

Pentecost 3—C
Luke 7:11-17
When Jesus Comes To Town

In the name of Jesus, the Lord of life, dear Christian friends,

I suspect that many of you have been at an intersection when the police have stopped traffic to allow a funeral procession to pass through unimpeded. What is going through your mind when this happens to you? Do you get frustrated or angry? Recently I saw a young man shouting and shaking his fist at the hearse as I rode by. I can understand the frustration of being late, but we have to give ourselves a little reminder that the people in this funeral procession are heading to the cemetery to bury the body of a loved one who has died. It probably won't be that bad to wait a couple of more minutes. In Florida, I remember seeing men stop their work and take off their hats and bow their heads when the funeral procession went by. This morning we will examine another funeral procession. Let's look at this funeral procession and see what happens when Jesus comes to town.

I. He meets life's problems

There is only one reason why we remember the city of Nain. That little town, situated in a valley in Galilee was about as insignificant as those little towns in Goodhue County like Bellechester or Welch. There is only one reason why we remember the city of Nain. There's also only one reason why among all the scores of widows who must have lived in that town that we remember this one. It's all because of what happened when Jesus came to town.

Another visitor had reached Nain before Jesus. This visitor needs no introduction. He had been in the city of Nain many, many times before. Why he had visited even in this very same house before, snatching from it the husband and the father of this family. Now this visitor had come again, taking away the only son in that house, someone who from a human point of view, still had his whole life before him; someone who from a human point of view, was still greatly needed by his mother. There were no doubt many old and sick people living in Nain, but this visitor is no respecter of persons. Ties of affection, age, or the urgent needs of loved ones all count for nothing before this visitor. This is what Jesus met when he came to Nain, a funeral procession on its way to the cemetery, caused by that grim visitor called death.

You and I are touched by death. Undoubtedly all of us have had loved ones die. But there is more death in our earthly existence than the physical death of loved ones. Death is not a "ceasing to exist." That is a poor definition of death because the soul of a human being once brought into existence by God never ceases to exist. When physical death comes, the human soul continues on. It is either by God's grace received through faith in Jesus living with the Savior in the joys of heaven; or due to his rejection of Jesus' forgiveness is enduring the eternal torments of hell. But it does not cease to exist. A better word to define death is "separation." Death is a separation from the blessings of God. Physical death is a separation from God's physical blessings. Spiritual death is a separation from God spiritual blessings. Eternal death is a separation from God's eternal blessings. So when we consider how many of God's blessings we separate ourselves from, we see how much death touches us. That is what sin does. It pays us with death. St. Paul wrote, "*The wages of sin is death*" (Romans

6:23). Paul also told us the sad fact that we were born in sin and therefore were born into this procession of death. *“Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned”* (Romans 5:12). We daily sin much and those sins create separations or deaths; separation between us and God and between us and people around us.

Jesus sympathizes with people like us who have been touched by death. That doesn't mean that he says these sins are ok. That doesn't mean that death is ok or natural. It is not. God did not intend for his creatures to sin and suffer death. But Jesus is able to sympathize because he knows what we are experiencing. He knew what this widow lady in Nain was experiencing and Luke tells us *“his heart went out to her”* (13). He knew her grief because he too was touched by death. In his earthly life he would see his friend Lazarus die. And of course he himself would experience physical and eternal death, in our place on the cross. He knows what sin is. He experienced *“the wages of sin.”* The writer to the Hebrews said it this way: *“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).

Jesus met another visitor at Nain's city gates. It's the one called loneliness. Whom did the widow have now? Who would lift her burden and listen to her problems? Who would help put meaning into her life and feeling into her day? Not only that, but in those days it was very difficult for widows to live. Her only means of support was gone. There was no Social Security, and women didn't just go out and get a job like they do today.

There was also one more visitor to Nain that day. This one is named sorrow. That widow cried real tears as they carried her loved one out to the cemetery, a loved one she had carried into this world. Perhaps this was the largest funeral the little town of Nain had seen for a long time. The whole town was there. Friends could express their sympathy but they could not suppress this woman's deep sorrow. Towns-people could show respect by following to the cemetery, but no one could really wipe away her tears.

Death, loneliness, sorrow... Those were the visitors Jesus Christ met at Nain's gate that day long ago. Indeed, that's why Jesus had come to this insignificant little town—to meet all three of these visitors. Do we know these visitors? Are we lonely? Do we ever get the feeling that nobody knows the trouble we've had with our jobs, or in our families, or with our health? Or if they do know, do we ever feel that nobody really cares? Do we ever get the feeling that nobody knows the sins we face, the rottenness we have inside, the repeated failures to curb our sinful urges and to correct our sinful ways? Or if they do know, do we ever feel that they only wag their tongues about us? Do we ever get the feeling that nobody considers us important, that we are among the tiniest dots on the population charts?

