

I speak to you in the name of our Creator, the Risen Christ and the Holy Spirit, the one who heals, restores, and transforms us. Amen.

Today's readings may seem disconnected, but they do have a common theme: the courage to trust God's invitation when the future cannot yet be seen. Abram leaves everything familiar for a land God will show him. Matthew rises from his tax booth and follows Jesus without knowing where that road will lead. The woman with the hemorrhage reaches out in hope after twelve years of disappointment. The leader of the synagogue dares to believe that even death does not have the final word. Paul reflects on Abraham's faith as "hoping against hope," stating that it was reckoned to him as righteousness. Isn't that an odd phrase? Reckoned to him as righteousness. Abraham believes God's promise, and God counts that faithful response as righteousness. James Dunn states that Abraham's faith being "reckoned as righteousness" means that God recognizes Abraham as a covenant member before circumcision and before Torah observance. In other words, righteousness can be understood relationally. Abraham is rightly aligned with God because he trusts God. Paul's point is that Gentiles can belong to God's people in the same way Abraham did: through faith rather than ethnic boundary markers.

I love the line from Genesis, "So Abram went, as the Lord had told him." Just like that! Just pack up everything and start walking. God speaks. Abram listens. Abram goes. No map is provided. No itinerary is outlined. No guarantees are offered beyond a promise. God simply says, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." (Gen 12:1) And Abram goes. When we read this story, we already know how it turns out. We know

Abram will become Abraham. We know nations will emerge from his descendants. We know that through his family line the blessing of God will flow into the world. But Abram only has the promise, "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing." (Gen 12:2)

Perhaps that's why Paul reflects on Abraham centuries later and describes him as "hoping against hope." What a beautiful phrase! Not hoping because everything looks promising. Not hoping because the evidence is overwhelming or even evident for that matter! But hoping against hope. Hoping when the future remains hidden. Hope in the face of overwhelming evidence. Hoping because God's promise is larger than present reality. I suspect many of us know something about hoping against hope. Perhaps we hope for healing. Maybe we hope for reconciliation; or we hope for peace in a troubled world. Perhaps we hope for renewal in the church. Or maybe we simply hope for meaning in a time of great uncertainty. Many of us carry hopes that have waited a very long time. Abraham certainly did. The woman in today's gospel certainly did.

For twelve years she had been suffering from a flow of blood. Twelve years. Twelve years of physical suffering. Twelve years of disappointment. Twelve years of unanswered prayers. Twelve years of isolation. And here it's helpful to pause and understand something about her situation. According to the purity laws of Israel, a continual flow of blood rendered a person ritually impure. Ritual impurity was not a moral failure. It was not a sin. It was not evidence that God had rejected someone. It was a normal part of life in ancient Israel's and modern Judaism's understanding of ritual purity. But it did have social consequences. Those who were ritually impure often found themselves excluded from aspects of communal and religious life. And this woman had lived with that burden for twelve years.

Imagine the loneliness. Imagine the exhaustion. Imagine the grief. Yet she continues to hope. And so she presses through the crowd saying to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well." (Matt 9:21) There is something profoundly courageous about that sentence. She doesn't possess certainty. She possesses hope. Hope against hope.

And then there is the leader whose daughter has died. The leader doesn't say she is dying. She is not still alive and close to death. He says, "My daughter has just died, but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live." (Matt 9:18) What kind of hope speaks those words? What kind of faith kneels before Jesus when death has already arrived? Hope against hope. Again and again these readings invite us into that place where faith is born. Not in certainty or control, but in trust. Trust that God's future may be larger than what we can presently see. Maybe even **infinitely** more than we can ask or imagine!

In today's gospel Jesus encounters two forms of ritual impurity. The woman with the flow of blood. And the dead child. Both situations carried significant ritual implications. Contact with blood or the dead would render a person ritually impure. Ordinarily impurity flowed outward. Touch something impure and you become impure. That's the expectation. That's how ritual impurity works. But something remarkable happens whenever Jesus encounters impurity. The expected direction is reversed. Instead of impurity flowing into Jesus, healing flows out from Jesus. Instead of uncleanness spreading, restoration spreads. Instead of death overcoming life, life overcomes death. Jesus repeatedly comes into contact with ritual impurity. He touches a person with leprosy. A woman with a hemorrhage touches him. He takes a dead girl by the hand. And every time the same thing happens. Jesus is not contaminated. The person is transformed. The flow moves in the opposite direction.

The healing and cleansing power of the Holy Spirit flows from Jesus into the afflicted person. Life moves toward death. Wholeness moves toward brokenness. Purity moves toward impurity. And transformation occurs. This beloved community is the heart of God.

