

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
October 1, 2006
Luke 7:11-17

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

God Has Come to Help His People

1. By sharing our sorrows
2. By conquering our great enemy

NIV **Luke 7:11** *Soon afterward, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him.¹² As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out-- the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her.¹³ When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, "Don't cry."¹⁴ Then he went up and touched the coffin, and those carrying it stood still. He said, "Young man, I say to you, get up!"¹⁵ The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother.¹⁶ They were all filled with awe and praised God. "A great prophet has appeared among us," they said. "God has come to help his people."¹⁷ This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country.*

Fellow believers in Jesus,

When the people of Nain saw Jesus raise a dead man to life, they concluded, "*God has come to help his people.*" Literally, they said, "God has visited his people." This word "visit" is the word James used in his epistle when he said that pure religion manifests itself in such things as *visiting* orphans and widows in their distress. "Visit" in this sense means more than just to pay a call on someone. It means to come with the intention to help. This word "visit" is the one that Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, used when he regained his ability to speak just after John was born. It was a bit late, but he now understood that God was about to intervene in human events in order to save the lost. Zechariah said, "**Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has visited and redeemed his people.**" (Lk. 1:68 ESV) Sadly, not everyone who heard and saw Jesus came to the same conclusion about him that Zechariah did. Jesus used a form of the word "visit" late in his ministry when he spoke about the destruction of Jerusalem and the reason for that destruction, saying, "**They will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation.**" (Lk. 19:44)

Now I don't know if the people of Nain had a full understanding of the person and work of Jesus when they spoke about God visiting them, but they were certainly on the right track. Jesus is God. The Bible says he is the image of the invisible God. To see Jesus is to see the Father. So we learn something about our God as Jesus comes to Nain with the intention of helping on what started out as a very sad day. We learn that God has indeed come to help his people, first, by sharing our sorrows, and, second, by conquering our great enemy.

1. By sharing our sorrows

Luke tells us, “*Soon afterward, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him.*” Nain is about 6 miles southeast of Nazareth, where Jesus grew up. The day before Jesus had healed the servant of a centurion in Capernaum. The servant was near death when Jesus, without even going to see the man, healed him.

But now the stakes rise dramatically. It says, “*As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out—the only son of his mother, and she was a widow.*” It was a funeral procession—and a particularly sad one at that. A young man has died leaving his widowed mother entirely alone. What a contrast between these two processions! The large crowd with Jesus was probably talking happily about Jesus and what they’d seen him do just the day before. The procession coming out of Nain was probably wailing and in other ways expressing their grief. So now the One who has come that we might have life comes face-to-face with death.

We’re not told what this young man died of. Was it some kind of disease? Was he injured in an accident? Did he die suddenly or was he sick for a long time? We don’t know. But in another sense, we do know the cause of his death. It was sin. I don’t mean that we know that some specific sin resulted in his death, but the sin that was in him, that he inherited from his parents, led, as it always does, to physical death. “**The wages of sin is death.**” (Rom. 6:23) We are dust and we will return to dust. Death is the great certainty of life in this fallen world.

But notice that Jesus doesn’t just greet the sight of this funeral procession with a shrug. Death may be a fact of life, but Jesus is still touched by what he sees. Luke tells us that when the Lord saw the grieving mother, “*his heart went out to her and he said, ‘Don’t cry.’*” Just as the Samaritan’s heart went out to the wounded man lying by the side of the road, and as the father’s heart went out to that prodigal son of his when he saw him coming up the driveway, so Jesus’ heart went out to this woman. When you see Jesus stopping to comfort this grieving widow, you learn something valuable about him. He is not one of those narcissistic personalities who’s so busy advancing his own interests that he can’t be touched by the plight of others. Nor is this a calculated act on his part, designed to try to convince the crowd that he’s the kind of guy who feels their pain. He was truly distressed. The book of Hebrews says about Jesus, “**For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin.**” (4:15)

It’s valuable to know this about Jesus. At those times when we are especially aware of our need for his mercy and grace, we should be sure that we can come to him. We can walk right up to our Savior’s throne of grace, as it were, in prayer, and present our requests to him. In one of his psalms, King David encouraged, “**Cast your cares on the LORD and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous fall.**” (55:22) Another psalm reminds us, “**God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.**” (46:1)

But now imagine that this account only shows us Jesus stopping to express his condolences to the mother. If he had merely said, “I’m sorry for your loss,” and urged her to stop crying, and then continued on into town while the funeral procession resumed its slow march to the cemetery, we might conclude that Jesus is thoughtful and compassionate but not more than that. But Jesus does more. He shows his power to conquer our great enemy, death.

