

Luke 7:11 Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. 12 As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. 13 When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep." 14 Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" 15 The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. 16 Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has risen among us!" and "God has looked favorably on his people!" 17 This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.

THE ROAD TO ZAREPHATH

The background for today's lesson is found in our lectionary lesson from the Old Testament. Many of you are familiar with the story. King Ahab married a Gentile woman named Jezebel. And with that marriage came the introduction of foreign gods into the nation of Israel. Instead of worshipping the one true God, they began to worship false gods like Baal and Asherah.

The great prophet Elijah confronted the evil King Ahab and said, “There’s going to be a terrible famine and drought in the land because you have caused Israel to worship foreign gods.”

When you tell the king bad news its time to hit the road, and, led by the Spirit, Elijah did just that. The Bible tells us that the Lord protected the prophet. The prophet drank from the brook and the Lord fed him from the mouth of ravens for a long time as he successfully hid from the wrath of Ahab.

But, eventually the drought grew worse, the brook dried up and the Lord told Elijah to move on down the road to Zarephath.

In that place a widow would supply his needs. That was a rather odd statement since widows had a hard time taking care of their own needs ... much less anyone else’s needs.

There was something else odd about this. Zarephath was deep in Gentile country, not eight miles from where Queen Jezebel’s hometown.

But, Elijah went to Zarephath, and there he found the widow.

But, as we might expect it didn't look like she could supply his needs or even her own needs. In this time of famine she only had enough flour and water for one last meal before she and her son would settle down to die.

The prophet told her that if she would bake him a small cake before she fed herself and her son God would supply all that she needed throughout the famine. Eventually she trusted in the word of the prophet, and God provided what they needed. Every day there was enough food for Elijah and her family.

But, then tragedy struck. The widow's son died. In her pain she asked Elijah, "What did you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?"

This is an ancient story but I recognize this response to death. When someone dies the universal feeling is one of guilt. What could I have done to prevent this? Is God punishing me?

Elijah answers her anguish by saying, "Give me your son." He took her son to the upper room where was staying, laid the child on the bed and cried to God, "O Lord my God, have you brought tragedy also upon this widow ... by causing her son to die?"

Notice that this is not a cry of faith, but an expression of doubt. Despite all the ways God had protected Elijah in the past, in the face of death he too sounded a note of despair.

Three times Elijah stretched out over the dead boy and cried to God, “Let this boy’s life return to him!” The Lord heard Elijah’s cry, and it happened. The boy’s life returned to him. Elijah picked up the child, gave him to his mother and said, “Look, your son is alive.”

No wonder Elijah was known as the greatest of the Old Testament prophets. Through him God did many mighty works.

Elijah did not die. He was taken up into heaven by the Lord, and Elisha, his understudy reluctantly had to take up the mantle of leadership. People thought that Elijah would return again from heaven to herald the coming of the Messiah.

ELIJAH IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

And yet, this story of miraculous provision and resurrection was not popular with everyone. You may remember that Jesus mentioned this widow of Zarephath in his first sermon in Nazareth.

Jesus used the widow as an illustration of the fact that God's grace often goes beyond our home and our country. Jesus said that in Elijah's time there was a severe famine throughout the land yet Elijah was not sent to a widow in Israel. Elijah was sent to a widow in Zarephath.

Do you know how they responded to that sermon? They tried to kill him. And so Jesus wasn't able to do many miracles among his own people. They wouldn't accept him.

But, everywhere else Jesus went there were many miracles. Jesus not only said what only God could say; Jesus also did what only God could do. People wanted to know: Is Jesus the Messiah? Could he be more than a Messiah?

So, when Jesus made his way toward the little town of Nain he had quite a following. There was a huge crowd that made their way toward the town that day.

And there was a crowd coming out of the town as well. But, this was not a crowd of excited disciples. This was a crowd of mourners.

Another widow's son had died, and it was indeed a tragedy. It was her only son, and that young man was the only thing that stood between her and a life of poverty. Without a man in the family to protect you and inherit the family fortune, a woman was very vulnerable indeed.

So two crowds ran into each other that day, a crowd that mourned a death and a crowd that was excited by hope.

Not too many years ago when we came upon a funeral procession we would pull our car off to the side of the road out of respect. And you would think that Jesus and his crowd would do something similar. But, it didn't happen that way.

