

JESUS AT THE FUNERAL IN NAIN

July 29, 2018 – Luke 7:11-17

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It's good to see so many here this morning; I'm glad I took that course in preaching to large crowds.

Today I want to talk about a passage from Luke in which Jesus raises a young man from the dead. It's in Luke 7:11-17. I never would have thought much about this passage if it hadn't shown up in the lectionary for a Sunday I'd volunteered for in June of 2013. After thinking a lot about it and doing research I decided then that I wouldn't be ready by that Sunday, so I turned to another topic. ... I then decided to finish up today. I was still afraid that talking about the passage would be like the pastor in *Beyond the Fringe* who preached on the verse "For my brother Esau is an hairy man, but I am a smooth man." But in looking for something to say I've come around to the view that the story describes an extremely important event in Jesus's ministry – besides, it gives me a chance to share one of my favorite yarns.

Let's take a quick look at what the Bible tells us about Jesus's raising of the dead:

Jesus is reported to have raised three people from the dead (aside from himself). Perhaps the most famous is the story of Lazarus, found only at John 11. You may recall that in that story, which occurred during or near Jesus's last week of his life, news of the death of Jesus's friend Lazarus reaches Jesus and his disciples on their way to Jerusalem. The disciples warn Jesus that if he goes to Lazarus's home he will be in danger from his enemies but he cannot restrain himself. "Our friend Lazarus is fallen asleep; but I go that I may awaken him out of sleep." Reaching Bethany, he finds that Lazarus has been lying in the tomb for four days. The burial is over, but the mourners are still keeping up their dirge, and Jesus is caught up in the emotion of the occasion. "Jesus wept. The Jews therefore said, Behold how he loved

him.” Jesus went to the mouth of the “cave” where Lazarus was laid and asked them to roll away the stone covering the doorway. Martha, one of Lazarus’s sisters, protested that by this time the body would have begun to decompose and stink. But Jesus called out to Lazarus – “Come forth!” And the dead man came forth, bound head and foot in his grave clothes. [One scholar has argued, citing historical cultural records, that the Lazarus story, which occurs only in the Gospel of John, “began as the memory of a ritual and ended as a piece of history.”]

Then there is the daughter of Jairus, in three Gospels - Luke, Matthew and Mark. In Luke, the only Gospel that contains today’s story of the Widow’s son in Nain, the incident with the daughter of Jairus occurs later in Jesus’s ministry than the Nain event, on the same occasion as Jesus’s curing the bleeding woman, which Mary discussed several weeks ago. Jairus, a synagogue leader, pleads with Jesus to come to his house because his twelve-year-old daughter is dying; later, news comes that the daughter has died. But Jesus says to Jairus, “Don’t be afraid, just believe, and she will be healed.” He then enters Jairus’s house with three disciples and the girl’s parents. The people outside are wailing and mourning. Jesus says “Stop wailing, she is not dead but asleep.” They laugh at him because they know that the girl is dead. But he takes her hand and says “My child, get up.” (Interesting aside: In a more formal translation, this is rendered as “Damsel, arise,” which was used as a rallying cry in the formative stages of the early modern feminist movement.) The little girl’s “spirit” returns, and she stands up. In one of the more amusing touches, Jesus then tells the parents to give the girl something to eat. He then orders them not to tell anyone what has happened.

So these are the other two recorded occasions in the Gospels in which Jesus raises someone from the dead -- Lazarus and Jairus’s daughter.

Now let’s go back and take a closer look at the incident at Nain. In thinking about this story, I was struck by three things.

First, I think this was the very first recorded occasion on which Jesus raised someone from the dead. It came before the only other two. In Luke, where our story appears, the resurrection of Jairus's daughter comes after the resurrection of the widow's son in Nain, and of course the raising of Lazarus comes much later, shortly before Jesus's crucifixion. So Jesus had done a lot of miracles, but this was the first big enchilada—not just casting out some demons and generating 5000 fish sandwiches.

Second, notice that here there were large crowds present – not just the crowd following Jesus, but also the crowd in the funeral procession. This contrasts with the stories of Lazarus and Jairus's daughter, where the resurrection occurred in homes with a few witnesses.