2. By conquering our great enemy

After Jesus had spoken to the mother, it says, “*He went up and touched the coffin, and those carrying it stood still.*” This was probably not a coffin with a lid on it, but possibly just a sheet of wood on which the wrapped body of the dead young man was being carried. Maybe you’ve seen something like that in news reports from the Middle East.

When the pallbearers came to a stop, Jesus spoke to the dead man. Just as he would later speak to Lazarus and order him to come forth from the tomb, just as he would later speak to the daughter of Jairus and tell the 12 year-old to get up from her deathbed, so now Jesus tells this young man to get up from his coffin. In each case he speaks to the dead as if they have the power to do something no dead person can do. But he can do that because Jesus provides the power to do what he tells them to do. Jesus always provides us with the power to do what he tells us to do. If he tells us to trust him, he provides the power to do it. If he tells us love each other or to bear persecution patiently, he furnishes the resources we need to do what he tells us to do. And so here, too, Jesus provides the power for this dead young man to suddenly sit up and begin talking. And he gives him back to his mother.

Now this is something you don’t see every day. This would make you listen a little more closely to Jesus, don’t you think? At the very least, you’d have to conclude that a great prophet has appeared in your midst. And maybe you’d think back to that time a little earlier when, just a few miles up the road in Nazareth, Jesus read the scroll of Isaiah about being anointed to preach good news to the poor, and said, “**Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.**” (4:18,21) And in the verses just following this account, John the Baptist, languishing in prison, wants to know, “**Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?**” Jesus’ answer to John’s question was, in part, “**Go back and tell John what you have seen and heard...the dead are raised.**” (7:20,22) Jesus did what he did there at Nain to lead people then and now to the conclusion that he is one to come, the one anointed with the Spirit to preach the good news of freedom for the prisoners and sight for the blind. God’s grace has dawned in the person of Jesus, his one and only Son.

But maybe you’re thinking, “That’s a nice story about raising that dead young man, but why couldn’t Jesus raise my loved one from the dead?” “Why didn’t he stop the funeral coach as my loved one went to the cemetery and raise him/her?” But here’s something to think about. According to the Gospels, Jesus raised people to life just three times (not counting those who were raised to life on Good Friday when Jesus died). In other words, there were thousands and thousands of people who died in Judea and Samaria during Jesus’ public ministry, but as far as we know, Jesus raised only three of them to life. I

think you could conclude from this that Jesus hadn't come to keep people from dying physically. And, even in the cases of the three people he did raise to life, what they got was a temporary reprieve from death. They lived on for a time on this earth, but then they died once again. In fact, you could even argue that coming back to life, was something of a sacrifice for these three, since—if they were believers—coming back to life would have involved having their souls come back from Paradise to be reunited with their bodies.

But in raising these three people to life, Jesus was showing his identity as the Son of God. And he was also demonstrating that he was well able, as the Bible says about him, “**to destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—**” and, ultimately, “**free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.**” (Heb. 2:14-15) To accomplish this, however, it was necessary that Jesus do more than restore a few people to life, however miraculous that was. It was necessary that he share our humanity, that he be like us in every way, that he suffer and be tempted, and that finally he offer his own life to make atonement for the sins of the people. Then, when he himself had risen from the dead, he would really be able to help God's people. It was by his death in our place and by his resurrection that he “**destroy(ed) the shroud that enfolds all peoples and the sheet that covers all nations.**” (Is. 25:7) That is the way he once and for all wipes the tears from our faces and swallows up death forever.

The people of Nain may not have known just how right they were. God *had* come to help his people. He shares our sorrows. The raising of the young man of Nain was a clear indication of it. And there at Nain he served notice to death and to anyone else who cared to pay attention: The last enemy has been defeated. Jesus has brought life and immortality to light. Amen.