



Lenten studies 2018 - Mark: Crown and Cross

Study 2 - Fear and Faith - Mark 5:21-43

Connect group questions

Read Mark 5:21-43

Watch Pete's talk : <https://youtu.be/znrmS1rbZ8Q>

1. If there are members in the group who do not know one another, perhaps you could share (very briefly), a little about yourselves.
2. Pete opened with these words: *we live in a time in history and in a place in the world where we are largely inoculated from desperate circumstances.* True?
3. What is a "Markan sandwich"? What are the similarities between the two stories?

Story 1

4. Has anyone in the group had a desperately ill child? Can we imagine how Jairus felt?
5. What do you make of Jesus' delay in reaching Jairus' daughter? What impact do you think it would have had on Jairus? What effect does it have on us, when God keeps us waiting?

Story 2

6. Read v25 and recall all the implications Pete shared with us about this woman's illness.
7. v27 - why do you think the woman came up behind Jesus in the crowd to touch his cloak? (Leaders - refer Pete's talk and Leviticus 15:25-33.)
8. Why did Jesus want to seek the woman out and talk to her? How does superstition still characterise the way some people relate to God?

Story 3 (or story 1 continued)

9. "Honey - time to get up!" What are the implications of the way Jesus spoke to the girl and of what happened as a result? Why did Jesus tell them to keep this secret and why did he tell them to give her something to eat?
10. "*Don't be afraid; just believe,* said Jesus. Impractical? Impossible? Or??
How can we train ourselves in challenging circumstances, not to be afraid, but to trust God?
Perhaps someone in the group would be willing to share how the Lord helped them through a difficult time - and you chose not to be afraid, but believe?

Share if there's anything in particular which struck you from this talk/study. Pray for one another, that having seen that Jesus is King of the difficult circumstance, we will learn to trust him more deeply.

Introduction

We live in a time in history and in a place in the world where we are largely inoculated from desperate circumstances. We are so wealthy, we are so well educated, we have access to such amazing health and medical and psychological services that it is very possible for a child in our city to grow to the age of 18, and really be untouched by suffering and death. We have not seen war. We rarely see poverty. Displaced others are not on our door step – only our TV's and only occasionally.

This is not the world into which the Gospels were written. In the first century, 1/3 of all children died before the age of one. One in three children died. That would affect almost every single family. So almost every family would carry the pain of having lost a child you had seen come into the world. Some of you know that pain. That changes you. In the first century, some of your children would grow up knowing the pain of losing a sibling. That would change them.

But it wasn't just back then that people knew desperate circumstances better than us. It happens today as well, just not here as much. I quite regularly head over to Zimbabwe and Malawi to teach pastors theology. Whenever I go - I am always reminded how privileged we are. I remember a pastor in Malawi asking me for \$10 so his 5 year-old daughter could get glasses, so she could see properly. Can you imagine not being able to buy \$10 glasses for your 5 year old daughter? I remember pastors in Zimbabwe telling me that they would only eat every 3 days – for that was all they could afford. Can you imagine actually eating only one major meal every 72 hours?

Now - some of us have experienced real and recent desperate circumstances. Some of us have. But most of us haven't. As I said at the beginning, we live in a time in history and in a place in the world where we are largely inoculated from desperate circumstances.

'Markan Sandwiches'

In Mark's gospel today, we meet two people who are really unlike us. They are two people who are in desperate circumstances. A lady who has been religiously, sexually, relationally and socially dead for 12 years; and a 12 year old girl who is dead. Some weird similarities there, right? Absolutely – and these stories are significantly and deeply interwoven.

To understand what is going on, today we need to see a technique that Mark uses a number of times in his Gospel. A technique we sort of miss, unless it's pointed out to us, and once it's shown we start to see it in a whole range of places. Now you might be thinking this is going to be a bit of a NT lecture here on how to read the Gospels for all their worth. And I'll try not to make it dry. But let me say this – if you don't understand what is going on here – there are key parts of Mark's Gospel you'll never get your head around. I'll say that again - if you don't understand what Mark is doing here – there are key parts of Mark's Gospel that will never quite make sense.

