December 1, 2024
Sermon Title: Hidden Hope
Scripture: Matthew 9:18-26
Theme: Your hope is greater than your hopelessness. Let your hope win. Feed your hope

“A leader of the synagogue knelt before him; come and lay your hand on her and she will live…. and suddenly a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his coat, saying to herself, ‘if only I touch his cloak, I will be made well… and Jesus responded, ‘Take heart, daughter, your faith has made you well.’ (v18-21)

**[1]** The prophet Isaiah utters the most hopeless of expressions we can ever say when he declares “No one calls on your name or strives to find you today, for you have hidden your face and have given us over to our sins (Is. 64:7).” I can think of
nothing more hopeless than the Lord turning away from us and leaving us to sit
alone in the prisons of our own making, in the hard places that result from our
selfish and misguided actions. Nothing makes us despair like a silent God,
watching from a distance when we stew in our own juice. But Isaiah does not leave
us sitting in this place without hope; these are not the last words spoken by the
prophet in this place. “Since ancient times, no ear has ever heard, no eye ever seen,
any God besides you; we have never seen or heard of any other god acting on
behalf of those who wait patiently for justice. You have truly done awesome things
we did not expect; the mountains have trembled before you in your coming (Is.
64:1-9).”

**[3]** Jesus has just finished one of his rarely-recorded teaching sessions with the
disciples of John the Baptist. They have been comparing themselves to the
disciples of Jesus, irritated that they are asked to fast quite frequently, but the
Jesus’ disciples do not seem to ever engage in fasting. Jesus has responded that
while he is alive, his disciples are expected to celebrate and not to grieve, but when
he takes leave of them, they will then fast in their grieving. One might say, it is
difficult to be hopeful and hopeless at the same time. It is difficult to fit hope into
hopelessness or to fit hopelessness into hope; the shapes just do not mix. It is like
putting new wine into old wineskins—it just does not work, says Jesus. One must
put hopeful wine into hopeful wineskins.

**[4]** At just this point, a ruler in the synagogue comes up to this teaching session where Jesus has been teaching the disciples of John the Baptist. [Matthew does not give his name, but Luke calls him Jairus (Lk 8:41) and tells us that she is his only
daughter. Both Mark and Luke tell us that she was about twelve years old and has
not died yet, but she is at the point of death.] Kneeling down (*proskuneó*) before
Jesus, this ruler surrenders his precedence and authority, yielding to Jesus. The
Greek verb “to kneel” comes from the verb “to kiss the ground,” and carries the
meaning that one falls-down on one’s knees in the “kissing-ground” between
yourself and Jesus. It is an expression of adoring Christ through obedience. The primary ruler of the synagogue enters the kissing-ground, the adoration ground,
before Jesus, asking the deepest of questions in his grief: “My daughter has just
died; come now and lay hands on her, and I know that she will yet live again.” The
ruler is placing all his grief into one basket of hope; tears of sorrow and of joy mix
together as he enters the kissing-ground between himself and Jesus. He is, at once,
experiencing hopelessness at his daughter’s death and hopefulness at the prospect
of Jesus’ power to give her life again. He sincerely believes that if Jesus merely
touches her body, she will live again, but his unbelief is tearing frantically at his
heart strings. And so, he does the unthinkable, he enters the kissing-ground before
Jesus and kneels. We might say that at this point in the story, he no longer has a
hidden hope but a public one. He puts all his hope into the Man of Hope even
while hopelessness is clawing at his spirit to take him down. As soon as he rises,
and Jesus turns to follow him, along with the disciples, another story intervenes in
**[5]** the main story. A woman in the crowd has overheard the conversation, and
desperately wants in on the healing action, without waiting her place in line. She
probably thinks that if Jesus leaves, he may never come her way again. She is
twelve-years desperate (Haimorroeó), the Gospel says. She has been waiting
longer than anyone else in that place, so she naturally thinks she should get
precedence with Jesus over the ruler of the synagogue. She has just heard the words: ‘If you touch my daughter, I know she will live.’ What if … , she reasons
quickly, what if I merely touch the ‘fringe of his outer garment (*kráspedon)*?’ The
same principle should apply, shouldn’t it? Surely, it’s the same thing as touching
him, or rather the same thing as Jesus touching me. What have I got to lose?
It’s a natural thought, isn’t it? I can take the healing intention away from Jesus and
incorporate it myself. I can touch the fringe of the cloak and get the same result,
without Jesus ever knowing. I can remain anonymous and still get satisfaction and
closure for the needs of my suffering. That is one way to see it, I suppose. But, you

know, Jesus does not seem to punish her in any way for her assumptions. ‘Take
heart, daughter, your faith has made you well.’ Jesus knows she has touched him.
Jesus knows she has tried to remain anonymous in doing so. Jesus knows she is
trying to take some of the power away from him without letting him know, without
him being any of the wiser for it (cf. Luke 8:40-48; Mark 5:21-33). Luke informs
us that the woman confesses to her hope, “that she could no longer keep her hope
hidden,” but came to Jesus trembling in the presence of all the people why she had
touched him (Lk. 8:47).”

Yet, in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus does not hesitate in his healing response, not even
a moment. ‘Take heart, daughter, your faith has made you well.’ It is a
characteristic response. We hear this response more than once over the course of his journey. Your hope is greater than your hopelessness. Let your hope win. Feed
your hope, starve your hopelessness.

**[6]** And Jesus immediately continues his journey to the ruler’s home. The crowd is
making a big commotion. There are flute players leading the crowd. This must be
surprising to most readers today. Why in the world would there be a celebrating
crowd in front of the ruler’s house just hours after his daughter died? Parades with
pipers and minstrels were used to inaugurate new kings, but we would not expect
the same with funerals, or even with those gathering to help a family mourn a
child. The ruler’s daughter had been dead just long enough for the professionals to
begin to gather to mourn her passing. The use of the flute in mourning the loss of a
child was common, to ease the acuteness of the loss and the melancholy of the
moment. And, in the first century, it was not all that rare for someone to die in their
mid-teens; almost sixty-percent did.

So, these professional mourners and flute-players were on-call as a regular
occurrence; they came as soon as they heard that she was dying, or at the point of
dying. What’s most interesting in this gospel account, however, is that they were
laughing at Jesus for saying that the girl was only sleeping, not dead. They were
laughing in such a way as to dishonor Jesus. They had seen such death before and
were scorning Jesus because they thought he was in denial. In other words, the flute players and the mourners who were creating a commotion in the streets were
purveying hopelessness, not hope. The Man of Hope was bringing hope to the door
of this child, but those marching in the streets outside her home had brought the

finality of despair to her door. Perhaps they had begun assembling even prior to her
death in the effort to get to the door first.

We have learned a lot since the first century. That’s for sure. We know more
about the grief process today. We have learned not to rush the mourning of loved
ones. More than this, we have learned to bring hope, not hopelessness, to the
process of grieving. We have learned to feed our hope and our faith. Mark gives us
the exact words that Jesus spoke to her. It was a colloquial language that the
common people knew (Aramaic), “Talitha cum!” which means: “Little girl, get
up!” It is the language of public hope for everyone to overhear. And she indeed
gets up and joins her family and they give her something to eat to acknowledge
that she is back home again! Jesus restores his honor—the flute players and the
mourners must leave. It is they who have the dishonor and the scorn, not Jesus.
**[7]** We are invited today to confess our hope on this Advent Sunday of Hope. If you but have hope, even the faith of a grain of mustard seed, if you revere Christ as
Lord, always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you … do not
hide your hope, but with gentleness and respect, give reason for the hope that is
within you (1 Peter 3:15). Alleluia! Amen.