Many people imagine holiness as something fragile. Something that must be protected from contamination. Something that withdraws from brokenness. Something that keeps its distance from suffering. But that's not what we see in Jesus. The holiness of Jesus is not fragile. It is powerful. It's compassionate. It's all encompassing. It moves toward human pain rather than away from it. Jesus doesn't stand at a safe distance from suffering. He enters it. He touches it. He embraces it. And in doing so he transforms it. This is why Jesus says, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." Mercy is not merely kindness. Mercy is God's movement toward human need. Mercy is God's refusal to abandon people in their suffering. Mercy is God's determination to restore what has been wounded. Again and again, Jesus chooses mercy. Mercy over exclusion. Mercy over judgment. Mercy over boundary maintenance. Mercy over religious performance.

This doesn't mean holiness disappears. It means holiness is expressed through restoration rather than separation. The holiness of God is not revealed by avoiding wounded people. The holiness of God is revealed by healing wounded people. And that changes everything. Because most of us know what it feels like to carry something we wish we didn't carry. Grief, fear, shame, regret, loneliness, loss, disappointment. Many people quietly assume that these burdens somehow place distance between themselves and God. Yet the gospel tells a different story. The woman reaches out in her vulnerability. The grieving father kneels in his desperation. Matthew, rejected by his fellow Jews, rises from a tax booth carrying

all the complications of his past. And Jesus moves toward every one of them. This is the good news. Every place where suffering appears becomes a place where grace begins to work. Many of us spend enormous energy trying to appear strong. Trying to appear successful. Looking like we've got it all together. Does that sound familiar? Yet the gospel repeatedly shows that God's transforming work often begins in places of vulnerability. The woman receives healing because she reaches out in her desperation. The young girl is not brought back to life because her father understands how resurrection works. She rises from the dead because her father comes to Jesus. And Abraham doesn't receive the promise because he has certainty about the future. He receives the promise because he trusts enough to take the next step. Our text tells us that Abram journeyed on by stages. I like that. Like the 12 Steps say, one day at a time.

I don't know about you, but I like a good plan! I want to know where I am going and how I'm going to get there. Phil and I have travelled all over the world in the 40 years of our marriage and we extensively researched every single journey. Often, we didn't know where we would be staying or have booked all our travel, but we knew what all our options were. The guide books *The Lonely Planet* were our constant companions and sources of many a daydream. While I won't say that God told us to go to any, or at least not many of the places we've been, I will say that God journeyed with us every stage, every step. We trusted that God was with us. Not necessarily protecting us from all harm, (although I'm really sure that's what my parents were praying for!) but that somehow, we would encounter God in the people we met and in the wonders of his creation. There were times when we got sick and needed God's healing. We received it. There were a couple of times we were so sick, we felt like we were nigh unto death, yet God brought us back to

the land of the living. There were times when we arrived late at night with no place to stay and yet we found lodging. One time we arrived in a small town in Germany with enough money for food and a roof over our head for three days with no work lined up. Two days later we had both! We worked in a hotel for 6 months which gave us a decent wage and a room. We spent our 1st anniversary there and are returning to that same town for our 40th. You may think we were brave and had awesome faith, but I'll tell you something, it's so much easier to trust in God when you are living day to day, not sure of your next meal or room, than it is in our capitalist consumer society. Once we got a mortgage and good paying jobs, we got caught up in the drive to do better, get promotions, and buy more stuff. Then when the challenge came for me to resign my executive position and go to seminary we couldn't see how we could possibly do it! How could we possibly survive without my salary? It took over three years and a near physical collapse for me to resign. And I still didn't immediately think, now's my time for seminary. It didn't even enter my mind. All I could think of was getting more credentials to get a better job. We had strayed so far from our early years and that simple trust in God! It was only after a forced sabbatical to regain my health and months of spiritual direction and a practice of centering prayer that I was able to hear the sweet voice of the Holy Spirit as she whispered to me, hey how about seminary now? That started a process of letting go of the drive for a great job, status, and all that goes with it. And once we knew we would be leaving Canada for 4 years we started to seriously downsize and every item that left the house felt like an additional weight lifted from our shoulders. By the time we left all we had fit into a 4x8 storage unit. We felt like we used to in the early years of our marriage. Ready and willing to trust that God would provide. One of the vows we take as members of the Emmaus Community is simplicity. It was easy to do when we returned because we were starting with so

little. We have felt so free the past 10 years. Free of the incessant drive to get ahead, free of the fear of financial instability and insecurity, free to trust in God and his steadfast love and mercy.

Our psalmist today proclaims that God loves righteousness and justice and that the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord. The whole earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord. This promise is as true today as it was then. The God who called Abraham, healed the woman, and took a little girl by the hand is still at work. Still healing. Still restoring. Still transforming. Still calling us forward.

And so, like Abraham, may we find the courage to go.

Like the woman, may we find the courage to reach out.

Like the grieving father, may we find the courage to hope against hope.

And may we discover, again and again, that the steadfast love of the Lord is already present in every place to which God calls us.

Amen.