

The Prophet

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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.

THE REPORTS OF MY DEATH

I received an email from Columbia Seminary with some sad news. Georgianna Brabbham had died. I went to school with her and was saddened to learn of the news.

But, the next day I got another email from my seminary.

Georgianna Brabbham had not died as was previously reported in the alumni newsletter.

She is alive and well and is working as a pastoral counselor. "We're very sorry for this mistake."

I bet they were.

When you make a mistake about who's living and who's dead that can cause quite a problem.

It was an odd thing.

When I heard that it was a mistake, I was upset that they had made such a careless error.

And yet, at the same time I was quite happy that they got it wrong.

What was that old line attributed to Mark Twain?

"The reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated."

This was certainly true in this case.

I guess you would say that her "death" was due to clerical error.

A TERRIBLE TRAGEDY

But, sadly, most of the time the news is true.

We would like for it to be a mistake.

But, the awful reality cannot be denied.

Our world fades to black, and we make our way to the cemetery.

This was the case with the widow.

Her son was dead, of that there was no doubt.

There was no mistake.

In fact, they were on the way to the graveyard.

And it was a terrible tragedy.

The young man who has died is the only son of a widow.

Women had absolutely no rights in those days.

She had lost her husband and her son.

There was no one to protect her in a man's world.

She was at risk for her very survival.

But, this sad funeral procession was going to experience an unexpected delay.

There was a crowd following Jesus.
And there was a crowd following the funeral procession.

And these two crowds come together at the gate of the city.

When I was growing up, if a funeral procession came by, we pulled off to the side of the road and let it pass out of respect.

Some might have thought that Jesus would have done something similar.

Maybe He would have had his folks step to the side of the road.

And then they would pay their respects as the sad procession passes.

THE SHOCKING TOUCH OF COMPASSION

But, Jesus does something different.

As these two crowds come together, Jesus approaches the widow who has lost her only son, and out of compassion he tells her, "Don't cry."

Then Jesus did something that was even more shocking.
He reaches out and touches the stretcher on which her son was laid.

That was unheard of.
Out of shock those who bear the funeral stretcher stand still.

In those days, people kept death at arm's length.
(We still try to do that to a certain extent.
But, in those days it was even more important.)

Touching death could make you ritually unclean.
And it was actually dangerous.
It could make you sick.
It could kill you.

No one touched the dead.
Out of necessity funerals were held right away.
People were very careful about how they handled the dead.

But, once again Jesus surprises us.
He does not act like everyone else.

He touches the untouchable.
He interrupts the funeral.
And he speaks to the one who cannot hear.

He said to the corpse, "Young man, I say to you, rise!"

WHO IS THIS MAN?

Now let's think about this for a moment.

Jesus stops a funeral procession.
And he tells this widow who has lost her only son to quit crying.

Who tells a widow who has lost her only son not to cry?
Apparently Jesus has not been trained as a Stephen Minister!

And, if that's not strange enough for you, then he tells the dead man to rise.

Who does Jesus think that he is? God? Well ...
His actions would have been absolutely crazy had it not been for one "little"
thing.

The young man gets up.
And he starts talking!

The Bible tells us that the "fear seized all of them."

I would have been afraid too.
We don't expect funerals to be interrupted by a dead man speaking!

The miracles of Jesus create a sense of amazement and hope.

But at the same time, they also create a sense of uncertainty.

Who is this man?

He can even raise the dead!

What does this mean?

THE PROPHET

The fearful crowd suggested an answer.
They said, "A great prophet has risen among us."

There's reason they said that.
Raising the widow's son reminded the people of the prophet Elijah.

He also raised a widow's son from the dead.

But, there was one big difference between those two miracles.

Elijah's miracle was done in private.
Jesus' miracle is very public.

Crowds bear witness to this miracle.
There is no denying what Jesus has done.

Apparently, when Jesus comes to town, anything is possible.

Not only are the sick healed;
Even a dead man can get up and speak at his own funeral!

No wonder the word spread throughout Judea and the whole countryside.

Who can keep a story like this quiet?

When dead men speak, people take notice.
When dead men speak, the world is turned upside down.

Of course, this miracle is not just about the raising of a man long ago. This miracle is a sign of the kingdom that comes.

It is an act of prophecy.

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.

We know exactly what it means.

This miracle in particular foreshadows the death and resurrection of Jesus. But, there’s one big difference between this miracle and the one that comes.