And this technique that Mark uses has been given a particular name. The name, is a sandwich. And so in Mark's Gospel, they are called 'Markan Sandwiches'. Here is how they work. What we have is a story; that is then interrupted by a seemingly unrelated story; and then after that we get back to the original story. And here is the key – the meat interprets the bread. The middle story is the key to understanding the outer story. And everyone agrees there are 5 sandwiches in Mark, plenty say there are 9, and some say there are 11. And today we stumble upon the first.

Victims of desperate circumstance

And it is all about a dying little girl. A Jewish Synagogue leader – an important religious man named Jairus comes to Jesus, because he is in a desperate circumstance. He falls at Jesus' feet, and then in verse 23 he cries "My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live." In the days before penicillin and cat-scans and stethoscopes – a gravely sick child was a very serious matter. And time was of the essence. So Jairus goes to see the healer.

And so Jesus is on his way to Jairus' house to see his daughter, and a large crowd has milled around Jesus. He is the teacher of the moment, the one with the magic touch, or so they all thought. And then in verse 25, we get to our next story – unrelated to the first, but it will soon become key. It is the meat in our sandwich.

We read in verse 25, see that, that 'a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse. When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, because she thought, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed."

Now a word on this woman. This is not a woman who is struggling a little. She is a picture of the walking dead. This is a picture of the walking dead. This is a woman who is dead in every way except physically. Religiously – she is unclean, and cannot meet with her God in the temple. Sexually she is untouchable – for her husband could not sleep with her whilst she was bleeding. In fact – he would probably have divorced her by now. Relationally she is dead – for she can bear no children – she cannot raise a family. And socially she is dead for she would be an outcast from her community.

And she approaches Jesus – and just wants to touch him. And there is probably an element of superstition in her desire. And verse 29 tells us what happened 'Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering.' And she is healed.

And all she wants to do is touch Jesus anonymously, and slip away. 'Please God let me just slip away unseen' she probably would have thought. Why? Because she has just broken the law. She is unclean, and she has come and touched a religious teacher. All she wants to do is get away unseen. But Jesus will have

none of it. Verse 30 – ‘At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, “Who touched my clothes?”’

The disciples say – verse 31 – there’s hundreds of people – everyone touched you. What are you talking about? Verse 32 ‘But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it. Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth.

Amazing story. Jesus will not let her just walk away. Ever wondered why? I think there are at least 2 reasons for this. The first is, if this woman were simply to walk away – she would misunderstand the Gospel. She would misunderstand Jesus. If she was to just walk away, she would think ‘if you touch this God, he does miracles’. She would become entrenched in her superstition. She thinks right now that touching Jesus clothes has saved her. And Jesus will have none of it. So he says to her “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.”

And what we see is that she has not been saved by the fabric, but by faith. This woman has been healed, she has been saved – it’s the same Greek word used – because she has come to Jesus in desperate trust. Now here is the thing. Did she have perfect faith when she approached? No. Was her faith tinged, perhaps over run with superstition – almost certainly. And yet we see Jesus respond with grace and life to those who turn to him – even those with broken faith. Weak faith, wrong faith.

This reminds me of the time when Jesus meets another man with broken faith, in Mark 9. This father comes to Jesus – also in desperate circumstances. His son is demon possessed, and demons make his son try to kill himself. And the father says to Jesus “...if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.” And Jesus responds ‘If you can’? Everything is possible for him who believes.” And then we read ‘immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”

We see another man, coming to Jesus in desperate circumstances. And Jesus says I can do anything for those who believe. And the man then in one sentence describes your faith, my faith, everyone who trusts in Jesus faith. He says ‘I do believe. Help me overcome my unbelief’. Our relationship with God is one built upon faith in his Son, Jesus. But it is always a faith that is weak and fickle and fractured. We do believe, but we are racked with unbelief. But here is the thing – God does not expect perfect faith – just desperate faith. Just a trust in him from people who know they have nowhere else to turn.

