

Luke 7:11-17

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.

## A FUNERAL INTERRUPTED

Have you ever been to a funeral that was interrupted? I have on several occasions.

Some of the interruptions have been minor. Cell phones go off during a prayer. That sort of thing is expected these days I guess. But, some of the interruptions are major.

I did a funeral in this church for a man who was active in the civil rights movement. The church was packed.

One of his friends arrived late and in so doing had missed the opportunity to give a eulogy. So, before the final hymn he shouted out, "Pastor Allen, can I please say something?"

He did and so did about 10 more people. The best laid plans of mice and preachers oft goes astray. A funeral was interrupted.

But, the most dramatic interruption of a funeral came at one I attended. The pastor who officiated at this service was new to the area, and this funeral was his first act of pastoral care in his new church.

He got the name of the deceased wrong. Not only did he get the name wrong he kept using the wrong name in a way that suggested he knew the deceased.

The normally mild mannered family was becoming more and more upset. Finally, they began to shout at the pastor in one voice,

“Her name was Jane!”

I felt horrible. I felt bad for the family. I felt bad for the minister. I felt bad for the congregation.

And to this day when I officiate at a funeral I have a sticky note in my service book with the name of the deceased prominently printed on it. I never want a funeral interrupted in this way!

## COMFORT IN CUSTOMS

In fact none of us want a funeral to be interrupted.

During a time of grief I think we find comfort in the familiar. The funeral customs of a society help us deal with our sorrow, at least to a certain extent.

At a time when we don't know what to do or what to say, we just go through the routine prescribed by our faith community. We sing the familiar hymns and say the familiar words.

And we don't want that routine interrupted. Funerals are not supposed to be interrupted. The same was true in Jesus' day.

Of course, the funeral customs in the ancient world were very different.

The body was buried right away. For reasons of religion and public health the body was carried out of town on a bier. To this day there are a series of caves outside of the town of Nain that are used for burial.

According to Barclay this bier was kind of like a large wicker basket on poles. Those who bore the bier and those who prepared the body for burial would be ritually unclean for several days.

Everyone else kept his or her distance when it came to the corpse.

Often professional mourners were hired. Their shrill wails expressed the grief of the bereaved.

If a person was important, the crowds would be greater, and more paid mourners would be hired.

Today we still see similar processions in the Middle East and in other parts of the world.

Undoubtedly if we went to a funeral like this it would seem very odd. But, the intent of those rituals was the same as the funeral rituals that we follow.

These prescribed routines provided stability in an inherently unstable situation. People knew what to expect.

### DEATH UNEXPECTED

Of course we don't really know what to expect in life do we? Often death intrudes in an especially unexpected and tragic way.

In those cases the outpouring of public sympathy can be greater.

For example, when a policeman or a fireman is killed in the line of duty, streets are blocked off and prominent people make speeches.

I've done funerals for very young people who were killed in car accidents. The attendance at those funerals is usually quite large.

And there is always the feeling that it shouldn't happen this way.

It shouldn't. But, sometimes it does.

This was the situation in Nain long ago. A young man had died.

That was tragic enough. But, the tragedy was made worse by the fact that this young man was the only son of a widow.

We've talked about this many times before. In the ancient world women had no rights.

They could not testify in court. They could not own property. This widow was totally dependent upon her son for protection and support.

And now he was gone.

The Bible tells us that a great crowd came out to support this widow.

And they were on their way out of town with the body of her only son.

### A SHOCKING INTERRUPTION

But, the funeral procession is interrupted.

Jesus has a large crowd of his own. I can almost envision a traffic jam at the city gate.

Now the usual thing to do, the respectful thing to do would be for Jesus to have his folks step aside and let the funeral procession through.

That's what we used to do in my hometown. When a funeral procession would come by we would pull off to the side of the road out of respect.

Jesus doesn't do that. Instead, Jesus does something that is unexpected and shocking.

First, he tells the widow to quit crying!

And then he goes over to the dead body and touches the funeral bier.

He touches what no one wants to touch.

The Bible tells us that those who carried the bier, the wicker basket that contains the body stand still. And I think that probably everyone else also stands still and stares at Jesus in stunned silence.

The wails of the professional mourners no longer fill the air. Time seems to stand still. For what seemed like an eternity there was no sound but the whistling of the desert wind.

Jesus had once again broken a sacred tradition. This time he has even interrupted a funeral. Who has the nerve to tell a widow to quit crying at her only son's funeral and then throw up a roadblock for the funeral procession?

Pretend you don't know how this story ends.

How would you feel about Jesus telling the widow not to cry and then touching what no one was supposed to touch?

You would be shocked.

