

Matthew 15.21-28
Reminiscere, the 2nd Sunday in Lent
25 February 2018
St. John's Ev. Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

+ Iesu Iuva +

Beloved in the Lord: grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.

The Germans have a term for it—the ultimate pessimist. *Schwarzseher*, they call it. One who sees only black. Sometimes that's an attitude. But sometimes that's just...life.

As it was for the Syrophenician woman. Nothing but black. Standing outside the promises of God to Israel, she was. For she was not a child of Abraham, by blood. And to top it all off, as if to confirm the blackness of her life: behold, her own flesh and blood, possessed and oppressed; afflicted and beset. Not by something with an ICD-10 code or a diagnosis in the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*. But by a demon. Harassed by a supernatural power and being. Beyond the reach of any doctor or medication. Beyond the reaches of leaches and invasive surgery. Something not in the body or the brain. But something in the soul. A captive of the prince of darkness himself.

Nothing but black.

But then comes a report. A Good Man is coming to town. His name is Jesus. And the report she's heard about Him is...promising! He's a godly Man. He walks in the power of the Most High God—even on water! And whenever and wherever He comes He gladly helps. He feeds 5,000 hungry. He heals the sick.

And He...casts out demons.

This is Good News. This is a true Gospel. A true word of grace. A real glint of true light in all the blackness of this poor woman whose daughter is oppressed by a demon.

And so the woman grabs and clutches at the word about Jesus. She holds it firmly in faith. So much so that it begins to direct her every movement. Where is this Jesus? Where can I find Him?

She plies the countryside looking for Him, asking after Him. If only she can have Jesus. Helpless, she seeks Help. Hopeless, she seeks Hope.

That's what faith does. It grasps and clutches at the word about Jesus. Hopeless in sin and death, it finds its hope in Jesus. Helpless against the mad raving of Satan, it finds in Jesus its help. And it seeks Him out and goes wherever He may be found, and whenever.

Parched and half-dead, it resubmerges itself in the life-giving water of Baptism. Hungry and thirsty for righteousness, it eats and drinks what Jesus gives it: His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. And seeing nothing but the blackness of sin, it clings to the light of Jesus' words, "I forgive you all your sins."

Because only Jesus is its Hope. Only Jesus is its Help and Helper.

And so the woman's faith searches.

Now mind you, this isn't a vain search for a vain hope and help. It's a search for her only Hope and her only Help, revealed in God's holy Word: Jesus Christ. The Helper and Hope of sinners. The Helper and Hope of those in Satan's thrall. The Helper and Hope and Life of the dying. And she finds Him.

And in all the confidence faith can muster she runs to Jesus. No note-passing. No entrée or intro requested. She just boldly walks up. You can imagine her elbowing her way through the crowds. Nudging her way into the inner circle of the disciples. And then with every confidence that her faith is not misplaced, she cries from the top of her lungs as her faith has taught her to cry, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! My daughter is severely oppressed by a demon!"

For faith has found its object. And that object is Jesus.

But then...from the brightness of her Hope she's plunged into deeper blackness. Jesus answered her not a word. Maybe He looked at her, startled, when she cried out. Or maybe He was bracing Himself for her approach as she ran up to Him, shouting after Him.

But beyond that, nothing. Pursed lips. A blank stare.

Her hopes were dashed; and her hoped for help was brought to naught.

By Jesus Himself.

Nothing but black.

This is how it must go for faith. This is its great reward. And every true Christian will—mark my words—experience it. The blackness and desperation of prayer seemingly unheard, unanswered. The darkness of hopes dashed. And don't think for a moment that because it hasn't happened to you it won't happen to you. It must. And it will. This is the nature of the whole thing. For Jesus and the faith in Him are a rescue. A rescue from sin and all the havoc that sin brings—horrible guilt; debilitating disease, broken relationships, sufferings beyond what you can bear, struggle and anguish, demons, inescapable death, and finally hell itself.