Instead Jesus headed directly toward the funeral bier. Let me paint the picture for you.

In those days funerals were not the sedate affairs that we have today. There was loud mourning. In fact some people actually hired themselves out as professional mourners. Sometimes there were flutes that played a mournful tune amid the shrieking of those who decried the loss of life. A bier was like a wooden stretcher, and the deceased was wrapped in perfumed clothes and carried on that stretcher.

Once again Jesus does what no one expects him to do. He steps right into the middle of these mourners. Jesus looks upon the poor widow with compassion. Actually the Greek word is much stronger. Jesus had a “gut reaction” to this tragedy. His stomach turned, and his heart was broken.

DON'T CRY

And Jesus told the widow. “Don’t cry.”

Now that’s something you don’t hear much at a funeral. Not many of us have the temerity to tell the relatives of the deceased “Don’t cry.” We say just the opposite. We say it’s okay to cry. It’s good to cry. Don’t hold it in.

But, Jesus says, “Don’t cry.”

I think everyone stopped and looked at Jesus in a moment of stunned silence. The Scripture tells us that those who carried the bier stopped, and Jesus reached out and touched the bier.

That alone was shocking and would have perhaps rendered Jesus ritually unclean. But, Jesus did even more; he talked to the dead man as if he were alive.

Jesus said, “Young man ... get up.” And he did. He got up and started talking.

I wonder if the people who witnessed this miracle remembered how long ago Elijah had raised the widow’s son. But, this miracle was even more powerful.

Jesus did not plead for a miracle. Jesus commanded the dead man to get up. And just like the prophet Elijah had done years before Jesus gave this resurrected son back to his mother.

And unlike Elijah’s miracle that took place in a foreign land and was witnessed by only a few people, this miracle occurred before two large crowds. One crowd was following Jesus, and one crowd was going to a funeral.

But when Jesus raised the dead woman’s son the two crowds became one. They were filled with a holy fear and began to praise God saying,

“A great prophet has risen among us.”

The Bible tells us that the word about Jesus spread like wildfire.

THE RESPONSE OF THOSE WHO HEARD THE STORY

I wonder how those who heard this story responded. Some would no doubt be encouraged by the possibility that God had raised up a new prophet in the land.

Some would want some more proof. They would want to come and interview the eyewitnesses, and talk to the mother and the son. Was he really dead? Did this miracle really happen?

Some would scoff at the story. This is just an exaggeration. They would say, “Dead men don’t rise up from the funeral bier on the way to the cemetery. This story is wishful thinking.”

And we know how the religious and the political leaders would respond to this news. They responded with fear. They didn’t care one bit if this was true or not. They didn’t care about the widow and her son.

They were worried about the political implications. They were worried all these crowds that were following Jesus. Recent history had proved to them that “Messiahs” and “prophets” always caused

trouble for their country. They wanted no part of this miracle worker. (See John 11:45-50)

What about you? How do you respond to this story? As Christians we believe that God was in Christ. And so, in this story we see a human picture of God.

WHAT THIS TEACHES US ABOUT GOD

What does that mean to you? What does this story teach you about the nature of God? What does this story teach you about life and death?

Let me suggest some ideas.

First, in Christ we once again see the compassion of God. Jesus had compassion for the widow who lost her son. It was a heart breaking, gut wrenching experience for Jesus.

God cares about the pain in our life. God cares about our loss. God feels for us; God feels with us.

This story does not suggest a God who is above and beyond the pain of our world. This story suggests a God who is with us in our pain.

Second, this story teaches us that God can deliver us from death. The crowd going to the funeral runs into Jesus and a crowd that is going somewhere else. When we run into Jesus and His people we begin to see the world in a radically different way.

Strictly speaking we don't have funeral services in the Presbyterian Church. We have what we call a "witness to the resurrection." There's a world of difference.

We know that Jesus can even touch the funeral bier; Jesus can even touch the coffin. When everyone seems to have given up hope we run into someone in the graveyard who brings hope.

That someone in the graveyard is named Jesus, and he doesn't come alone. The Bible tells us that there is a great cloud of witnesses who testify to the power of this Savior, and that power is never more evident than in our hour of greatest need. (Hebrews 12:1-3)

Third, this story teaches us that this story is good news the world wants to hear. Yes, there will be those who scoff and those who will think that it is God's job to take away all our pain instead of being with us in our pain.

