeptical that anything that can be done at this point is actually going to effect change or help anything at all. Then finally we're introduced to the girl that we're made known of at the beginning of the story, but we don't meet her until the very end. This little girl who indeed has, it seems, passed away. This little girl who is in need of healing that no one in her family, no one who loves her can provide. So maybe...maybe you are the little one this day desperately in need of healing. The beautiful thing about the gospel story here in the Gospel of Mark is that each character reveals for us another dimension of the kingdom of God; and I wonder what each of the interactions that we get to witness here, what they reveal to us. First, we meet the desperate parent Jairus, this synagogue leader, this one who was influential in his community of faith and in his wider community as well. If we were to try to situate Jairus this morning, we might imagine him as an elder or a deacon or even a clergy in our midst or perhaps someone who's very active in the life of the church, but whatever those titles are, they pale in comparison to how he finds himself this day— a parent terrified that his daughter is about to die. If we are honest with ourselves, perhaps we might say that we have been there too. Maybe not with the impending death of a child, but maybe with a friend who we know the way in which they are living is going to lead to their demise. Maybe...maybe someone that we care for, maybe even a parent of ours that we worry about their days coming to an end. What I love about Jairus in this story is that at the very beginning he un.masks something that cannot be present in the Kingdom of God. In the kingdom of God there is no room, it turns out, for pride or arrogance. This leader, this one who is looked upon to lead and to be proud, comes and falls at Jesus's feet, sees him through the crowd, seeks him out, sees him, and then falls at his feet and begs. It turns out then that if Jairus is teaching us something this morning, it's that humility is an essential component of Kingdom living. Pridefulness when you sense it in yourself or experience it in the world, it lets you know that you have not located yourself in the kingdom of God. Arrogance, then, it's a...a signpost for us that we have made a wrong turn, that we need to find the path of humility if we are to truly experience the kingdom of God. Maybe you're the desperate parent this morning, the one who is desperately in need of healing for someone that you love, or maybe you're the skeptic that meets

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them halfway. Jesus in response to Jairus's humility gets up and goes. And while we skipped over a really important story that I hope you'll go back and visit this afternoon in scripture, if you're...it's cold, it's gonna be a little misty, you might as well stay inside. You can read that story too. But Jesus goes. He responds to humility and says, "I'll go with you." And halfway there, just as Jesus has finished an incredible experience with the woman, the small group meets him and first shares purposefully the news with Jairus. "Your daughter is dead." And then gives an unneeded piece of advice to a grieving father—why bother the teacher any longer? And Jesus seeming to want to at least push them aside and maybe ignore them completely says to Jairus—you can imagine him pulling him away from this small group of people that he knows really well, his church people actually, people who have been in his home as his daughter was dying, pulling him away and situating him and saying to him, "Do not be afraid; keep trusting." And so they leave that group behind, and they keep making their way.

But maybe you have been that skeptic, maybe you are that this morning; and if you are, then it's important for us to see what Jesus is trying to teach us in that moment. The kingdom of God is a place in which we cannot and do not lose hope. The kingdom of God is a place where we have faith that God is still at work. It is a place where the best unexpected thing can still happen. It's beautiful what Jesus does here, N.T Wright observes. He says. "Jesus moves Jairus, and ultimately the people. He moves the people from fear—"do not be afraid" --to faith, because Jesus knows something that the people in this moment have forgotten. The kingdom of God is a place where more is happening than you can see." These people think she's sleeping or think she's dead. Jesus will later tell them she's just sleeping. We've seen this before. Just a few weeks ago Mary was preaching a number of different parables, and one of them was of a farmer who planted but did nothing really to tend the field, and yet somehow or another something kept growing and coming up from that field. It wasn't because of the farmer's Ingenuity that that happened. He would rise and sleep and rise and sleep, and something beautiful would grow. Something was happening beyond what the farmer could see. Then this morning, perhaps you read it, our friend, Micah Greenstein, had a piece in the Daily Memphian. That's a gift of writing sermons at 4 a.m. on a Sunday morning. You get to get beautiful nuggets here right at the end. Maybe you've read it this morning, but if not, I encourage you to. Micah shares this, says,