Do we cry? The sorrow, the heartaches, and the hurts in the lives of the people in our congregation are just as deep and just as painful and bring tears just as real as those on the cheeks of the widow of Nain. Or is it death that has visited us? Sooner or later we must all join the people here in the Gospel story in their walk to the cemetery. One generation carries another to rest. We carry our fathers and our mothers. Our children will carry us. We carry our husbands and our wives. Sometimes we too must carry our sons and our daughters. In the midst of life we are surrounded by death. How we had to wrestle at the deathbed of a loved one with that horrible feeling of helplessness, the deep wounds of parting, or that slow process of adjusting to no longer having a dear one with us? Is the thought of our own grave somewhere off in the future something that frightens us?

If so, then it's time to stand again at Nain's city gate and relearn what happens when Jesus comes to town. It's time to be reminded again that Jesus Christ comes to town to meet life's problem and to beat life's problems.

II. He beats life's problems

Jesus not only met and felt the widow's problems that day at Nain's city gate. Jesus did something about them. To this heart-broken mother, Jesus said "*Don't cry,*" (13) offering her not only sympathy, but a promise of something wonderful to come. Then Jesus walked up to the coffin and touched it. Silence must have fallen over that funeral procession as the Lord of life tapped at death's door. Then he who has power over life and death gave this command: "*Young man, I say to you, get up*" (14)! The original Greek verb literally says: "It's time to wake up!" And without a second's delay, this young man sat up and began to talk. The funeral was off. The mother had her son back! Death gave way to life, terrible loneliness was turned into a glorious reunion, and great sorrow had to step back and give way to great joy. All because Jesus had come to town to meet and to beat life's problems.

If only it would happen like that, we say, when Jesus comes to our town. If only he would halt those funeral processions and speak his command to our dead. But doesn't he do even better than that for us? You know, between the "*Don't cry*" and his "*Get up*" at Nain's funeral, only a few seconds passed. Between his "*Don't cry*" and his "*Get up*" at our funerals, many years may pass. But time means nothing to our living Lord Jesus. In the end when raised bodies are reunited with souls already there, we will have from him an eternal life in heaven. There death and all life's problems will not only be gone, but forgotten, replaced by joys unspeakable at the Savior's side.

To know this and to believe this we need to do more than just meet Jesus at Nain's city gate. We need to follow Jesus to Calvary, there to see him die so that God might blot our sins from his sight and mind forever. We need to look into Jesus' empty grave again and again to know that he has beaten life's biggest problem, sin, and its punishment of death. Then we also will know for sure that Jesus Christ will help us with all the other problems of life. When the citizens of Nain saw what had happened, they said: "*God has come to help his people.*" The living Lord Jesus, our living Lord Jesus Christ, is still doing what those people said. No matter what the circumstances in our lives may be at this moment, no matter how dark or how hopeless it may seem to be, our Savior is standing next to us just like he stood beside this weeping widow. "*God has come to help his people*" (16). He is the one we have whose strength always prevails and whose love never fails. That's what happens when Jesus comes to town.

There is one more very important truth from this story I want to share with you. This truth has been impressed upon me again and again during my ministry in your midst as I have gone with sorrowing families of our congregation to the cemetery helping them to give their loved ones a Christian burial. A good number of times death didn't just come to people who were very old or very sick. Death came for people who were still young. Death comes to people suddenly and without any warning. What a terrible mistake it would be for anyone here today to toy with eternity or to think that death won't strike me because, "I'm too young," or "too healthy," or "too needed by my loved ones to be taken from them." Whether we are a little boy or a little girl, a teenager or college age, whether we are a mom or dad, or Grandma or a Grandpa, the words of the prophet Amos apply to us all: "*Prepare to meet your God*" (Amos 4:12). Not tomorrow. Not next week. But now, this very moment, today. I

read a story about a Christian who was finishing his breakfast in a Chicago hotel. A stranger sat down on the stool beside him and nervously ordered a cup of coffee. "Did you see the headlines?" the stranger asked as he held up the front page of the morning paper which read: "Air Crash Kills 52." I'm supposed to catch a plane for L.A. this morning and I'm scared stiff. If I didn't have to be there for a meeting today I'd take the train." It happened that this Christian also had a plane ticket to L.A. and he told the stranger that he planned to use it. "Well, I guess it's the way you look at it," mused the stranger. "When your number is up, it's up." The Christian looked at the frightened man and said: "Yes, I suppose so. But I happen to know the Man who puts up those numbers." Do you know that Man who puts up the numbers? He is your Savior, Jesus Christ. Are you prepared to die? Here is the only way. Turn away from your sins and put your trust in him. Don't let the world out there influence the way you live each day. Listen to Jesus and his Word and live for him and close to him. When death comes, he will lead you into a life that is more wonderful and glorious than anything you have ever known in this world.

Jesus met that dead young man at Nain's city gate and told him, "*Get up.*" And he got up and lived. That scene there is a preview of things to come. One day soon, around the world that word, "*Get up*" will be heard again and from thousands of cemeteries "*all who are in their graves will hear the voice of the Son of God and come out*" (John 5:28-29). We too will get up and begin to speak. We too will praise him with these people here in our text and shout: "*God has come to help his people.*" Then the Savior will give us back to our moms and dads, our husbands and wives and all our loved ones. Never again will there be any parting. That will happen when Jesus comes to town. Amen.

Hymns: 520, 491