

Out of the Trenches
by Tracey Alfred

I have often heard the expression you'll never find an atheist in a foxhole. That is to say that when someone is facing the possibility of death, there are few who will truly believe there is no God. I have never spent time in a foxhole, but I have spent quite a bit of time in hospitals as a pastoral care giver. I have observed that the foxhole statement is also true in times of health crisis and death. There are few who do not look up for answers when they find themselves flat on their backs. Today's text is a miracle narrative dealing with this very faith phenomenon. The great news of this Gospel text is Jesus' reaction to their desperation.

The chapters preceding Mark 5 deal primarily with early ministry events like the first healing, calling of disciples, and the reactions of the crowd to Jesus' early teaching. Chapter 5 delves into specific miracles of Jesus. It is important to remember that in Mark there is special consideration given to the faith of the nonapostles. Often in Mark the twelve disciples are the last to understand Jesus' words or actions. Instead, there are ordinary believers whose faith sets them apart. Jesus often uses these examples of faith as teachable moments for his disciples and his critics. Today's text deals with two examples of faith—individuals whose perhaps desperation-driven faith

teaches an important lesson about Jesus. After delivering the demon-possessed man, Jesus crosses to the other side of the lake where a large crowd has gathered. There he is approached by a synagogue leader, Jairus, who humbly approaches Jesus, falls at his feet, and begs Jesus to come and heal his ailing daughter. From scripture, we well know that synagogue leaders were not often followers of Jesus, yet the desperation of this father led him to approach Jesus for healing.

Jesus is filled with compassion and agrees to go to the man's daughter. At the possibility of witnessing a miracle, the already assembled crowd presses on with Jesus and Jairus as they journey the street toward Jairus's home. The crowd must be so large and the street so narrow that they are practically arm-to-arm as they move. In the midst of that crowd a woman approaches and reaches to touch Jesus. This woman was also motivated to seek him through desperation, as she had been bleeding for twelve years—a condition causing not only physical suffering but also spiritual suffering as a Jew. She presumably cannot even get close enough to speak to him, but believes correctly that she may be healed if she can merely touch him. Even with the crowd so close, Jesus realized that he had been touched, and stopped to acknowledge her. Just as he finished speaking with the woman, some men came from Jairus's house reporting that the girl had died. Against the

suggestion of these men, Jesus urges Jairus not to be afraid but to continue to believe. Upon entering the room with the girl's parents and the inner circle of the disciples, Jesus commands that the girl get up and she does.

Both Jairus and the nameless bleeding woman are desperate. Jairus feels the desperation of a parent losing a child and consequently is willing to do whatever it takes to restore her health. The woman feels the desperation of someone experiencing a chronic debilitating health problem and reaches to perhaps the last one that might provide her relief. Both reach out to Jesus in utter faith that Jesus is the answer to their desperate situations. Their faithfulness is particularly outstanding as told by Mark, since Jesus' own disciples and friends struggle to believe. I think that the most significant theological lesson to be learned from this text deals with Jesus' reaction to Jairus and the woman. In both situations, Jesus does more than heal. Jesus demonstrates that he is more than a magician or miracle man. Jesus acts out of his compassion. He embraces and blesses the individuals for their faith. He feels their desperation and demonstrates that his healing is more than physical. It is more than a magical or medicinal touch; it is a life-changing encounter.

We do not know the rest of the story for Jairus and the woman, but in most cases in the Gospels, those who experienced Jesus in this way became lifelong followers.

Some of us might find ourselves in actual foxholes (and God bless those who do)! Most of us will not. All of us, however, will find ourselves in a desperate situation at least once in our lives.

Hopefully, this will not be when we reach for God for the first time. If it is, this text promises that God will respond to our touch. This text also promises that whenever we reach for Jesus, Christ will respond with compassion and understanding. We are not alone. We are not untouchable in our grief and suffering. We are not beyond hope. Jesus will always respond to our touch and cry for help. All we must remember is that Christ is there for us to call, whether we're in a foxhole, a physical crisis, or just need a touch from the Master.

Let us pray...

God of hope,

you are ruler of night as well as day,

guardian of those who wander in the shadows.

Be new light and life

for those who live in the darkness of despair,

for prisoners of guilt and grief,

for victims of fantasy and depression,

that even where death's cold grip tightens,

we may know the power of the one

who conquered fear and death. Amen.