



Catalog No. 1921

Luke 7:11-17

21st Message

John Hanneman

March 3, 2013

TRANSCENDENT LIFE

SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

Transcendent Life

What happens when the bottom falls out, when the only thing we really care about is taken away, when, in Kipling's words you "watch the things you gave your life to, broken?" For most people there are two important questions. First, does God really care? Many people begin to doubt God's goodness and love, and struggle believing in a God who would allow such suffering in the world. Second, is there any hope? Is God capable of bringing life and joy into our dead hearts once again? Many people simply give up on God and retire from the human race, or they see themselves as a victim and choose to live in their misery. These are the two questions we encounter in a very tender and compelling scene in Luke's gospel.

The Encounter

Soon afterward he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a great crowd went with him. As he drew near to the gate of the town, behold, a man who had died was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow, and a considerable crowd from the town was with her. (Luke 7:11-12 ESV)

The setting for the story is the city of Nain, which was at the base of Mt. Moreh, about 6 miles southeast of Nazareth and 20 miles southwest of Capernaum. According to Luke our story takes place soon after Jesus healed the centurion's servant in Capernaum.

Jesus arrives at Nain with his disciples and other followers. Luke tells us that there was a great crowd with him. When Jesus comes to the city gate he meets a funeral procession. The funeral is for a widow's only son. Luke tells us that there is also a crowd going to the cemetery.

According to the customs of the day the body of a dead person would be buried quickly to prevent deterioration. The body would not be kept in the house over night. Therefore this death was recent. It was probably later in the day. The body would be anointed and wrapped with cloths, placed on a wood plank, (a bier, not in a coffin) and carried outside of the city walls to be buried. Therefore the wrapped body would be visible for all to see. The crowd in the procession would be mourning, which was an act of love by the village inhabitants.

Luke continues to surprise us. The previous story was about a Gentile centurion, who was an unexpected main character. This story features a woman, another unexpected character since women in those days were marginalized. In fact women will be very visible in some upcoming scenes.

The woman has already lost her husband, and now she loses her only son. This would leave her an orphan, without a family, and therefore without protection. The "only" son foreshadows the death of God's only begotten son. Luke uses the same word that John uses in his prologue: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father,

full of grace and truth." (John 1:14 ESV) Also, the orphaned mother is a reminder of what will happen to Jesus' mother who is now also a widow.

The scene is gripping and captivating; this juxtaposition of the two crowds meeting at the city gate. The crowd with Jesus has been seeing remarkable things, filled with life and anticipating what will happen next. The crowd with the widow is lost in grief and despair. The moods of these two crowds meeting at the city gate could not be more opposite; "The Way of Life meets the way of death."¹ The followers of life stumble upon the followers of death. Can you imagine the scene? Can you imagine the awkwardness between these two crowds? The scene stops us in our tracks in the same way these two crowds must have stopped in their tracks.

It is not hard for me to imagine the pain this woman feels. We only need a few words. I remember a young Romanian girl a few years ago who shared what her mother had told her, "I wish you had never been born." You don't need many words to know heartache and sorrow. The widow in our story has lost the last thing, the only thing that matters. She would have found solace in the words of W. H. Auden:

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.

Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead
Scribbling on the sky the message He Is Dead,
Put crepe bows round the white necks of the public doves,
Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.

He was my North, my South, my East and West,
My working week and my Sunday rest,
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;
I thought that love would last for ever: I was wrong.

The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood.
For nothing now can ever come to any good.

Have you ever felt the emotions of those words? I have. Most of us have encountered seasons of deep loss, inexplicable grief, and pitch-black darkness. Fourteen years ago last month I received a call in the middle of the night telling me that my oldest brother had been killed in an automobile accident. The passenger in the car was hardly hurt. I went numb.

Twelve years ago this month I received a call from a dear friend that his wife had died suddenly and tragically. When I told my wife she just fell prostate on the floor in shock and disbelief, crying out "what are you saying?" I can still recall the emotions I felt when the

doctor who had operated on my mother's brain tumor told me she had maybe six months to live. My knees buckled under me and I fell against the hospital wall in shock. Most of us have been there. When the pain of unexpected suffering suddenly appears, the clock stops, the curtains are drawn, and we wonder if anything can ever be good again. Thankfully, this is not the end of the story.

The Healing

And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, "Do not weep." Then he came up and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, arise." And the dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. (Luke 7:13-15)

Jesus comes upon the funeral procession and sees the distraught woman who is probably leading the procession. Unlike other situations, Jesus initiates the action. His words and actions are dramatic and poignant. There are five movements in the healing.

First, Jesus' initial reaction is compassion. He is deeply moved. The NIV translates "his heart went out to her" and the MESSAGE, "his heart broke." Perhaps tears filled his eyes. This is the same word that Luke uses to describe how the Good Samaritan feels when he happens along a man lying in the road and also the emotion of the father when he sees his prodigal son coming down the road towards home.

Second, Jesus tells the woman, "do not weep." Jesus will say the same thing to those gathered at Jairus' house when his daughter dies. This seems so strange to me. Would the woman be comforted or agitated? Would Jesus' words be soothing or would she have thought this some kind of sick joke. Maybe a little bit of both. I really don't know.

