Sunday, February 2, 2025

First Lesson: Mark 8:22-26

Gospel Lesson: Luke 4:21–30

Sermon Series: Revitalize: Faith

Preacher: Kirstie J. Engel

* Beloved Community, we are here today with heavy hearts, mourning the tragic events that have recently unfolded with the fatal airplane crashes in Philadelphia and Washington DC area. On January 29, 2025, a catastrophic mid-air collision occurred over the Potomac River near Washington, D.C. An American Airlines flight, en route to Reagan National Airport, collided with a U.S. Army Black Hawk helicopter, resulting in the loss of all 67 individuals on board both aircraft.
* Among those we lost was Kiah Duggins, a remarkable young woman whom I had the privilege to serve as her associate pastor roughly 15 years ago; a dynamic woman whose life was a testament to grace, intelligence, and dedication. At just 30 years old, Kiah had achieved more than many do in a lifetime. She was a Harvard Law School graduate, a civil rights attorney, and was set to begin her role as an associate professor at Howard University. Her commitment to justice was evident in her work with the Civil Rights Corps, where she litigated cases on unconstitutional policing and bail practices. Beyond her professional achievements, Kiah was a talented dancer, a two-time Miss Kansas pageant contestant, and a compassionate soul who founded a food and personal hygiene bank for students during her college years.
* In addition to Kiah, the crash claimed the lives of many others, including world-champion figure skaters Evgenia Shishkova and Vadim Naumov, several young figure skaters and their families, and dedicated professionals and individuals who contributed significantly to their communities and were deeply loved and cherished by their family and friends.
* In times like these, when the weight of sorrow blurs our vision, we must seek to revitalize our faith. How do we find clarity and hope amidst such profound loss?
* **Biblical Exegesis: Mark 8:22-26**
* In the Gospel of Mark, we encounter the story of Jesus healing a blind man at Bethsaida. This miracle is unique in that it occurs in stages. Initially, after Jesus' first touch, the man gains partial sight, seeing people who appear as "trees walking." It is only after Jesus lays hands on him again that the man sees everything clearly.
* This gradual healing reflects our own spiritual journeys. There are moments when our understanding is incomplete, when grief and confusion cloud our perception. Yet, Jesus remains with us, guiding us toward clarity and renewed faith. Our faith is not always instantaneously complete; it often develops progressively, especially through trials and tribulations.
* **Historical Exegesis: Luke 4:21-30**
* In Luke's Gospel, Jesus returns to Nazareth and reads from the scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue, proclaiming the fulfillment of this scripture. Initially, the congregation speaks well of Him, but as Jesus challenges their preconceived notions and highlights God's grace extending beyond Israel, their admiration turns to hostility. Their familiarity with Jesus as "Joseph's son" blinds them to His true identity and mission.
* This passage serves as a caution against allowing our expectations and limited perspectives to hinder our faith. True faith requires openness to God's expansive and sometimes surprising plans. It calls us to move beyond comfort zones, embracing a trust that transcends our understanding.
* **Honoring Kiah Duggins**
* Kiah embodied a faith that was active and transformative. Her dedication to civil rights showcased her commitment to justice and equality. Her artistic expression through dance revealed a soul attuned to beauty and storytelling. Her academic pursuits and community service highlighted a life devoted to uplifting others.
* In her final days, Kiah spent time with her family, attending church and supporting her mother through surgery. Her life was a testament to love in action, a beacon of light in a world often shadowed by injustice.
* **Faith in the Midst of Tragedy**
* The recent tragedies challenge us deeply. The sudden loss of lives, including Kiah's, confronts us with the fragility of existence. Yet, it is in these moments that our faith is called to be resilient. We are reminded that, like the blind man of Bethsaida, our journey toward spiritual clarity is ongoing. We may not understand the reasons behind such events, but we can trust in God's unwavering presence.
* **Lincoln First: Being the Light**
* As a community, how can we honor humanity as a whole and revitalize our faith?
* **Seek Deeper Understanding**: Engage in prayer, study, and reflection to allow God to continually open our eyes to His purposes, especially during times of sorrow.
* **Emulate people such as Kiah's Commitment**: Advocate for justice, serve those in need, and use our talents to bring beauty and hope into the world.
* **Embrace an Expansive Faith**: Be open to God's leading, even when it challenges our preconceptions or requires us to step into the unknown.
* **Conclusion: Seeing Beyond the Blur**
* Today, we grieve, but we also believe. We grieve, but we also move forward. Faith for me has become seeing beyond the blur. It is seeing beyond sorrow, beyond loss, beyond confusion. It is seeing God’s presence even when the way ahead is unclear.
* Faith for me has become seeing beyond the blur of heartbreak, beyond the blur of unanswered questions, beyond the blur of deep, unshakable grief. Faith is trusting that Jesus is still here, still touching us, still bringing clarity, still guiding us toward hope.
* Faith for me has become seeing beyond the blur of tragedy and stepping into the light of God's love. Faith is knowing that even when the world seems dim, God is still illuminating our path. Faith is knowing that even when we struggle to see clearly, God is still moving.
* Faith for me has become seeing beyond the blur—beyond the uncertainty, beyond the limitations of this world, beyond all that seeks to cloud our hope. And in seeing beyond, we find new vision, new courage, and new strength to carry on.
* May we trust in the One who brings clarity, may we believe in the One who leads us through the haze, and may we go forth seeing beyond the blur, with hearts full of faith and eyes open to God’s ever-present light. Amen.