That's what Jesus rescues you from. And if that's true, you can't kid yourself: that must be your predicament. That must be your plight.

If you don't believe me, stand at the deathbed of any sinner, as I'm privileged so often to do, and you'll quickly realize it: in this world God seems to take away what faith gives. The deathbed robs you of every assurance of God's salvation. The most confident of Christians stares into the face of the certainty of one thing and one thing only: his mortality. And death, aided and abetted by God's silence, tries to strangle the firm "I believe" of earlier life and turn into a whimpering "I sure hope so."

But it's not just your own death that does this. It's the tragedy of human life.

The diagnosis you hoped never to hear.

The king-sized bed slept in alone because the other half of your one flesh has found the love you never gave in the arms of another.

The loneliness that comes at the end of a life of familial neglect.

The raging guilt in the face of its consequences over sin committed and God-given duty shirked.

Nothing but black.

And God has answered you not a word.

So it was for the Syrophenician woman. The blackness of her life. Compounded by the silence of God Himself.

But faith doesn't cling to God's silence. Faith clings to God's speech. God's speech about Jesus Christ. About Jesus Christ who rescues from sin and all its consequences, even death; who rescues from the devil and demons and all the evil they inflict on the crown of His creation.

And so what a relief it must have been! In the blackness and silence of this woman's world there rises a word from the disciples: "Lord, send her away; for she is crying after us."

Now, don't mishear them. They're not copping an attitude here. They're pleading on her behalf. They're saying, "Lord, this woman is clearly miserable. Just cast out the demon. And then send her away."

Here, the disciples themselves step forward in their own faith. And they plead with every certainty they'll be heard. Because unlike the woman who only had a report of the Lord's grace and mercy, they themselves had witnessed it. Faith buttressed by empirical evidence. At a His Word Jesus had used just five loaves and two fishes to feed 5,000 men. And the disciples had taken up twelve baskets of leftover crumbs. And after that the Lord had come to them in their storm-tossed little boat. And He'd done exactly what the Syrophenician woman was asking Him to do. He'd rescued them.

But now the Lord God pits His Word against His Word; His Word against His own merciful works. And against His own Word of His grace and mercy He speaks a horrible thunderous Word: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." A wave that threatens not just to wash over the gunwale of the boat of faith, but to capsize it and bring shipwreck.

This, too, is how faith in Jesus must be rocked. For we live constantly between two words of God. Between the gracious, merciful Word about Christ that is Good News. And the thunderous, destructive Word of the Law. Between a Word that says we stand outside of grace and beyond redemption and that makes us unworthy. And a Word that promises that only the unworthy are truly worthy; that only the unredeemed can be redeemed; that only those who do not have favor of God can receive His favor.

And grasping at that last word the woman persists. Faith persists. "Lord, help me," she cries. She calls Jesus a Helper and a Friend.

But behold! Her Friend becomes her adversary.

Her Helper becomes her destroyer.

God becomes her enemy.

And now the only word He has for her is this: "It's not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."

A Word worse than His silence.

Nothing but black.

Has God become *your* enemy?

Then take heart. And look at what faith does. Where God speaks curse in thunder, faith says, "But You promised."

Faith is so certain of God's promises in Christ that even when Christ Himself speaks against them, faith will not be moved. And it says, "If I must be a dog to have This One as my Master, then let me be a dog. And if crumbs it must be, then let it be crumbs."

Because even then, faith has Jesus as its Rock and Anchor and Master. Even then, faith has food from the Master's table. Even then, in the midst of all the blackness, there is light. The light of a gracious Master who doesn't sweep up the crumbs before the little dogs can lick them up. The forgiveness of sins is the forgiveness of sins whether it comes on a silver platter or gets lapped up from the floor. And the promises of God in Christ are more firm and certain than whatever life throws your way. The friendship of Christ more firm and certain than His enmity. The light of Christ brighter than your greatest darkness. And Christ's Help greater than the greatest depth of plight.

Amen.

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