



Luke 7:11-17 (NRSV)

Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. 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. When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep." Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. 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!" This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.

THE POWER OF DIVINE LOVE

Our story this morning begins with a funeral procession.

The strangest things happen at funerals and funeral processions. I remember the oddest funeral procession of my ministry. The cemetery was only several miles away from the funeral parlor in the small town of Covington, TN.

Usually, a large white Cadillac with blinking lights led the procession, then the hearse, and not far behind was the pastor. Me.

Our first interruption occurred when a train came by—and even funeral processions get stopped by trains.

Next, an ambulance raced passed us, and yes, we again stopped; ambulances take precedence over funeral processions. In the confusion, one angry man thought I was trying to run a red light; he honked and gave me the finger. Said some choice words that I could clearly read on his lips.

But then, when he saw the hearse and the procession following behind me, I could see the pall of embarrassment flood his face. He had just flipped off the Presbyterian pastor and mourners in a funeral procession.

As if this couldn't get any weirder, there was a slow moving tractor in our path with a farmer who paid no mind to the mile long traffic jam, hearse and all, left behind in his dusty wake.

It was a strange funeral procession indeed; but not as strange as the one in this morning's text.

As the procession was headed out of the village Nain, Jesus and his disciples interrupt the mourners. A grief-stricken widow was about to bury her only son. Deep must have been her grief.

No parent can imagine the crippling pain of having to bury a child. It does not matter that her son was an adult.

In the case of this widow, her grief was compounded by the fact that losing her only son would disconnect her from economic and social opportunities, possibly forcing her into deep poverty. Without a family, she would be vulnerable prey and forced to beg for her livelihood.

The story tells us that Jesus is moved to compassion for her. He tells her not to weep, which in any other circumstance would seem strange, if not callous.

Jesus then does something that would have seemed untoward, even shocking to both his followers and those in the procession. He reaches out to touch the bier, which would have been like a long wicker basket or gurney used simply to carry the dead to the grave.

This would have rendered him ritually unclean. Yet, not only does Jesus touch the bier, but commands the dead to sit up.

In obedience, the young man rises and begins to speak. Just as Elijah raised the widow's son at Zarephath and gives him back to his mother, so Luke tells us that Jesus gives back the son to his mother. No doubt the first hearers of the story would have quickly made a connection between the two stories.

It's worth remembering that Jesus referenced the story of Elijah's raising the widow's son at Zarephath in his inaugural sermon in his hometown of Galilee, making the point that God will have compassion on outsiders as well as insiders, and the good folk of Galilee were so impressed with his message that they tried to throw him from a cliff.

Jesus performs three resurrection miracles in the four gospels. He raises Lazarus; he raises a little girl for her father, Jairus, a synagogue leader and Pharisee, and he raises the widow's son at Nain.

In each case Jesus is moved to act out of compassion, not for the dead, but for those grieving the dead. It is the grief of a father, the grief of a mother, the grief of his own friends at the death of their brother that moves him to raise the dead.

These stories also strangely provide no insight into death. No one seems interested in interviewing Lazarus, or Jairus's daughter, or the widow's son. The deceased is strangely not the point of these stories, nor the focus of such stories. Each story focuses on the compassion of Jesus toward those who are in mourning and the power of Jesus to command the dead to live again.

So it is that, in our book of common worship, we don't refer to a funeral as simply a funeral, but as "A Service of Witness to the Resurrection." In the face of death, we speak of the promise of life.

SO, what actually does happen to us when we die?

You can basically break down the theories into two: Something or nothing. It's really one or the other: either something happens to carry on human existence after death, or we just die—and death is oblivion, as simple and cold as a candle being snuffed out, as Bertrand Russell was wont to say.

I think we have good reason not to be much impressed by the idea that death is oblivion, but even if it is, we won't be around to worry about it, as Socrates reasoned after drinking the hemlock that would cause his own death.

Human beings have mapped out all sorts of possibilities about death, from resurrection to reincarnation to transmigration of an immortal soul to extinction and non-being.

You can find hints of all of these positions in the Bible. Consider Psalm 146, which we heard this morning: “Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help. When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish.”

In Ecclesiastes we hear these depressing thoughts: "For what happens to the sons of men also happens to animals; one thing befalls them: as one dies, so dies the other. Surely, they all have one breath; man has no advantage over animals, for all is vanity. All go to one place: all are from the dust, and all return to dust."

