

“Resilience: Hoping for 12 Years”

Psalm 30; Mark 5:24b-34 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – March 21, 2021

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that the power of hope might sustain us
as long as necessary. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

Do you remember 2009? What were you doing 12 years ago? It feels like a long time ago, doesn't it? What I know for sure about 2009 is that it was the year my nephew Ben was born while I was in Nashville over the 4th of July weekend and also the year my congregation in Alabama decided to step out in faith and become the hosts and recipients of a Regional Miracle Day that resulted in a major renovation of our sanctuary, a vacant lot being turned into a prayer garden, and a number of other major improvements. I wonder what you remember about 2009? If you'd like to share, you can add a comment to the chat box.

I ask about 2009, because today is the one-year anniversary of our first remote worship experience which it feels like we've doing forever, and we're nearing the end of our ENDURE Lenten theme, so our word of the week is Resilience, and to learn about that we've turned to this story about the woman with the hemorrhages, and she had them for TWELVE YEARS! Now you may not think that the story of one woman with a health condition is a good example for how to endure a pandemic, but it's important to recognize that this woman didn't just have an illness; she had a condition that would most likely had caused her to be somewhat isolated from the

rest of her community. Because her condition involved blood, it would have made her “unclean” which meant that many people would think she should just stay home by herself so she didn’t contaminate anyone else. Illness and social isolation seem like a pretty good match for our situation to me.

We talked last week about how frustrating the constantly changing information about the coronavirus can be, as we learn more about how it works and how to prevent its spread. This woman had been dealing with her condition for twelve years; Mark tells us “She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse.” Nobody understood how to help her; nobody had any answers. But they took her money anyway.

Which is easier to remember, 2009 or March 2020? They both seem like a long time ago, don’t they? Do you suppose anyone went through those twelve years with this brave woman? Did she have family or friends that stuck with her? Or did they fade away and experience those twelve years very differently? We have seen very clearly that the last year in our lives has impacted different people in different ways. Around 3,500 deaths in San Diego County alone, but only a handful of us have lost a family member or close friend. We know that this virus has affected communities of color, in particular our Hispanic friends, much more intensely than it has white folks. We know that the repetition of racist scapegoating about the virus has led to a heart-breaking uptick in violence against Asian and Pacific Islander neighbors, most dramatically the mass shooting in Atlanta this week. At certain moments, we may talk

about how we're all in this together, but the virus has revealed that the divisions that already existed in our society have more impact in crises than we might have guessed. What does it mean to seek to build up resilience as a faith community when we're not even having the same experience?

Do you think that woman's friends stood by her? I think they must have, and here's why. We know basically two things about this woman's back story: we know about her condition and how that had been going, and we know that she had heard about Jesus. There wasn't any Internet or social media or even a newspaper, so she must have heard about Jesus directly from other people. She was still in contact with someone. She was still engaging with others, despite her condition that could have isolated her. This is one of the first lessons in resilience she can offer us.

We do have the Internet and social media and newspapers. We can learn about the ways our shared condition are shifting and the possibilities for improvement that are coming. We can pray with one another by text and offer encouragement over the phone. Staying connected to our community is one of the keys to resilience. We carry each other through, taking turns breaking down and lifting up. It makes me think of the lyrics of one of my favorite Semisonic songs: "If you're afraid to cry,/Though you could use it once in a while,/Nothing will cloud your eyes,/You've been caught in one of those times,/When nothing's real or getting through,/And it seems like you've forgotten how to feel,/Call me,/I'll Feel,/For you,/And some days you'll feel for me too."