You would be angry.

You wouldn't know what to think or say.

You would stand still.

COMPASSION

But, we have an advantage.

We do know how the story ends. And we do know why Jesus does this. Jesus does this out of compassion.

The word translated “compassion” is a very strong word. We might say that Jesus had a gut reaction to the grief of this widow. And this was his motivation for interrupting the funeral.

No one asked Jesus to stop this funeral procession. The widow didn’t ask Jesus for help. It was too late for help. The young man was dead.

You can slow down a funeral procession but in the end you can’t really stop it.

That’s what the people believed. That’s what we all believe.

But, in this story we get a different viewpoint.

Funerals can be interrupted by the grace of God as revealed in Jesus.

In Jesus we get a human picture of what God is like.

God cares about tragedy. God has compassion on his people. God sees the widow of Nain and wants to do something.

#### THE ETERNAL WORD

So, God in Christ interrupts a funeral and changes it into a celebration.

The Bible tells us that after Jesus told the widow not to cry and touched the bier stopping everyone in his or her tracks, Jesus talked to the dead man.

Jesus said, “Young man, I say to you arise.”

And he did. The dead man sat up and began to speak.

And Jesus gave him to his mother.

Now that was a funeral interrupted.

How did the people respond? Oh, they were afraid. Specifically, the Bible tells us that “fear seized them”.

There were stories about the dead being raised in the Hebrew Scriptures. Elijah and Elisha two great prophets of old had raised the dead sons of widows.

But, those were stories written long ago. This was here and now. It was unexpected. It was absolutely terrifying.

Should we expect anything less from the God who created heaven and earth? Compassion and creative power are bound together in a Word that can even raise the dead.

There could be no doubt. God was in Christ.

In addition to being seized with fear the people were seized with the conviction that God was with them in a new and different way. They spread the message far and wide: "A great prophet has risen among us. God has looked favorably upon his people."

## A SIGN

I guess when you come right down to it I really haven't seen a funeral interrupted. A few have been delayed, but none have been interrupted.

But, long ago God in Christ did interrupt a funeral.

So, what does that mean to us today?

The miracles of Jesus are always a sign of something greater. They are a reminder of God's blessings in the past and a harbinger of blessings yet to come.

The miracles reveal that God was in Christ. He is the Messiah, the Son of God and in Jesus the prophecies are fulfilled.

In the passage that follows this some disciples of John the Baptist come and ask a question of Jesus on John's behalf. They ask, "Are you the one (the Messiah) or should we expect another?"

And Jesus answers, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them."

The miracles are about more than just the good fortune of those who were healed by Jesus. They are signs of the kingdom that comes.

Yes, the funeral was interrupted in Nain long ago. But, in the final analysis we have to say that the funeral was just delayed. There would be many funerals in that family in the days to come.

The young man who was given back to his mother would still die one day in the future. In that sense the miracle was just a resuscitation and not a resurrection.

But, it was a sign pointing to resurrection, a sign of that promised day when God will wipe away every tear and sorrow and pain will be things of the past.

That's why Jesus' answer was of such comfort to John the Baptist. John would lose his life in service to God, but he knew the truth about Jesus.

A new day was coming. The final enemy, death would be defeated. With Jesus the funeral would truly be interrupted. He would rise to die no more, the first fruits of those who would live forever.

#### HOPE IN THE HEALER

When I pray with someone in the hospital, I always pray that God would heal him or her. But, I always qualify that request.

I say, "Heal them as a sign of your coming kingdom in which there will be no more suffering or pain."

I do believe that people are still healed by the power of God. But, healing is always temporary. That healing is but a sign of the kingdom that comes.

In our lives the funeral may be delayed, but only God in Christ can interrupt the funeral procession forever. We may receive our loved one back for a while or like John the Baptist we might just receive the promise of the kingdom that comes.

But, our hope is not in the healing. Our hope is in the healer.

The most significant thing about this story is not the miracle ... as great as it is. The most significant thing about this story is the fact that Jesus sees the great sorrow of the woman and has compassion on her.

The widow does not see Jesus. But, Jesus sees her. And that makes all the difference.

Why is this so important?

Well, if we believe that God was in Christ, then this story tells us something about God.

God sees our pain. God sees our sorrow. God has compassion on us.

We may not see Jesus. But, Jesus sees us. Jesus is with us. Jesus is for us.

#### WHEN THE SAINTS GO MARCHING IN

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 “When the Saints Go Marching In.”

Folks who heard 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 is coming. We may not see Jesus, but Jesus sees us.

And one day the funeral procession will be interrupted ... forever.

The eternal Word will call us home.

Amen.