Nevertheless, in the Old Testament, the overwhelming theological census is that the dead live on in a shadowy underworld called Sheol. The dead live on in a kind of half-existence, as shadows in a shadowy world. Sheol was no picnic, no heavenly, happy place. It was the grave, the pit. However, over time, the concept of Sheol came to be rather highly developed—with Sheol itself having divisions or compartments that contain the righteous dead who await resurrection or paradise and the wicked who will either experience eternal death or divine wrath and judgment. Certainly, some passages in the New Testament reflect just such a view.

You can even find hints of reincarnation in the Bible, though never explicit and formulaic. No Jew would have hoped for reincarnation or believed in cycles of rebirth through reincarnation. Nevertheless, ancient Jews did imagine that, very rarely, the dead could come back in the living, to live again in another body. When Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” Their answer is a little shocking if we listen carefully: 'Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' In other words, people imagined that the spirit of one of the prophets had returned in the person of Jesus.

Among ancient Jews as well as ancient pagans, many held the idea that the dead could return, reborn into the body of a person. There was much fear and trepidation among Jews, Gentiles, and Christians that cruel Emperor Nero would make good on his threat/promise to come back from the dead in another form. However, neither Jews nor Christians systematically incorporated these ideas into a theological belief system like that which we find in Hinduism and Buddhism.

We also hear hints in the New Testament of the idea of the transmigration of an eternal soul, which started out an idea much more commonly held among pagans than Jews. In pagan mythology, a ferryman was believed to have transported the souls of the newly dead across the river Styx into the underworld.

That reminds me, my sister-in-law was driving over the Mississippi river with her kids, and they look down and saw a big ferry boat. Her five year old boy said: Mom look at that big boat. She said, yeah, that's a big boat; I bet it's 150 feet.

Her two year old in the back seat said, barely audible: Boats don't have feet.

Indeed, boats don't have feet, and hopefully we don't have to pay ferrymen in the afterlife to safely transport our souls out of hell.

The real hope for life after death in the New Testament, however, is not a shadowy half-life in Sheol, nor reincarnation into a new body, nor the transmigration of the soul, but resurrection.

It is resurrection that is our hope in Christ. Resurrection is not, in my opinion, best understood as a crude re-animation of our physical, earthly bodies. Resurrection is more simply the hope that our souls will be given new bodies in which to dwell—bodies perhaps similar to our own, but also quite different, but bodies nonetheless. As my seminary professor Shirley Guthrie would say to us, “we won't be disembodied spirits, but embodied spirits.”

I don't know exactly how it will all happen, when it will happen, or what heaven and the afterlife will be like, nor do I know what God's wrath and judgment will consist of for those outside of such promises.

But, I have three good reasons for firmly believing in such things:

1. First, this life is too strangely improbable to be explained without God. You can try your best to convince me, but I'll never believe that you can reduce the mystery of existence and wonder of human consciousness to merely the random vagaries of an orphaned universe. Likewise, I don't believe there's any good reason that anything should exist at all—not atoms, not stars, not galaxies—without first positing something grand enough (divine enough) to speak being out of nonbeing; much less can I believe that the universe, just by random happenstance, happens to be the kind of universe where clumps of old stardust can become so organized as to give themselves names, ponder the meaning of life, build amazing cities, discover the Pythagorean theorem, and pray to God.
2. Secondly, because I do believe in God, I refuse to believe that God is apathetic, cold and uncaring, unconcerned with creatures that have big enough brains and sensitive enough spirits to pray to the One in whom they owe their very existence.
3. Thirdly, and most pointedly, I hope because Jesus spoke life in the face of death, and death gave up its stranglehold on the dead. In his own death, Christ triumphed gloriously when raised by God. Jesus, as the revelation and embodiment of divine compassion, demonstrates that God has no intention of abandoning us to oblivion. God is better than that.

So, we people of faith, we speak life in the face of death. It may seem foolish to outsiders. Our dead stay in their graves just like the dead among the unbelieving. Yet, we continue to celebrate the power of divine life and the hope of life eternal even in the face of the harsh reality of our own mortality.

We are not engaged in mere wishful thinking. We have good reason for all our hoping. We believe because we have experienced the power of God's grace and God's kingdom on this side of the grave, and in that experience we have learned this: God's love is more powerful than death. When God speaks a word of life in the face of death, death cowers and life wins.

Amen.