But there is a second reason why Jesus won’t let this women get away so easily. And it is because he is teaching her and us something new about who he is. I said before this woman has broken the law. She has. This is what Leviticus 15 says “When a woman has a discharge of blood for many days at a time other than her monthly period or has a discharge that continues beyond her period, she will be unclean as long as she has the discharge...Whoever touches them will be unclean; he must wash his clothes and bathe with water, and he will be unclean till evening.”

Twelve long years this woman has lived like this. Fatigued with grief. Fatigued by illness. Fatigued with the knowledge that anyone she touches, she defiles. Do you feel how draining that would be? And Jesus now wants to teach her and us something.

I hope you noticed in that Leviticus reading, that there is always a direction that defilement moves. Always in one direction. From the unclean to the clean. In the OT, the leper, the infected, the menstrual – the unclean - they had to be removed, isolated, separated. Because defilement always moved in one direction – from the defiled – the unclean, to the undefiled; to the pure.

But did you notice with Jesus – the exact opposite. For the first time in history the movement swings the other way, the tide turns. For the first time in history – instead of an unclean person defiling another - a perfect person purifies the unclean. That is what we are being shown. Jesus shows this woman, and us that he is the one who can make the unclean clean. More than that – he takes a woman who is dead in every sense, and makes her alive. Brings life to her in every sense.

And all of a sudden, we're out of the story. And we're back to Jairus. We're back to the bread in the sandwich. But keep in mind – that story about this bleeding woman is going to help us understand the story of Jairus.

And in verse 35, we see that this interlude Jesus has had with this woman – this life-giving touch Jesus has given to this woman has resulted in the death of another. The death of a very small little girl. And her father has been with Jesus this whole time – willing him to come along to his house. And then he gets the news – your daughter is dead.

Don't lose sight of what has just happened here - the upright, religious, moral and pure Jewish leader has been kept waiting while Jesus has been dealing with this unnamed, unclean, non-temple attending, nobody. And the leader's child has died. It's interesting, isn't it? The privilege and the power of the leaders of the kingdom of the world do not continue into the Kingdom of God.

And you can imagine this father's heart is crushed. The finality of death all of a sudden becomes deeply personal for him. He is a man – in a desperate circumstance – who has now come to the end of the line. And he is told to stop bothering the teacher. But Jesus is the King of desperate circumstances.

In verse 36 we see that Jesus hears what the servants have said to Jairus, so Jesus, turns to Jairus and says 'Don't be afraid; just believe.' And here we see a very important thing. The difference between fear and faith.

Fear versus Faith

You know, I was speaking with a very wise Christian mother recently, whose children are now all grown up. And she was telling me that a number of people at her work – other parents – often ask her ‘what did you do to raise your kids the way you did? Your kids are so secure, so established, so unshakable now – ‘how did you do it?’ To which she replies – ‘I didn’t do. Everything you see in them, that you wish your kids have but don’t, didn’t come from me, but from God.’

And then she explained to me what that looked like as her kids were small. She told me the story of Will, her youngest boy, and how when he was 12 years old she put him on a train to catch by himself to go into the city to High School. And she says she remembers him turning to her – this little 12 year old, and saying ‘mummy, I’m scared’. To which she replied, ‘Will, there is nothing I can do for you. I won’t be there, I can’t help. But Jesus can. You trust him. You pray to him. You know that he will be with you, every second, every minute, every hour of every day’.

And she said that what that taught her kids, from the youngest age, was that there was a rock, a stability, a God who had them and held them and loved them and cared for them more than any parent every would or could. She said that is what has given her children a security as adults, that no-one can have apart from trusting in Jesus.

What she actually did, with that little 12 year old boy – was replace his fear, with faith. The very thing Jesus does with Jairus and the bleeding woman. They are actually opposites - fear and faith. And Jesus says to Jairus – verse 36 – ‘don’t be afraid – just believe’. And he says it to you. As you are fearful about life and work and health and singleness and marriage and family and housing and kids and, and, and, and don’t be afraid. Just believe. Just trust in Jesus.

