

Life NOT Interrupted

A message by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
March 28-29, 2020—Pandemic Closure Week 3

Remember Lent? We're in the church's season called "Lent." It's easy to have forgotten that because of the disruption to our normal lives. Sunday, March 1st and Sunday March 8th were the first two Sundays in this season called Lent that leads to Easter every year. When you were in this church earlier this month, you knew it was Lent because the color purple was prominent. You knew it was Lent because some of the music had a more somber tone.

Perhaps your personal observance of Lent began with attending a favorite local Friday fish fry or starting a discipline of Bible reading or prayer or daily good deeds or something else. As a way of appreciating the sacrifice Jesus made for humankind, maybe you chose to take on the popular tradition of giving up something for Lent. (Who would have imagined that we all would be giving up as much as we are right now?)

So now we're beginning the fifth week out of the six weeks of the season of Lent... except that it doesn't feel like it. We probably don't feel like we're on our usual spiritual journey through Lent because we've been interrupted. We've been interrupted by our unexpected encounter with a viral pandemic.

I hope you'll take time today to read a story about Jesus interrupted. I like the version found in Mark Chapter 5 the best.

One day when Jesus stepped out of a boat on the Sea of Galilee's western shore, among the crowd eagerly awaiting the teacher's arrival was a man named Jairus. Jairus was a leader of the local synagogue. He said to Jesus, "My little girl is dying," then pleaded for Jesus to come to his home. So they set out.

As they walked, the crowd followed. Some wanted to hear Jesus teach the scriptures. Some wanted to ask him questions. Some wanted to follow him as a disciple. Some wanted him to heal their body or mind or spirit.

In the crowd was a woman afflicted with chronic bleeding. For twelve years she'd spent all she had seeking the help of physicians but none could help her. When she heard Jesus was coming, she resolved to get near him. She said to herself, "Even if I can just touch the hem of his robe, I know he will heal me." And that's what happened. When her hand touched his garment, immediately the bleeding stopped and within her she felt a profound sense of healing.

Jesus, too, immediately felt power going out from him. Jesus stopped right there and said, "Who just touched me?" His disciples laughed. They said, "In the press of this crowd around us, you want to know who touched you??" But Jesus continued to look around him, and the woman made herself known to Jesus. "It was me," she said, and she told him the whole story. Jesus blessed her for her courageous faith.

But wait. Let's remember why Jesus was walking: he was going with Jairus to see his daughter who was dying. Jesus had spent precious time searching for who touched him, talking with the woman, blessing her and resuming his walk. By this time messengers from the home of Jairus came and said to their master, "Sir, we're sorry, but you needn't bother the teacher any longer. Your daughter has died."

Overhearing them, Jesus told Jairus, "Don't be afraid, be a believer. Let's keep going." He told the crowd not to follow and took only Peter and the brothers James and John to Jairus' house. Shortly they arrived at the home, and already family and friends and some nosy neighbors had assembled outside, wailing and weeping as was the custom.

Jesus said to them, “Why the confusion? Why these tears? The girl’s not dead; she’s just sleeping.” They didn’t know what to say. Jesus took Jairus and his wife, and Peter, James and John into the house and to the room where the little girl was. Jesus took her hand and said to her, “*Talitha cumi*” which means “Little girl, I tell you to get up!”

...Which she did! She walked around. Jesus said, “Get her something to eat” to prove that they could believe their eyes because, after all, a ghost wouldn’t be able to eat food. She really was alive.

This is one of my favorite Bible stories; sometime you can ask me why. But one curious thing appears only in Mark’s version of this story. After Jesus raises the girl to life, Mark writes (in parentheses!), “The girl was twelve years old.” Why is that little fact pointed out? It seems odd. It’s sort of out of place as the story is being told. Jesus never asked how old she was, as if that would determine whether he would heal her. So why did Mark include that?

As many times as I’ve read and studied this story, it never occurred to me until this week. The girl’s age was... twelve years. The woman healed by touching Jesus’ garment had hemorrhaged for... twelve years. The two stories are connected by that common detail: “twelve years.” Why the connection? I think that was Mark’s way of telling us that Jesus healing the bleeding woman was *not an interruption* to what Jesus had set out to do; healing the bleeding woman was just as important as healing the dying girl.

These days the restrictions we’re living under feel a lot like interruptions in what we thought we would be doing right now:

- Maybe we thought we’d still be on campus with our classmates;
- Maybe we thought we’d be gathering with family and friends at pubs or theatres or concert halls or sports venues;
- Maybe we thought we’d be wrapping up the third quarter of the school year;
- Maybe we thought we’d be amid our usual workload at the factory or office;
- Maybe we thought we’d be preparing for a Spring Break getaway trip;
- Maybe we thought we’d be making restaurant reservations for Easter brunch;
- Maybe we thought we’d be well into our observance of the season of Lent, and preparing for Holy Week’s meaningful and memorable observances of Palm Sunday and Maundy Thursday and Good Friday and, of course, Easter.

Just about every part of life right now feels like it’s been interrupted by cancelled activities and the ban on gatherings. But view it differently. What if we see the period of this public health emergency not as an interruption to our lives, but as a unique season of opportunity within our lives?

As we all strive to keep ourselves and others healthy, this season can provide us with special opportunities. Yes, you finally have the time to clean out that junk drawer. But what else might this season offer you?

- Time to connect with your own family and dear ones, whether in person or at a distance...
- Time to reflect on what gives you joy and purpose rather than what merely fills your calendar...
- Time to open your spirit to God’s guidance showing you how you can use your talents, your money, your time, your influence to bring healing and hope to people who are hurting or disadvantaged....

There is a lot we can do with the time that we may find on our hands while we’re urged to “stay at home.” Let’s see this not as an interruption in our lives; this season is a time for us to appreciate why God has given us the lives we enjoy.