The widow’s son was raised to die again.
Jesus was raised to die no more.

That’s the true meaning of resurrection.

Resurrection is about life that is eternal.
Resurrection is about a new creation.
Resurrection is about being raised to die no more.

Our lesson for today suggests that when Jesus is around, those who are filled with sorrow can catch a glimpse of that hope.

When Jesus is around, those who are filled with sorrow can get a foretaste of the heavenly banquet.

A WITNESS TO THE RESURRECTION

When I do a worship service for a church member who has died, I don’t call it a funeral service.

Nor do I call it a celebration of life.

The title of our worship service for a saint who has joined the church triumphant is:

“A Witness to the Resurrection.”

The title makes a difference.

We believe the theme for our worship service is not primarily sadness or a longing for the past.

The theme of our worship service is prophecy.

We point to the resurrection.

We point to the future, God's future.

With the crowd we say,

"A great prophet has risen among us."

And "God has looked favorably upon His people."

In other words, in a death dealing world God's grace brings life. In world filled with injustice, God brings a "peace that passes all understanding".

This is the theme of our worship at the time of death.

And it is also the theme of every worship service that we do.

Every worship service should be designed to do the same thing. Every worship service should point beyond where we are today to where God is taking us.

Every worship service should point to the eternal.

In worship we look at the world not as it is but the world as it is going to be.

In worship we look up instead of about.

SEIZED WITH FEAR

When we worship we would do well to copy the reaction of the crowd to the raising of the widow's son.

We too need to be "seized with fear."

What does that mean? It means that ...

We need to get a sense that God truly is above and beyond us.

We need to get a sense that with God all things are possible. We need to get a sense of wonder.

We overcome with awe in the presence of the One who created the heavens and the earth.

Down through the years the church has tried to create this sense of awe in many ways.

Great masters have created amazing music.
Great architects have built awe inspiring cathedrals.
Great preachers have preached amazing sermons.

But, in the final analysis none of these things are as important as meeting the Savior who raises the dead.

Let's be clear.
It's not what we do that inspires the holy.
It's what God in Christ does in our own lives.

The one who raises the dead is the one that brings the holy into our lives.

So, let us not confuse the trappings of our worship with the object of our worship.

God was in Christ, and when the Spirit of Christ comes into our lives, the road to death is transformed into the road to life.

The proper response is to be seized with fear, to be overcome by the holy.

SEEING THE FUTURE

What I want for you and what I want for me, more than anything else, is to experience the presence of Christ. I want the death in your life and I want the death in my life to be touched by Jesus.

And when that happens, when we are touched by Jesus, we can no longer look at the world in the same way.

In Jesus we see the future, God's future.

With the crowd that witnessed the miracle long ago we too can say,

"A great prophet has risen among us."

One of the titles given to Jesus in Scripture is prophet.
He is the great prophet.

What does that mean?

The prophet is able to see God's future.
And if you want to see God's future clearly, look to Jesus.

Jesus is Lord.
Jesus is the one who represents the will of God.
Jesus is the way, the truth and the life.

And what is God's will?
What is God's vision for the future?

The crowd has it right once again.
The will of God, God's vision for the future is to look favorably upon His people.

To say it another way, God wants His people to look toward the future through the lens of grace.

We can look forward with confidence to the future because we know that the future is in God's hands.

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. 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 in her grief 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.

WITNESSES TO THE RESURRECTION TODAY

When Jesus interrupted a funeral,
when Jesus showed compassion toward one who suffered,
when Jesus raised the dead,

it was not just about something that happened long ago.
It was the pattern for what God still does here and now.

God in Christ still shows compassion on those who have lost everything.
God in Christ still touches those that the world considers to be untouchable.
God in Christ still offers a future to those who think their world has ended.

That's why we take communion on a regular basis.
It reminds us of this eternal hope.

Christ's body was broken.
Christ's blood was shed.

It looked like the one who raised the dead had been defeated by death.

But, it didn't end that way.

We know.

We are witnesses to the resurrection.

We know that he did for us what we could not do for ourselves.
He touched death, and he overcame it.

And the Bible tells us that this is just the beginning.
This is but a foreshadowing of what is to come.

Jesus is the first fruits of the resurrection that is still to come.

How can we keep quiet about this message?
Like the crowds of old we need to spread the word near and far.

God in Christ has touched death.
And none of us will ever, ever be the same.

Amen.