

Believing Life
John 4:46-54
May 29, 2022
First Presbyterian, Luling

This sermon comes with an advance warning that I'm probably going to make myself cry. Locate the nearest Kleenex box; mine is right here.

I've been a mess this week. I know most of you have, too. We listened to one of our own share just last Sunday his heartbreak and pain twenty eight years after his son was killed. And now too many families in Uvalde know that same heartbreak and pain. We are also heartbroken and hurting and angry, though in a different way.

The events of this week have hit us especially hard, though. It happened in a small town, not unlike our own. Most of us are connected to children in our own families. Many of us worked in and with schools. The people we see on the news and the accents we hear as they speak, look and sound like our own neighbors, and that all makes it seem closer, even more immediate as we think "It could have been our school, our children, our teachers, our neighbors and family and friends." Our feelings are real, and there's no need to disregard or discount or swallow back our own tears because others are in far worse pain. It is natural to be horrified beyond words at such a tragedy. I would be worried about us if we were not appalled and angry and sad.

I had chosen this week's scripture reading on Monday. I'd even sent it to David and said to him, "I'm not sure where I'm going with this." I know he just loves it when I say that. This passage is not ever in the lectionary. I was flipping back from where we read last week and saw this story and found it intriguing. By Tuesday evening, I was ready to get rid of it and start over. What kind of insensitive clod of a preacher would read a story about a child being healed and saved from death in a week like this? Well, this clod of a preacher, apparently. A lifetime of being Presbyterian, three years of seminary, and twenty two more of practice, have anchored me in the belief that sermons start in Scripture, not in what happened this week or how we feel about it. Scripture speaks to our lives, of course, and a sermon that doesn't make that connection is fairly useless.

So we turn to the Gospel of John. Jesus returns to Cana of Galilee, where he turned water into wine with such ridiculous abundance, that John proclaims it the first sign. Today's story is the second sign of seven in John. A royal official from Capernaum, 25 miles away, hears that Jesus is in Cana and comes to him to beg

him to save his son. The little boy was “at the point of death.”

Jesus does not respond in exactly the way the father might have hoped. What he says, in our translation, is “Unless you—and that’s plural, so unless y’all—see signs and wonders, y’all will not believe.” One scholar I read thought it might be more like Jesus saying to the father, “I wonder what it will take for you to believe? Will it be signs and wonders, like all the rest?” And we’ve said before that “believing” in John especially is more of a “trusting,” more of an action. So Jesus wants the official to trust and put his faith in Jesus, without signs and wonders.

The man, the father, just wants Jesus to save his son from death. We have heard those pleas this week, and we can imagine all too clearly how desperate the father sounded. “Come,” he says, “Before my little boy dies.”

Jesus doesn’t accompany him back to Capernaum. He tells him to go, that his son lives. It’s not future tense, like our translation makes it sound, but present. Your son lives. Go home. There’s no guarantee. There’s no verification that the son has been saved. There’s just the promise.

John tells us the official believed Jesus and heads back home. On his way, his servants come to meet him and tell him that his son lives, in the same words that Jesus had used. They compare notes, and the son’s fever had broken at the same time Jesus had said “Your son lives” the day before. The official then believes, trusts, has faith, as does his entire household, and this is the second sign.

That father has to turn around and go back home, without any evidence, on the strength of a promise, and trust and believe that things will turn out as he hopes.

In Uvalde this week, some families received that same promise: your child lives. And yet the children and the families, and the whole community, will never be the same. Nineteen families did not hear those words. They will never be ok.

I think I can speak for all of us to say that as the week has progressed, things have not turned out as we had hoped, in any way. It’s more and more horrifying each day. We search out and plead with Jesus, please save our children from death, because we can’t summon what it takes to keep them safe.

We can be sad. We can be scared. We can be mad. We can feel things that sermon-appropriate words can’t express. We can feel things that are beyond words at all. That father was probably feeling many of those same emotions, as Jesus sent him back home. Why wouldn’t Jesus just heal his son? Why wouldn’t Jesus come with him? Why was he left alone, to hold onto hope by himself?

“Your son lives.” And that life was a sign of Jesus’s power, and that life brought belief in Jesus to the whole household. And that’s hard to hear this week. It’s hard to hold onto that, when “your child has died” has filled our ears and eyes and hearts and souls and won’t let go.

We, together, dwell in the same place as that father as he turns to go back home. We beg Jesus to save our children, to save us from ourselves. We hear Jesus’s promise that there is life, life abundant he calls it. We turn and head towards wherever it is that we are called to be. We somehow trust in Jesus’s promise of life; we somehow hold onto a what feels like a foolish and precarious hope; we somehow put one foot in front of the other; we somehow manage to pray that we are drawing ever closer to the fulfillment of the promise.

Wherever we are on that road back to home, we aren’t there yet. That much is clear. We haven’t yet encountered our folks, running out to meet us to tell us everything is fine. We haven’t yet verified for ourselves that our hope was not foolish. We have no evidence that the promise was true. We have no assurance that children live abundantly and without fear. We’re trudging our way back, holding onto the promise of life with all the hope and faith we can muster. We’re trudging our way back, trusting in the one who gives us that faith and makes us that promise and gives us the breath of life.

That road back feels long. And so for today, I’m thankful to have **us**, trudging together, crying together, trusting together in life.