

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen+

Some people can tell a story, and some people can’t. I believe that phrase can be attributed to Charlie Brown’s dog, Snoopy, who sitting at a typewriter (remember those?) has pecked out the opening line to his novel; “It was a dark and stormy night...” This time of year we watch movies where there is a creaking door waving in the wind and we wait to see what will jump out at us. Will it be scary and frightening or will a cute animal come out of the night creating a moment of relief? We have all found ourselves situations at some point in life where we live with tense anticipation. Our boss sends out an email indicating a “called meeting” and adds, “Attendance is mandatory”. Or we want to start a new relationship and reach out not knowing the response in advance. And we sit or pace in a waiting room looking for the physician to appear and tell us news about someone dear to us.

If we took a few unhurried moments and selected just one of these scenarios we could write a very recognizable story; a story we have encountered. The narrative would be real, full of anticipation—either fulfilled or not, and it would invite others to see and feel what is in our hearts. It would have some conclusion and these stories can be told over and over again because the events are NOT stuck in mere facts, but in living experience.

Have you ever noticed how the Gospels are comprised mostly of stories rather than sayings or teachings or lectures? And these stories about encounters; close interactions between Jesus and people in every walk of life and condition imaginable. Why such stories? Because we remember narratives, and we actually join in them and find ourselves connecting with the people and their situations.

St. Luke shows us today he is one of those who can tell a story, tell it powerfully, and pack it full in a short space. To begin it is crucial to see where he places this vignette—it follows the healing of the Centurion’s slave, and it precedes John the Baptist’s disciples questioning Jesus about who he is; “Are you the One to Come (that is the Messiah) or should we look for another?” What is Luke doing here? He is reminding his readers that Isaiah said the coming of the Kingdom of God would be marked by healing of the ill, the raising of the dead, and the proclaiming of good news to the broken people of the world. “LOOK”, says Luke, and tell me what you see in Jesus and his actions! The story of the widow of Nain is a direct reflection of Elijah’s actions in I Kings, and is a sign of a prophet—not one who foretells the future but who acts in the power of God. The people all proclaim, “God has visited his people”. They knew as we know that God’s actions are not theoretical jargon about what might happen, but are specific events and encounters that alter the direction of life and bring hope where none seemed possible beforehand. Luke can tell a story; one that captivates and casts light so that we can see what is true and good and full of hope. He invites us to look and see if we, too, can identify how our relationship with Jesus helps us to know God has visited and is present to us.

So, the story opens with Jesus and a group travelling together having a typical day when they encounter what we often experience; a funeral procession. Everyday life and sudden death crash headlong into one another. A bier (stretcher) rather than a hearse leads the way followed by

immediate family, mourners who feel the loss, and just concerned individuals on their way to burial. Luke tells us the mother is a widow and this, her only son. This is not just passing detail. It shows the depth of the tragedy in two ways; one is this is the reverse of how we reckon life should be—we bury our parents, but parents are not supposed to outlive their children, and this woman now has NO economic support or status. It is the beginning of the end for her as well. There is no anticipated hope in this situation, only pain, brokenness, and darkness. We do not have to stretch our memories or recollections very hard or very far to identify being in a similar circumstance. Most of us have come to “dead ends” in life where it has been nearly impossible to envision a future. Perhaps it has been the death of a child or loved one or simply the threat of such a loss. Maybe it is illness that more slowly takes away strength and capabilities that heretofore have been commonplace for us. Or it may be events and struggles with work or relationships that drain us of resources and leave us sad and fearful. Fear can become a companion that colors everything we view. We live in a world full of it. We fear rising costs, drought, immigration, failing healthcare systems, terrorists—the list goes on and on. This poor woman is no stranger to us, is she?

This text, this story invites us to see it all from another tint and coloring. The key in this encounter is that Jesus sees and has compassion for this woman, does likewise for us. First he sees her. Seeing is not the same thing as passively noticing. To be seen is to become the focus of full attention. It happens when all other matters and concerns are left aside, and in a moment no other thing or person is more important than the one seen. It amounts to an invitation to her and to us to be taken fully into Jesus' care and life. Luke is telling us that the One who created heaven and earth, the cosmos with all its complexity; the One who himself has walked the way of suffering and apparent abandonment and was raised for us, also has the capacity to stop and see only us, and everyone who hurts beyond the capacity to manage it. Perhaps when we feel most alone and wonder if God is anywhere to be found, this story reminds us it is not our condition that defines us, but rather the God who is often hidden from our normal sight sees us.

There is one deeper step in this story. We are told Jesus had compassion. The word in Greek transcends our usual sense of compassion, which is to care or be concerned. Here it states that Jesus reached out to this woman with his bowels, that is, his most inward and inseparable love. Everything in his being, reached out and stood with her in the worst moment of her life. The God we have come here to worship cannot be defined fully, but if Jesus is to be believed, God's deepest and abiding quality is compassion; His unwillingness to resign us to the struggles of life or leave us alone with them. Jesus' own journey to the cross is a concrete example of just that compassion.

A number of years ago my parents were involved in a terrible accident. A young woman had on that very day been given a new car by her parents. It was a Firebird—a high powered engine drove the auto, and she ran a stop sign taking it out for a drive. She hit the truck my father was driving from at the right rear. Witnesses said the truck tumbled rear-end over front 4 or 5 times before coming to a stop. My mother's heart had to be re-started by emergency personnel before being transported to the hospital some 20 miles away. We do not remember much about the evening, except that one of the people in the ambulance spoke with the family at the hospital. We do not know her name and would not likely recognize her today. But what is recalled is that she met one of my sisters at the hospital to report on what was happening. Then, almost as a passing comment, said, “I held her hand all the way to the E.R.” It was not a medical necessity. It was an act of compassion; of standing with someone in the worst of circumstances with total care and

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commitment as if nothing else or anyone else mattered in those moments. According to St. Luke that is what happened in Nain. The restoration of the young man to life is a confirmation of compassion; it is a sign of what living in the Kingdom of God is like. The text says the people were seized by fear, but it was not fear of being left alone, but awe that the normal rules of life don't apply in the Reign of God. That Kingdom is a place, an event, a relationship where the heart-giving of God trumps all other events. Let us pray that we may be signs of just such a Kingdom. Amen+