

“God Of Lost Causes”

Dr. D. Jay Losher

1 July 2018 + Gaithersburg Presbyterian Church

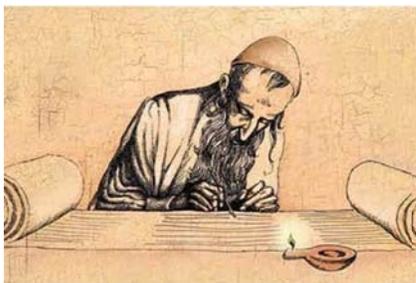
2 Samuel 1:17-21 + Mark 5:21-23, 35-43 = Trust, Miracles

As a boy Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel was interned in Auschwitz and Buchenwald death camps. One of the most prolific writers among holocaust survivors, Wiesel has written an incredible number of books on maintaining faith in the midst of overwhelming destruction and against the odds.



Wiesel has pointed out that his people prayed for release during the holocaust, and the prayers were not answered. Jews in the

1400's prayed for release from the ghettos of Europe and those prayers too remained unanswered. The prayers of the Jews were unanswered during the persecutions of the 1100's. Unanswered as well during the genocide of Jews by the First Century Romans, and unanswered during exile in the centuries before the Common Era. These were all lost causes if there ever were lost causes.



Most all of Wiesel's books explore how Judaism can maintain itself when its history is one filled with the suffering of innocents. Wiesel offers a solution in *Four Hasidic Masters*. Pinhas of Koretz, medieval rabbi instructs a young student on many things. As his final instruction, he says:

a good religious story “is not about miracles, but about friendship and hope ~ the greatest miracle of all.”

Not so much about deliverance, but maintaining hope in the face of unanswered prayer, faith in the midst of lost causes.

Last week we talked about how God's grace often runs counter to the odds. This Sunday we have a corollary to that: If God's actions run counter to the odds, then our God is God of lost causes.



Today we take up lost causes. Our texts this week represent 3 lost causes: 1) David's lamentation for the death of Saul and Jonathan; 2) Jairus' dead daughter; and (though we did not include the text from 2 Corinthians 8 in our readings) #3) represents Paul's collection for the relief of the Jerusalem church. All represent long odds, lost causes, yet God intervenes in each of these three. We could add many, many more lost causes from Scripture.

In our Samuel lost cause, David should be celebrating victory over Saul, yet instead David raises his deep lamentation over the death of Saul and Jonathan. David is finally king in Israel, but it is a bittersweet victory, a celebration filled with regret and grief:

“Your glory, O Israel, lies slain upon your high places! How the mighty have fallen!”



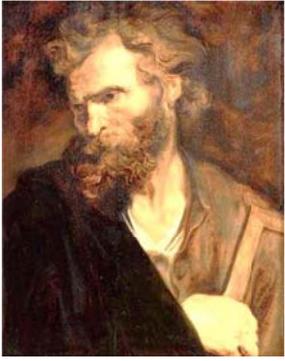
The people of Israel had demanded a king. Saul had been chosen, but as God predicted, his reign had been rough, his rule had turned tyrannical, and his regnum ended in civil war. Saul's soul had been lost in the process.

David had served Saul, had married one of Saul's daughters, was like a brother to Jonathan. David took no pleasure in their deaths. David raised his lamentation for Saul's lost cause, and expressed his deep grief over the defeat implicit in victory. Saul was laid to rest in loss and disgrace, buried along with his son Jonathan, his line ended forever.

Saul's cause had become a tragic lost cause. Nevertheless, our God is God of lost causes, and Yahweh, the God of Israel, snatched victory from the jaws of defeat. After Israel's devastating civil war, a greater king, a better king comes to power.

Susan when travelling in Europe came across an altar to St. Jude and found it covered with notes, offerings and with many brightly burning votive candles, all indicating quite a great number of petitioners. For you see St. Jude is the patron saint of lost causes in the Catholic hierarchy. Even though Protestants don't assign saints any particular powers, we can still be instructed and led by St. Jude.





No one actually knows how Jude became associated with lost causes because there is nothing out of the ordinary about his cause. Jude was a cousin of Jesus and his cause was preaching the Gospel. He is said to have healed a king of leprosy using a cloth with the impression of Christ's face on it, and he is the patron saint of the Armenian Orthodox Church having planted the Good News there.

About the only other item known about Jude's life is that he was bludgeoned to death by a crowd while preaching in Persia, that is modern Iran. Perhaps lost causes were assigned to Jude not because he was victorious in his cause, but because he was victorious in sustaining faith, hope, and courage in the face of the lostness of his cause.

Our Gospel text represents yet another lost cause. Asked to heal the sick, Jesus ends up doing an even greater work, raising the dead. Maybe the word came too late. Maybe he was delayed getting there as he had to stop to heal the woman with a hemorrhage. Maybe all that was God's plan from the beginning, yet Jairus' daughter died before Jesus could arrive.



The odds of healing her, so desperately ill, were long, but once dead, the odds lengthened to infinity. No one could return life to the dead. Our God truly is God of lost causes.

Jairus gave up hope, but Jesus said to him: **"Do not fear, only believe."** Jesus took only Peter, James and John, Jairus and his wife. Jesus went into the death chamber, took the child by the hand and said simply **"little girl, come out."** Miraculously she got up and walked, alive and well.

**"DO NOT FEAR,
ONLY BELIEVE."**

But let's be careful. God doesn't take up all lost causes. Remember from last week that God is only on our side as far as we are on God's side. There are many lost causes which God rightly ignores.



The great "lost cause" in American history is Southern independence. A century and a half after the Southern defeat in the Civil War, the persistence of the

great lost cause can be found even today in the politics of segregation, Jim Crow, redlining and “states’ rights.”

Having grown up and lived in Texas the majority of my life, the dream of an independent Republic of Texas is still alive and well and raises its siren sweet but toxic voice almost every election cycle. Voices defending Confederate monuments keep this cause alive, but it is a lost cause. And I am afraid to say, it is a cause for which God is not prepared to intervene.

I have been known to take up a hopeless cause or two. Legislative initiatives I took up in Texas in the 1970’s such as immigration reform and farm workers’ rights are still largely unadvanced. Some others have made some real progress. Through it all, faith in Jesus has sustained hope against hope, sustained faith against overwhelming odds.



Our God is truly God of lost causes. Our Catholic brothers and sisters have a patron saint of lost causes, St. Jude. Our Jewish brothers and sisters have sustained hope and faith through 3,000 years filled with innocent suffering.

Always remember: in the face of lost causes all around us, in the face of overwhelming odds, the most durable task, the most honorable task is sustaining hope, the greatest virtue is love, the greatest miracle is faith.

