

Nothing Short of Hopeful

Proper 8, Mark 5:21-43

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In 2017, on my 23rd birthday, I was given a children's book about caterpillars. This 144-page, mostly illustrated book, has quickly made its way to my list of favorite books and onto my list of things that never fail to make me cry. *Hope for the Flowers* by Trina Paulus tells the story of two caterpillars, Stripe and Yellow, who hope for something more than their ordinary caterpillar lives. Stripe and Yellow spend their caterpillar lives eating leaves and crawling to the top of a pillar made of caterpillars that reaches up to the sky. They are so sure that if they can just reach the top of the pillar of caterpillars, they will be fulfilled. Whatever is up there is worth it, they are sure of it.

In today's Gospel, we meet two people who hope for something more. One woman hopes that just by reaching out and touching Jesus she will be healed. One man, with a daughter close to death, hopes Jesus can just get to her in time. Two very different people, one very same hope brings them through the crowd.

While I sat at nearly every coffeehouse in Memphis wondering what I had to share about this passage, I have been nothing short of thankful to be writing this in June of 2021 and not June of 2020. Would I have been able to see the hope in the story? Would I be able to see hope in my own life? It's no surprise to us all to say that our past year and a half has been hard. Truthfully, it wouldn't just be unsurprising, but it would be an understatement. It hasn't been 12 years of pain quite like the woman experiences in this story, but perhaps it is the same feeling of desperate hope for healing. How do we find hope in the midst of it all? If we manage to find hope, how do we keep it so that if Jesus came near us today or tomorrow or next week, we have enough hope to fight our way through the crowd just to touch his cloak?

When I look for hope today, I have to look no further than right here. I look to our baptismal font, the water it contains, Nathaniel who is about to be baptized, and all of you who are about to affirm your Baptismal Covenant. How blessed I am to have symbols of hope surrounding me in this place! When I look past the sanctuary and search for hope within this community here at Calvary, it's easy to find. I find it at Basement Church where people show up before the sun rises to meet the needs of our neighbors. I find it during Children's Chapel and I find it during the Eucharist.

When I look for hope in my own life, I find it in a Tuesday night Zoom Compline with friends from across the country. I really can't believe I'm still willingly logging onto Zoom, but here I am. A practice that was started by a dear friend of mine during the height of social distancing has quickly become a weekly time of prayer and ultimately, thanksgiving. I'm in an interesting time in my life where I'm watching friends search for and find their call in life. Unfortunately, I'm learning that it often means more miles in between me and those I hold close. Despite the distance, I'm hopeful that pursuing their vocations will only make the world a little better, a little more healed. I feel the same hope for Calvary seniors we celebrated only a few weeks ago.

When I look for hope in my own life, I find it in my yard. Mammoth daisies that were planted months ago were accidentally mowed down before we saw any flowers. Months of waiting and anticipation were cut short by a lawn mower. Naturally, we were bummed. As someone who lacks a green thumb, I just figured we would cut our losses and maybe stick to something like succulents next time? Much to my surprise, within a week they were taller than they were before. The regrowth of a bunch of daisies gives me hope.

In the story today, two are healed. I wonder how many people in the crowd bumped into Jesus and touched his cloak that day? I wonder how many were at home with a loved one that needed healing? Was it the hope to be healed that propelled the woman forward to Jesus? Was it hope for the future of the little girl that threw Jarius at his feet? I wonder how the woman kept her hope alive for 12 years. I wonder if it was the stories she had heard about Jesus that strengthened her faith and her hope enough to bravely push herself through. Maybe she was encouraged by a friend, maybe she saw a symbol of hope somewhere along her path. I wonder what she did after. I know, I know... I'm asking a lot of questions and providing only the tiniest bit of answers and speculating on the lives of people who I don't even know the name of, but I think it's worth wondering.

As my favorite children's tale continues, Stripe and Yellow leave the pillar together, live happily for a while, and eventually part ways to follow their own instincts to find "something more." Stripe returns to the pillar, fighting and crawling to just be "up" and near the sky. Yellow follows her instincts, weaves a cocoon, and is born a butterfly. With her wings, she finally understands that there was indeed something more than the life of a caterpillar, just eating leaves and crawling "up." I struggled with the idea of sharing the ending of this beautiful book, but I think it's worth the spoil. Just as Stripe reaches the top of the pillar to find nothing but more caterpillars struggling to keep their footing, Yellow flies to him and shows him what he is meant to become. As he loses his own hope for more, he is reminded by another that Hope exists still.

Even with my community and symbols of hope in my life, there have been and there will be times where I feel I cannot find hope for myself. I imagine that we have all been more like Stripe the caterpillar than Yellow the butterfly, without hope or a way towards it on our own. We will soon be asked, "Will you who witness these vows do all in your power to support this person in his life in Christ?" When we answer, boldly and loudly, let us remember to hold hope for Nathaniel, in times where he finds his own hope in Jesus and in times where he needs someone to be hope for him. The story of our caterpillars ends with hope for the flowers. Hope touches all of our lives, just as hope moved through the woman for herself and Jarius for his daughter. And now I ask, what do you hope for?

