

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for August 31, 2008 in the Old Broad Street Church
Lessons: Psalm 138 and Mark 5:21-34

INCREASED STRENGTH

We need to stop selling the Bible as the book of official answers to all life's major questions. Life means growth, and we cannot memorize it; we have to live it ourselves. To keep growing, we need to ask the questions that lead to growth. Having a supposedly definitive set of answers ahead of time would only block us from learning and growing.

You're, perhaps, not convinced. Well, if a life, yours for example, came pre-made with only some assembly required, then a set of instructions would be very helpful – if, of course, we men would read them. But life is relational, and there are no manuals for friendship, marriage, or (despite the attempts) parenting. Yes, I can accept guidance at times, but for better and worse, I have to live my life myself. Even God cannot live it for me, without taking it away from me.

The other reality about us that defies any mere set of answers is that we have feelings and emotions, and our feelings get involved in every choice we make in life and every response we make to other people. Never do we give our attention to anything without the engagement of our feelings, even when we are unaware of them. We are wired for feeling, and we do not make choices without feeling, however rational we may be. So, answers handed to us in advance are made to be resented, ignored, or else accepted and submitted to, but without our own thought and personal engagement. We may rebel, or we may do as we are told, but without making even the question our own, let alone the answer. So it is that children can often give the right answers about God, about Jesus Christ, and about the choices in human life; but once they become teenagers or young adults, they still have to make the questions their own, or they will depart from the faith.

The Bible tells us how deeply and wonderfully God cares about us and our world. It invites us to respond to God's passionate caring for us. If we try to reduce the Bible to nothing better than a set of answers, it becomes for us a court of judgment where unmoved truth either feeds our pride or makes us hang our heads. So, people become either "Bible believers" or Bible avoiders.

Why are people drawn to the Psalms? What is it about these poetic prayers and reflections that attracts us? They bring me into their conversations with God, with life, and

with my “soul,” my very self. They don’t talk at us, but often they speak for us and, in so doing, help us learn to speak for ourselves. The psalms express emotions (and not just positive ones) toward God, toward other people, and toward that sometimes frustrating self that just won’t feel the way we want it to. But through all of them runs the conviction that God cares. That God is compassionate and trustworthy. That God understands the frustrations as well as the joys of being human and alive in this world.

So, let’s join Psalm 138 and journey with the psalmist. Along the way, we will find ourselves also in the company of a woman who has the audacity to reach out and touch Jesus in hope.

“Oh what a beautiful morning! Oh, what a beautiful day! I’ve got a beautiful feeling everything’s going my way!” That’s Curly’s song in the musical *Oklahoma*, but it’s not the song we hear in Psalm 138. Life is not going the psalmist’s way, and she is not just struggling to maintain her faith in God but actively and assertively calling upon the LORD God to be Israel’s covenant partner for her, to hear her cries and come to her aid.

If you’ve been here either of the past two Sundays, you know I use “he” and “she” interchangeably for the psalmist, not because I doubt the probability that the author was a man, but because the psalms invite us to let them speak for us and with us – invite us to become the psalmist. The psalm succeeds when you become the one calling to God, when the hopes and disappointments lifted to God are yours.

The psalmist uses her past experience of God’s grace to fortify her present resistance to fear and depression. “On the day I called,” she remembers, “you answered me, you increased my strength of soul.” Literally, in the original language, it says, “You made me arrogant in my soul with strength,” but I doubt our word arrogant gets it quite right. We might better say “confident,” but with a bit of attitude to help us stand up to the arrogance of powerful enemies, to face down their taunts and jeers. By the way, these enemies don’t necessarily even have to know who we are, and we don’t need to hate them (although sometimes that helps, and I’ll come to that situation in a moment). The enemies need be only the voices of the powerful and privileged that can get into our heads and whisper that we are fools for trusting God and trying to live by faith in the way of Jesus – that smart people look out for themselves, taking what they can and doing what they must to get ahead, and that people who think otherwise are losers. Compassion, these voices say, is for saps, and justice is the dream of whiners.

The situation in which I think it wise to allow ourselves to hate these enemies comes when they are not people at all but forces that hurt and destroy life, such as cancer. In that case, praying for God to destroy the enemy utterly is not only therapeutic but justified.

When, however, the enemy is a person, the psalms of Israel may help us be more honest than we Christians often allow ourselves to be. We are speaking to God, and with God we do not need to pull our punches or edit our prayers to make them reverent or proper. We don't even have to say what we mean; we can, instead, for the moment, say what we feel. Then, what I feel is out there where I can see it and deal with it, knowing God understands and is not offended. God, after all, knows how I feel anyway. So, why kid myself?

“You increased my strength of soul.” My soul is my very self, the self Jesus Christ calls to be strong with trust, hope, and compassion, not with greed or cruelty. God works with us, not on us, as though we were cars the mechanic could just repair and tune up. Unless I am engaged emotionally in the question, the answer will never be mine. It might be your answer or the Bible's answer or the minister's answer, but it cannot and will not be my answer until I have made the question my own for real.

Do you think Jesus wore a magical robe that contained and could transmit healing power? Do we imagine Jesus had an aura that radiated God's power? What century do we live in? This desperate woman has the audacity to touch a man, a man of God no less, though she is not only a mere woman but one in a permanent state of uncleanness. She is barred from God's presence, and she embodies what her culture saw as disgusting and unfit for the community of faith.

Jesus is her last hope, but she certainly marshals her courage to dare touch him. Even today, in some parts of our world, women who overstep their bounds are publically beaten or worse. She is desperate, to be sure, but who can draw the line between desperation and faith? Jesus doesn't even bother. He calls it faith, and responds with God's grace to give her healing and offer her peace. He understands what she has done and the courage it required, and his understanding is that of compassion, not contempt for her superstition. She doesn't have to get it just right but only to reach out in hope.

“The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me.” Do we hear what we are being invited to think, to feel, and to believe? You matter to God, not as a tool, but as a person. Your life is to become God's work, but not in a way that takes it away from you. Calling on God to be present with care, the psalmist voices his fear, “Do not forsake the work of your hands.” You are the work of God's hands God must not forsake. Who am I to say what God “must not” do? That's not irreverence; it's the boldness, the audacity, of a child who trusts his parents' love and of a psalmist who trusts her God's understanding and caring. So, with all the doubt-faith, fear-courage, desperation-trust, and belief-hope we can muster, we affirm, “The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me.” And then we add the prayer, “Your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever. Do not forsake me, the work of your hands.” *God, increase the strength of our souls.* Amen.