Third, he approaches the bier, the plank on which the dead man's body rests, and he touches it. This is amazing. Whenever the words "come up" is used of Jesus approaching someone, it leads to his acting with authority (Mark. 1:31; Luke 9:42; Matt. 28:18). By touching the bier Jesus renders himself unclean (Num. 19:11, 16), an idea that we have already seen several times in Luke. However Jesus is not put off, because people are more important than ritual cleanliness. For me this action is heart-rending. Can you imagine seeing a funeral at a cemetery, moving through the crowd, and putting your hands on the casket?

Fourth, Jesus addresses the man directly and tells him to arise. This too strikes us as either humorous or tragic. Jesus said the same thing to Jairus' daughter in chapter 8 (Mark 5:41; Luke 8:54). He also speaks directly to Lazarus when he raises him from the dead (John 11:43). This action by Jesus foreshadows his resurrection from the dead.

The man sits up and begins to talk. The word for "sat up" is a "medical term often used outside of the Bible to describe the sitting up of someone who was formerly incapacitated by illness."² Suddenly life replaces death.

Finally, Jesus gives the man back to his mother. This is highly significant, for the phrase "gave him to his mother" is verbatim the phrase we find in 1 Kings 17:23, when Elijah raises the widow of Zarephath's son from the dead. The miracle also reminds us of the story in 2 Kings 4, when Elisha raises the son of a couple who lives in Shunem from the dead. This event took place only a couple miles

away from Nain, and the inhabitants of Nain would have been fully aware of it. Every word in this short story is packed with meaning.

The Reaction

Fear seized them all, and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has arisen among us!" and "God has visited his people!" (Luke 7:16)

As one might imagine, the crowd of people had some strong reactions. First, all of them, not just some, were seized with fear; fear took hold of them in the same way it would have taken hold of us. Fear is a common reaction in Luke to the manifestation and witness of God's power. (Luke 1:65; 5:26; 8:25,37; Acts 2:43; 5:5, 11; 19:17) Over and over people respond with amazement, astonishment, and wonder at the sight of extraordinary things.

Second, they glorified God, another common reaction that we find in Luke. (Luke 5:9, 26; 9:43; 13:13; 17:18; 18:43; 23:47) The people connected what Jesus did to God's working and power.

Third, they were saying in their state of fear and praise: "a great prophet has risen among us." The verb is passive, meaning God has brought Jesus. The people are reminded of Elijah and Elisha and are speculating that Jesus is a great prophet like them. The word for "risen" here is the same word Jesus used when he told the dead man to arise. Again, we get a hint of what will happen to Jesus after his death.

Fourth, they were also saying: "God has visited his people." We saw this word twice in Zechariah's song in chapter 1:

And his father, Zechariah, was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying, Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people (Luke 1:67-68)

whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace. (Luke 1:78-79)

The idea of God visiting his people refers to God's gracious activity for his people as he utilizes his power on their behalf (Ruth 1:6; Ex. 4:31; Gen. 21:1). In the Old Testament God visits Israel at the time "of the exodus and other great events. It means 'God has come near to us, to save and rescue us.' It means, 'This is the time we've been waiting for.'"³

Last week we saw that Jesus had the authority to heal from a distance when he healed the centurion's servant. Now we see that Jesus has the authority to raise the dead. The story expands the scope of Jesus' power and authority. As a result people are trying to figure out who this Jesus is, his identity. Is this man from God? Is he as great as the great prophets Elijah and Elisha? Perhaps he is even greater. Luke gives us a hint of his identity by calling him "the Lord" in verse 3. He is the only Synoptic writer to do this before the resurrection.

The Report

And this report about him spread through the whole of Judea and all the surrounding country. (Luke 7.17)

The story ends with a note telling us that the report, literally "word," (logos) about Jesus spread like wildfire. Even without

smartphones and social media the news went viral. And as we will see next week, the news even reaches the ears of John the Baptist in prison. Now, let's talk about how this story can impact our lives.

All of us suffer loss to one degree or another. Some suffer more than others. Some handle it better than others. But we all face our share of dark days and unexpected pain no matter how much we try to protect ourselves. Suffering is part of the human condition and our fallen world. The rain falls on the just and the unjust and so does suffering. Being a Christian does not safeguard us against tragedy and neither does living a good life or being a good person. Often we ask the question "why me?" But perhaps the better question to ask is "why not me?" Why should we expect that no misfortune should befall us? Why do we think our hearts will not be broken?

Suffering just *is*. It lies outside the scope of explanations, rationalizations, and justifications. The only thing that truly matters is receiving and experiencing God in the midst of it. When the last thing is taken, when our deepest fear is realized, will we turn towards God or away from him?

Two questions are critical. First, does God care? We see the answer in Jesus' compassion, his heart-felt sympathy for a widow who had lost the only thing that mattered. The word compassion means, "to suffer with." Not only do we have a God who suffers with us, we also have a God who himself suffers. The Son suffered on the cross and the father watched him die. A story that Ray Stedman told has always stayed with me:

A man who lost his son in battle, in World War II, was grieving over his lost boy, and a chaplain tried to comfort him and the man kept sobbing, crying out. When the chaplain suggested that God would strengthen him, the man, said, "Where was God when my son died?" Wisely, the chaplain replied, "He was right where he was when his own son died, grieving, watching, and waiting for the outcome of a greater purpose that would yet be fulfilled."