"Jewish mysticism, known as Kabbalah, has become more than a crossword puzzle favorite or an interest of Madonna or other celebrities. The appeal is the notion that there is more to reality than meets the eye. Things are never as they appear.... Enter this week's Jewish holiday: Tu Bishvat. This is the original," as Micah says, the original holiday for the Earth, for the environment. It is known as the "new year for trees." The new year for trees is celebrated this week in the Jewish tradition. "On the surface it seems crazy that we Jews," Micah says, "would celebrate the rebirth of trees in late January" when the ground is still frozen from the weather a couple of weeks ago. "While all Jewish holidays are geographically based in Israel which is a tad warmer than Memphis, (but even the northern, even in) Northern Israel there are snowcapped mountains. What, therefore, is the rationale for celebrating new growth in this icy wintry season? The answer is that what you see around you is not the total picture. While the trees may be bare above ground, future life is beginning to grow beneath the soil, a harbinger of springtime and

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brighter days ahead. The spiritual message of (this holiday) is for humans not to despair no matter how cold or challenging the present may be, because a warmer future is germinating and taking root beneath the ground—quite literally—as far away as a warmer season may presently seem.”

It is being born, and I think it's interesting the way that Jesus then greets the skeptical crowd. Jesus, a good Jew, would have known of this holiday, would have known of the meaning of looking upon the bare tree, but knowing that what one sees is not all of what is happening in the world. And he would have hoped that the people that greeted him that day on the road with Jairus would have remembered that too, but they have forgotten. Jesus, though, reminds them the kingdom of God is a place where we do not lose hope. It's a place where the best unexpected thing still happens. And so they continue on their way. Perhaps you're the skeptic this morning. Perhaps you have resigned yourself to the fact that what you see in your friend or your spouse or your child or our world, what you see is exactly what is going on, and that's all there is. And if you are that person this day, I hope you'll continue on the journey with Jesus, because he comes to the house, and there's a big old commotion going on—wailing and crying. They are grieving what they believe they have just seen, but it turns out that what they think they have seen they have not. “Why are you crying? The little girl is not dead. She's asleep.”

Perhaps you're the desperate parent, perhaps you're the skeptic in the crowd, or perhaps...perhaps you're the little child this morning. If we're honest we've all been there where we felt that it wasn't just a deep sleep but that what we had hoped for has passed away. And Jesus goes into the room and takes the young girl by the hand and speaks a tender and healing word to her. He says, “Little girl, get up.” And we don't know how long the pause was between him speaking “*Talitha kum*” and her rising, but what we do know is that this one that those around her believe to be dead was not not anymore. At least that she rose and began to walk around. She responds to the call of Jesus, and she rises. And in that Jesus is teaching us that the kingdom of God is a place where even what appears to be dead might simply be sleeping.

But here's the other thing Jesus tries to teach us this morning. For this little girl her father has been an...an integral part of her healing. What do I mean by that? We don't have to, it turns out, believe and understand everything. Others can for us. The little girl was in no place to seek her own welfare, to advocate for herself, or to even be healed, but her father trusted in her stead and sought out Jesus. Her father and the people around her prayed for her. Her father advocated on her behalf before the Lord. It turns out that others can trust for us. Others can pray for us. Others can advocate for us. Others can seek Christ for us. That is exactly what Jairus was doing for his daughter. And what happens when that happens is something brand new is born. I think Jesus is trying to impart to us, at least in some way, why we have that parenthetical G. Jesus is not just trying to establish a kingdom where he is ruler of all. He is also trying to establish a kindom where we understand that we are bound to each other in love and in faith, where we understand our responsibility to care for and advocate for and seek Christ, even for those who we believe to be lost causes, because the God that we know in Christ doesn't believe in that, doesn't subscribe to what we

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do. Maybe this morning you need to be the one that hears ‘little one, get up.’ Maybe you're strewn across a place that feels too overwhelming for you to rise from, and maybe you need this text to remind you that Jesus still speaks a Word of Life to us. Or...or maybe you might be called to be the voice of Jesus to another this day. Regardless, the kingdom of God, it turns out for us in the Gospel of Mark, is a place that holds our fear and desperation, our doubt and our skepticism in ways that we scarcely...scarcely imagine to be possible. The kingdom of God is a place where Christ is able to transform that which we imagine to be dead into something brand new.

I love The Gospel of Mark, because each of us can locate ourselves where we need to locate ourselves in this story. And the beautiful part is to the desperate father and the skeptical crowd and the little girl who appears to be dead, Jesus shows up to each of them, teaches them, and models for them that in the kingdom of God what we think we see is not the full picture. God is bringing forth from places that we imagine to be dead new life.

May you trust that to be true in your life this day.

May you know it to be true and proclaim it for your neighbors' lives and for our world.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.