There's more though. This woman didn't just stay connected to her community; she stayed engaged with her faith. Can you imagine how hard it would be to maintain hope for T W E L V E Y E A R S? How had she not given up long before Jesus arrived in town? And yet, somehow, when she heard he was coming, she psyched herself up and hope that maybe, just maybe after all this time, maybe possibly perhaps this was the thing that could bring her healing? She dared to put herself out there in that crowd, hoping none of the fundamentalists would recognize her and cause a scene about her being in public with her condition, because she was still holding onto hope. This was a woman of faith. I bet she knew Psalm 30 by heart. Last week, we talked about how we don't like not understanding why bad things happen. We could look at Psalm 30 and say that it's telling us that the pandemic came because God has turned against us. But I would argue that this Psalm isn't trying to explain to why bad things happened, when it uses language about God hiding God's face. It isn't an explanation of why it happened; it's a description of how it felt. The fact that the psalmist is saying these things to God is a testimony to the psalmist's trust that God is still listening.

Who is this God that can handle all the false accusations we throw out when we're suffering? This God shows up in this woman's story too, and she recognizes that Presence when Jesus arrives. I realized this week that I've always heard Jesus' "Who touched me?" question as an alarmed accusation; as if he was upset that someone was stealing his power without his consent. That's how the disciples seem

to respond to it. But that's not what it is at all. I've accepted the disciples' misinterpretation all this time and missed what's really happening. Jesus isn't mad; he's concerned. This isn't alarm at theft; it's the urgency of suddenly becoming aware of someone's deep need and not wanting to leave them isolated in that need.

Some of you have seen our current set-up for Welcome Saturday. We have a long table set up under the overhang near the playground gate where we put out all the towels and toiletries that people can use for a shower or take to use later. I usually staff that station because it gives me a good vantage point to keep an eye on everything. Quite often, I have to wander away to take care of one thing or another. If I were to return to the toiletry table just in time to see a newcomer grabbing a bar of soap and running off, you'd better believe I'd be following them and hollering for them to stop. But it wouldn't be because I'm mad they took the soap; it would be because I want to offer them breakfast and lunch and a shower if they want it and friendship. That's why Jesus wanted to know who touched him. The woman had already been healed of her disease; she felt it in her body, and I have no doubt Jesus knew that too. But that only fixed part of her problem, because she'd also been suffering from some degree of social isolation for 12 years. Jesus had so much more to offer. She knelt before him, and he called her "Daughter". He brought her back into the family. This is the God whose cloak she hoped could bring her healing, the God who chases after us because there are so many more blessings in store. This is the God the psalmist cried to; this is the God who turns our mourning into dancing.

Our faith in this God is what will bring us the resilience we need to get through this difficult season. There are many things we've learned from this pandemic. But much of what we needed to know, we already knew because our faith has been teaching us these lessons for centuries. I thought it would be interesting to look at the words we used in worship as we were just beginning this new way of being church. I was struck by how appropriate the words from March 22, 2020's worship service still felt, so I decided to use them again today. Our faith has always promised us that God will carry us through hard times. Our faith has always promised us that God will not abandon us, but will be with us through all things. Our faith has always called us into community, knowing that God works through each of us to sustain all of us.

One of the things you may not have noticed about our Lenten theme this year is the music. In our Ash Wednesday video meditation there were six hymns, beautifully played, if I do say so myself, by my niece Claire on her cello. Those hymns were selected to go with each week of our ENDURE theme, and we've been singing one each week. We began with "I Want Jesus to Walk With Me", "Let Us Break Bread Together", and "Precious Lord, Take My Hand." What I didn't realize when I picked out these six songs is that the one we sang last week, "There Is a Balm in Gilead", and the one we sang today, "O God, Our Help in Ages Past," were both part of our service on March 22, 2020. Our faith has been assuring us of God's presence and promise all along. How often during those 12 years do you think that hemorrhaging woman repeated verse 5b of Psalm 30? "Weeping may linger for the

night, but joy comes with the morning.” Is that how her hope was still alive when Jesus finally came to town? One of the verses we didn’t sing of our theme hymn today says, “A thousand ages, in thy sight, are like an evening gone; short as the watch that ends the night before the rising sun.” Twelve years is a long time for weeping to linger for the night; one year is a long time for weeping to linger for the night. But joy comes with the morning, joy comes with the morning. Let us lean on our faith; let us lean on one another, as together we grow in resilience and keep hope alive till the morning comes. Amen.