

SERMON: Reach Out  
TEXT: Mark 5:21-43

6-27-21

Her name is Jane Marczewski, but professionally she's known as *Nightbirde* (with an e). I recently learned about her from a friend who posted a video on Facebook about her audition with *America's Got Talent*. In her interview with the judges, she revealed - in a very poised and calm demeanor - that she has cancer in her lungs, spine, and liver. She later revealed that she has been given a 2% chance of survival. *Nightbirde* is just 30 years old, but she looks about 17. This is her third bout with cancer.

Before she sang, the panel asked if she had anyone with her. Usually there's a whole cheering section of family and friends when contestants appear on the show. But, to add insult to injury, after five years of marriage her husband had left her. "No, it's just me," she answered. Then she quickly added, "But it's okay." *It's okay* is the title of the original song that she sang.

That she was alone is - to me - the saddest part of her story. The most beautiful part is how she decided to call herself, *Nightbirde*. She revealed that she had the same dream multiple nights in a row where birds were singing outside her bedroom window in the dark. While the first two times were, in fact, dreams, the

third time ended up being real. "The birds were singing as if it was morning but there was really no sign of the light yet," she noted. "And I wanted to embody that. Being somebody that could sing through a dark time because I was so full of hope and assurance that there would be a morning."

One contemporary Bible scholar would call this "audacious hope," and would probably include Nightbirde in the same category with Jairus and the unnamed woman from Mark, Chapter 5. He defines "audacious hope" as **not** reasonable hope. Not the kind of hope that rests on a pretty good chance that it will be fulfilled. "It is hope that has exhausted all other options. It is hope when there is no good reason to hope." (Allen Verhey, *Feasting on the Gospels: Mark*, as referred to by Rachel Young, *Looking into the Lectionary - A Markan Sandwich*, June 21, 2021, The Presbyterian Outlook)

No one would have ever expected Jairus and the woman to be placed in any category together, because they were from two different worlds. But on that day when Jesus was by the sea teaching a large crowd, Jairus and the woman had at least one thing in common. They were desperate.

First, Mark tells us about Jairus. He was a leader of the synagogue - a person of great authority and honor in Jewish society. For him to honor Jesus by *falling at*

*his feet and begging* is quite remarkable. Certainly it caused a stir in the crowd, if not outright disdain for this leader's willingness to publicly debase himself in this way. I wonder if they felt differently when they heard Jairus tell Jesus that his daughter was near death. I wonder if they felt compassion when they heard Jairus beg, "Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live."

Jesus began to go with Jairus, "and a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him." I'm imagining the kind of crowd you find at a parade or a sports arena or a concert. The kind of crowd where you have to hold on to the person you're with so as not to be separated. The kind of crowd that you can't wait to escape because claustrophobia is threatening to overwhelm you. There is no such thing as personal space, and social distancing is non-existent. Everybody's touching everybody.

And there was this woman - unnamed, of course - in the midst of that crowd. She does not belong there because she is considered ritually unclean, as she has suffered with chronic hemorrhaging for twelve years. And anyone she touches also becomes unclean. But she is invisible, especially in this crowd. She doesn't need to debase herself; she is already the lowest of the low. Poor, unclean, and a woman.

But she cares enough for herself to REACH OUT to touch Jesus. “If I touch his clothes, I will be made well.”

It’s no surprise to anyone familiar with Jesus, to learn that he felt some healing power go forth. He knew that someone touched him in hopes of being healed. And the woman knew immediately that she had been healed. So, when he asked, “Who touched my clothes?” she made herself known. She “came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth.” Then Jesus called her “daughter,” and said, “Your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.”

In the meantime, Jairus’ daughter had died. People came from his home to report to him. And they told Jairus that there was no point in having Jesus come.

The people in the crowd no doubt were wondering whether the interruption from this unclean woman - and the resulting delay of Jesus’ arrival at Jairus’ house - was to be blamed for the death of the religious leader’s daughter. Certainly, the needs of Jairus and his daughter should have taken priority over this woman, who basically stole a blessing from Jesus. But, as usual, Jesus saw things differently.

Both the woman and the child were important. In fact, Jesus insisted on going with Jairus to his home. He explained that the child was merely sleeping. And he took her by the hand and told her to get up.

The point in having one story sandwiched in the middle of the other, is to show that the woman and Jairus are not as different as they seem. Jairus is male, privileged, important, and respected, the woman is female, destitute, unworthy, and unclean.

But they both took great risk in reaching out to Jesus, in their desperation for healing. Jairus humbled himself publicly, basically admitting that Jesus was a higher authority and more powerful than he. And the woman risked everything to secretly join with that crowd and touch the robe of Jesus.

One commentary looks at these healing stories in the context of prayer. “Prayer is not simply a matter of bending the vector of divine will toward my will, my needs, and my hopes. More profoundly, to ask something of God is to edge into deeper relationship with God. God’s mind may or may not be changed, but I - my mind and heart - may be.” (Michael L. Lindvall, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 3, p. 192)

Jane - that young woman who calls herself Nightbirde - also has a blog where she has written about her cancer journey. In one installment, she wrote this: “After the doctor told me I was dying, and after the man I married said he didn’t love me anymore, I chased a miracle in California and sixteen weeks later, I got it. The cancer was gone. But when my brain caught up with it all, something broke. I later found out that all the tragedy at once had caused a physical head trauma, and my brain was sending false signals of excruciating pain and panic....The bathroom floor became my place to hide, where I could scream and be ugly; where I could sob and spit and eventually doze off, happy to be asleep, even with my head on the toilet....Even on days when I’m not so sick, sometimes I go lay on the [bathroom] mat in the afternoon light to listen for [God]. I know it sounds crazy, and I can’t really explain it, but God is in there—even now. I have heard it said that some people can’t see God because they won’t look low enough, and it’s true....If you can’t see [God], look lower. God is on the bathroom floor.”

She has a powerful story and a powerful faith. Through all of her trials and all of her pain, she continues to REACH OUT to God.

I was struck by something I heard recently about Michelangelo's paintings in the Sistine Chapel. Part of that massive work is known as “God giving life to

Adam.” It’s the part where the arm of God is reaching out to the arm of Adam. Someone saw a small detail in that painting and interpreted it as an important depiction of humanity’s relationship to God. What they noticed was that God’s arm reaches out as far as it can, fingers pointing straight out to touch Adam. But Adam’s hand is rather limp and seems relaxed or even weak.

There is a lot of truth in that interpretation. God does everything in God’s power to REACH OUT to humanity to give us life, and hope, and peace, and presence. Sadly, we tend to grow tired, or weak, or distracted, or doubtful, or self-important, or greedy, or... pick your own adjective. We don’t do as much as we can to REACH OUT to God.

No matter what our station in life, we all need healing, we all need help. God is within reach. May we REACH OUT to the glory of God!

AMEN.