Well, Jesus arrives at Jairus’ house. The mourners are there. The little girl’s death is being grieved. And then Jesus takes charge. ‘The little girl is not dead – she’s asleep’. And they laugh at him. These people did not get death wrong. They knew what death was. And then Jesus walks into this little girl’s room, takes her by the hand and says to her “Talitha Koum’. Which, as were told in our bibles means ‘Little Girl, I say to you, get up!’” which is an accurate but wooden translation. It gives us the meaning, without the feeling. What Jesus actually says her is this. He says ‘honey, it’s time to get up’.

Do you see the difference? Jesus rouses this child from death, the way a parent rouses their child from sleep. Do you see the point? Death, to Jesus is like sleep to us. This man, this Messiah, this God holds even the power of death in his hand. And Jairus is given his daughter back.

Now I said that the meat interprets the bread. Right? I said the story of the bleeding woman helps us understand the story of Jairus? Well, this is how that works.

Story 1 – we meet Jairus who thinks he has a sick daughter. So he goes to Jesus in faith, in hope, in trust.

Story 2 – we meet a woman who we think is sick. But she's not. Mark wants us to know that she is not sick, she is actually dead. Not physically – but in every other way. So Jesus meets a woman who appears sick, but is actually dead – and then restores life to her death. He re-animates her, and restores her.

Story 3 – Jairus' hope turns to dust, as his sick girl dies. As his servants say 'don't bother the teacher. It's all over'. But story 2 shows us that death is not beyond the power of Jesus. And so we read story 3 with new eyes, now. We read it with an expectation that death is not beyond this man Jesus. So Jairus is told don't be afraid – just believe. And of course Jesus awakens the little girl. Clever, isn't it? That is what our two stories mean, together.

Conclusion

I started this talk by saying that 'We live in a time in history and in a place in the world where we are largely inoculated from desperate circumstances'. And that is all true. But not entirely. Because largely inoculated does not mean entirely inoculated. The fact is we don't escape desperate circumstances here in the affluent west – we simply mask, ignore or postpone them. None of us are so arrogant to think that death doesn't crouch at our door, are we? None of us actually believe that money will make us secure, do we? None of us really think that education is our saviour, and our children's saviour do we? Not if we're wise.

If we're wise, we will know that all of those things can become great distractions to the reality of our world. And in the same way that putting perfume on a corpse – does not change the reality of a situation; nor does long life, money or education.

We can run, but not hide. We can ignore, but not escape. We can distract, but not change the fact that desperate circumstances are the lot of every person who lives in this broken world. And the words of Jesus to Jairus, and the words of Jesus to the bleeding woman are the words to we need to hear 'don't be afraid. Just believe. Go in peace'.

You know, both of these stories here raise the question – why? Why did this woman have to live for 12 years with this awful, debilitating, deathlike disease? Why did this little girl, and her family need to go through the grief of her death? And the answer is – we have no idea. The thing with desperate circumstances that befall us all, is that they are often shrouded in mystery. And we long for answers to those things more than anything – and often all we get is silence. Let me finish today with the words of Paul David Tripp, from his book called *New Morning Mercies*:

“The best theology will not remove mystery from your life, so rest is found in trusting the One who rules, is all, and knows no mystery. God is with you in your moments of darkness because he will never leave you. But your darkness isn’t dark to him. Your mysteries aren’t mysterious to him. Your surprises don’t surprise him. He understands all the things that confuse you the most.

Not only are your mysteries not mysterious to him, but he is in complete charge of all that is mysterious to you and me. Remember today that there is One who looks at what you see as dark and sees light. And as you remember that, remember, too, that he is the ultimate definition of everything that is wise, good, true, loving, and faithful. He holds both you and your mysteries in his gracious hands, and because he does, you can find rest even when the darkness of mystery has entered your door.”

‘Don’t be afraid. Just believe’.