But, there are many more who will receive the good news of resurrection gladly.

Such news can still spread like wildfire. The power of God is in this news, and it is our job to keep on spreading the news.

There is a mighty Savior in our land, and even the final enemy, even death is no match for Him. He touches us where no one else can touch us. He saves us where no other salvation is possible.

FOCUSING ON DEATH

We say that we believe that, but sometimes our actions say something else. Instead of talking about resurrection power, we talk about human possibility. Instead of talking about the inevitable pull of death, we immerse ourselves in work.

A Christian counselor that I respect very much, a Southern Baptist by the name of Wayne Oates once wrote a book entitled, “Confessions of a Workaholic.”

Why do some people work compulsively, sometimes abandoning family and friends? Oates says that the root cause is a fear of our own finitude. We don't

want to consider the reality of our own demise and so we fill our lives with work in order to try and forget it.

Contrast that with what the Bible has to say on the subject. The Bible tells us that we should “number our days” that we might get a “heart of wisdom.” (Psalm 90)

In the book of James we are reminded that it is presumptuous to make too many plans for the future. Our life is like a vapor, as mist that is here one moment and gone the next. James advises us to say, “If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.”

Death was certainly no stranger in the church down through the ages. For example, Christians in the early church often saw it as an honor to be martyred for the faith.

John Wesley bragged about the early Methodists. He said, “Our people know how to die well.” Christians of that era joyfully recorded and even created magazines to publish accounts of the good death.

Why do you think so many of our older churches are located in the middle of graveyards? Worshippers in

those old churches had to walk by many graves in order to get through the church door. In those days the church felt that they had the responsibility to keep death ever before us.

One Christian author of the Renaissance era wrote, “He who would teach men [and women] to die, will at the same time teach them how to live.” (Michael Montaigne)

Richard Baxter wrote in the 1600s, I preach as a dying man to dying men [and women].” He even had that put on his tombstone.

Baxter thought it was imperative that young ministers meditate upon their own mortality and the mortality of their listeners to battle against the tendency of some young preachers to preach in what he called a “schoolboy monotone.”

When I was younger I thought all this talk of death was a bit morbid. But, oddly enough I have come to embrace these words. Our own mortality puts everything in perspective.

Today I do indeed preach as a dying man to dying men and women.

Our worries about the future are useless because only God holds the future. And sometimes our obsession with work or play or security is nothing more than a desire to ignore the obvious fact.

We are mortal. No matter how hard we work we cannot guarantee the future.

But, suppose on the way the graveyard we ran into someone who holds the future, not just our future but also the future of all creation.

In the film, Schindler's List, Oscar Schindler is distraught by the fact that he couldn't save more Jews. And some Jews, who are there reply,

“There is a saying in the Talmud: ‘He who saves one life, saves the world entire.’”

Our lesson for today is more than just the story of a miracle long ago. It is a story about how God in Christ saves the world. It is a harbinger of eternal hope.

It's been a long time since Easter when the church was full both services and the glory of the resurrection hung in the air.

But, today as we gather in a combined service in the heat of the summer, we learn that Jesus is not only the one who rises from the dead; Jesus is also the one who raises the dead ... just by showing up.

AN IMAGE OF MOURNING TURNED TO JOY

Let me leave you with an image of what today's lesson is all about.

Have you seen those New Orleans jazz funerals?

The brass band begins its solemn procession at the church, playing hymns like "Just a Closer Walk with Thee." There is no improvisation and no frills. Nothing but sadness blown low and blue to the beat of a muted snare drum.

But, once the procession arrives at the cemetery, the final words are spoken, and the body is lowered into the ground, the mood shifts.

Brightly colored umbrellas burst open. The snare drummer removes his mute, and the procession heads back into town to the strains of "Didn't he Ramble?" and "When the Saints Go Marching In."

Folks who head the somber hymns earlier in the day wait for the procession's return because they know a celebration's coming. And no one wants to miss the funeral celebration.

When the somber tones blow in our life remember the celebration that's coming. Remember and trust in what our confessions teach, "in life and in death we belong to God."

Amen.