Third, notice that, unlike the other two cases, there is no evidence that Jesus and the widow knew each other or even knew about each other. Nor was the widow described as especially devout or morally praiseworthy. Neither she nor anyone else asked Jesus to intervene, and she did nothing to indicate a belief that it would help if he did. So, why did he do what he did? He didn't just go around looking for people to raise from the dead although I suppose that if he'd wanted to he could have retrieved hundreds. You'd think there would have to be something significant to call from him an act as momentous as this. True, we're told that he felt "compassion." The widow was certainly in dire straits, having lost her husband and only son. Luke doesn't say Jesus was informed of these facts, though perhaps he knew them with a special insight. Still, the fact that he intervened in the funeral, unbidden, leads one to wonder whether something more than sudden "compassion" led him on.

Reflection has led me to wonder whether at Nain Jesus actually welcomed, even seized, a chance to raise a person from the dead. After all, he could have just passed by – as we saw, nobody asked him to stop. In any event, regardless of whether Jesus intentionally sought, or at least welcomed, the circumstances that arose in Nain, I have the following takeaways on the importance of this event for Jesus:

(1) Among all his miraculous acts, now for the first time would be added raising people from the dead, an act arguably on a different plane from the cures, exorcisms, and seeming violations of natural law such as walking on water, calming seas, and feeding multitudes. He could, as it were, add a stupendous power to his 'resume'. Thus, in replying soon thereafter (as recounted in Luke 7:18-27, the immediately following passage) to the inquiry from John The Baptist whether he was "The Coming One"), he could now say:

Go and tell John the things you have seen and heard: that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, [and now for the first time] **the dead are raised**, the poor have the gospel preached to them...."

(2) As we read, the crowds who witnessed the revival of the widow's son said "A great prophet has risen up among us'" and "God has visited his people." In this, the witnesses were thinking, among other things, of the story, with which they were all familiar and which we heard in today's Old Testament reading, of the Prophet Elijah who raised the woman's son from the dead. They now spoke of Jesus as a prophet, an agent of God through whom God visited his people.

(3) And then the last sentence of today's reading: "And this report about Him went throughout all Judea and all the surrounding region." The report of a prophet who could raise the dead. "Went throughout all Judea and all the surrounding region." Let me comment further on this third takeaway by sharing a story.

I heard this story told about President Bush. It might have been about any of several other Presidents, but we'll stay with Bush. Now it seems Bush was disturbed about apparent leaks (sound familiar?). Every time he readied a big announcement or an important action, news of the event seemed to precede it. Or if an event occurred that the Administration wanted to keep quiet, it became public knowledge. And it

appeared that as often as not the exposure originated among members of the Jewish community. He summoned a high-ranking intelligence adviser who was Jewish and asked for advice. “Why do the Jews know what I’m going to do almost before I do it?” Well, Mr. President, it’s a matter of “Vos tut zich.” “What’s that?” “An old Yiddish saying, means “what’s up?”, “What do you know?” When two Jews meet, the first words from one of them are “Vos tut zich?” And they exchange information. And so it goes, and you have your leaks.” (By the way, just thinking – it’s good that in passing the peace during our service we simply say “Peace be with you.” If we said “Vos tut zich” we’d never finish the service!) Anyway, Bush replies “I don’t believe it, I’m gonna check this out. Get me some Jewish clothes.” So they fit him out in a sort of Hassid costume – long black coat, hat, braids – like Al Pacino in *Serpico* – and fly him to Manhattan, where a small black limo takes him across the bridge into deepest Brooklyn. Unseen, he gets out, sends the limo away, and starts walking. Sees a pair of Jewish men talking under a streetlamp, saunters up, and says “Vos tut zich?” One man looks around, says “Bush is in Brooklyn.”

At Nain, Jesus was without TV, Internet, newspapers, but as a Jewish guy, born and bred, he knew he had the power of Vos tut zich. And it stood him in good stead. The news of the prophet who could raise the dead spread throughout Judea.

And those are my thoughts for today.

[TEXT: ¹¹ Now it happened, the day after [healing the servant of the centurion], *that* He went into a city called Nain; and many of His disciples went with Him, and a large crowd. ¹² And when He came near the gate of the city, behold, a dead man was being carried out, the only son of his mother; and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the city was with her. ¹³ When the Lord saw her, He had compassion on her and said to her, “Do not weep.” ¹⁴ Then He came and touched the open coffin, and those who carried *him* stood still. And He said, “Young man, I say to you, arise.” ¹⁵ So he who was dead sat up and began to speak. And He presented him to his mother.

¹⁶Then fear came upon all, and they glorified God, saying, “A great prophet has risen up among us”; and, “God has visited His people.” ¹⁷And this report about Him went throughout all Judea and all the surrounding region.