We don't know the rhyme or reason or sources of evil and tragic events. But God isn't sitting up in heaven taking some morbid delight in our misfortunes. He is not trying to "get even" with the human race. Our pain causes him pain. At the tomb of Lazarus Jesus became agitated and troubled at the sight of people's grief because this is not the way it was supposed to be. And then Jesus wept. What God has been seeking to do is not to destroy people but to save and rescue. God has visited his people. God's answer to sin and death and suffering was the cross. I think the little girl got it right when she knelt for her evening prayers and said "Our Father who art in heaven, how did you know my name." God sees and God cares.

Earlier in my life when I suffered misfortune I would shake my fist at God and curse the day I was born, like Job. But over the years I have come to understand that God suffers with me. He is a companion with me even in the darkness, even when I cannot feel his presence, and even when I cry out in anger. God is a compassionate God and this is what we see over and over in the Scriptures. "The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love." (Psalms 103:8 NIVII) We choose to believe or not believe.

The second question we ask is: is there hope for life and joy after tragic loss? The story demonstrates that God has the power and authority to bring light into darkness and life out of death. First and foremost, through a death we can be delivered from the power of sin and death and we can look forward to a resurrection, never to die again and to become what God fully intended us to be. But secondly, we can also experience that life here and now. We can experience

restoration even when tragedy befalls us. But what shape will this take? How does this happen?

Our story is a story of physical restoration. But Jesus didn't heal everyone, he didn't bring back every person from the dead, and he himself could not avoid the cross. While God has the power to heal, we cannot depend on this in every case. A dramatic physical healing might glorify God and yield more time on earth but it cannot stave off death in the end. So what is the miracle that we can expect? What are the purposes of God in our misfortunes?

When we suffer deep loss, life changes. Life can never be the same as it was before and we can't try and make it the same or pretend that the loss didn't happen. Some losses simply become part of us and we continue to carry them. But the miracle of God is the power to breathe life back into a grieving, dead, hopeless heart, to start the clock again, but not the same clock. We begin to experience life in a different dimension.

Suffering is often the place where God does his greatest work and accomplishes the deepest transformation in our life. "It is in precisely the dark times that Jesus is the most present." In the darkness Jesus becomes the most real, even if we "cannot see or sense him because he is our suffering Savior – God with us in every circumstance of life."⁴

We experience a deepening of love, forgiveness, and tenderness. Spiritual blindness is healed and we see with fresh eyes. Our priorities change and we become more aware of the movements of God. If we seek to avoid the darkness, we do not experience transformation. Transformation happens when we are vulnerable to our brokenness and woundedness. There is no other way.

There is no formula or program for experiencing life after death. It can happen suddenly, like it does in our story, but more often than not it takes time. And usually it doesn't happen in the busyness of life while we are driving to work in our car. It happens in silence and solitude when we spend time with Jesus and our prayer becomes listening.

I am not an expert, but all I can tell you is that this is how it has happened in my life. But when you think about it, the stories that move us are the stories of brothers and sisters in Christ who have undergone the same process, who have experienced the healing touch of Jesus, who have found life, but a completely different kind of life through their struggles and pain, who have experienced restoration and redemption, who have seen and tasted that despite the tragedies of life God is good, faithful, and compassionate. If you need that this morning I pray that you would receive it by his mercy. God is compassionate towards you. He sees you and cares for you. He is right next to you, suffering with you and he will be with you every day and every hour of your life. The life of Jesus is what our heart longs for, to know his presence no matter the circumstances of our life.

We come to share table fellowship this morning with our Lord Jesus Christ. We are reminded of his death and his suffering. We are reminded of the cross. We are reminded of the evidence that God truly cares, for why else would he die for us? We are also reminded that the body and blood of Christ gives us new life. If you are suffering this morning, you might pray and imagine Jesus coming to you, reaching out, touching your broken heart, and saying to you personally, "arise."

Anima Christi (Soul of Christ)

Jesus, may all that is you flow into me.

May your body and blood be my food and drink.

May your passion and death be my strength and life.

Jesus, with you by my side, enough has been given.

May the shelter I seek be the shadow your cross.

Let me not run from the love which you offer,

But hold me safe from the forces of evil.

On each my dyings shed your light and your love.

Keep calling to me until that day comes, when, with your saints,

I may praise you forever. Amen.

Contemporary Paraphrase by David L. Fleming

1. Darrell Bock, *Luke Volume 1* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994), 649.
2. Darrell Bock, *Luke Volume 1* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994), 652
3. N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2001), 84
4. Juliet Benner, *Contemplative Vision*, IVP Books, (Downers Grove, IL, 2011), 96

© 2013 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino

*“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
and honor and glory and blessing!” (Revelation 5:12 ESV)*

May we go forth today with the abiding presence of the
compassionate Christ who has visited us and given us life.