

THE RAISING OF THE WIDOW OF NAIN

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Text: Luke 7:11-17

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.

A widow is walking down the road with a crowd of people around her. It's the road that leads out of town. The name of the town is Nain, and it sits on the edge of a beautiful valley, across from Mount Tabor, about two miles away to the north.

But the widow isn't looking at the scenery. She's walking behind the body of her son. This is a funeral procession. Her son is wrapped in strips of cloth, and he's being carried on a simple wooden frame by the other mourners. He died earlier that day, and according to custom, he has to be buried before sundown.

The widow has been down this road before—literally and figuratively. When her husband died, she walked behind his body in the same way, and the memory of that day is still fresh in her mind. Her grief was immense. But at least back then she still had a son to lean on. Now she's alone, and that adds a layer of worry on top of her grief. With her husband and son both gone, she's afraid of losing her own life—maybe not in a physical sense, but in other ways that are just as real and just as terrifying.

The son who died wasn't just her son. He was her only son, and as far as we know, her only child, which puts her in a very vulnerable position. Widows at this time can't inherit land. According to the law, when a man dies, his land is left to his children, starting with the eldest son, who's then expected to provide for his mother. But if there are no children, the land is passed on to more distant relatives, and the man's widow gets nothing.

So the widow of Nain is facing a future where she's completely dependent on people who are not her kin and have no obligation to support her. And if they're not willing to do so purely out of the goodness of their hearts, and if she doesn't have kin of her own who will take her in, she won't have anywhere to go. She'll be out of luck.

All this is undoubtedly weighing on her mind as she walks down the road toward the cemetery on the outskirts of town. She's in real jeopardy, and she knows it. Every step she takes is heavy, not only with grief, but with a gnawing sense of dread. She's already lost so much, and now she could lose everything. Her home. Her security. Her place in the community. She could end up on the street, a kind of non-person—a person with no name or identity; a person others walk by and pretend not to see. It would be almost as if she had died along with her son.

But things are about to change because walking down the road in the opposite direction, heading into town, is another crowd of people, and among them is Jesus, who sees the widow and feels compassion for her. He tells her, "Do not weep." Then he puts his hands on the wooden frame that's carrying the body and says, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" Immediately the young man sits up, alive and well, and Jesus gives him back to his mother, the widow. And in so doing, not only is he giving her back her son, he's also giving her back her life. He's giving her back everything her son's death would've taken away. He's saving her from the social and economic forces that would've left her destitute.

So Jesus raises them both, and honestly I don't know what's more impressive—raising someone from literal death or raising someone from the kind of death that comes when we lose all hope; when all we have to look forward to is isolation and poverty and despair; when that becomes our whole reality.

I'm pretty sure I know what the people in the story would say is more impressive. Everyone in the crowd is awestruck by the sight of a corpse reanimating. Fear seizes them, and they all start praising God for this wondrous deed. And I agree, that's pretty amazing. But I would argue that, in terms of how it changes the world beyond this one event, in terms of how far-reaching it is, the raising of the widow is even more amazing than the raising of her son. Because this is a miracle ordinary people can imitate. This is a miracle you and I can do ourselves.

If you ask me, that's what this story is really about. I hear it as a call. I hear it as Luke telling us what it means to be followers of Jesus. It means helping people come back from the margins. It means restoring the fabric of communities. It means building futures for people who don't have one. And obviously raising actual dead people is a little bit above our pay grade, so we can't imitate Jesus down to the letter. But we don't have to. Luke gives us a kind of roadmap to follow, and it starts when Jesus first encounters the widow.

He's approaching the entrance to the town when he runs into the funeral procession, and according to the text he "sees" the widow. And I don't think that means he simply spots her in the crowd. I think Luke is saying something more than that. I think he's saying Jesus sees the widow in a fuller sense. He sees her plight. He understands her situation and all the legalities involved. He knows what kind of bleak existence she's going to have without her son around. And the reason I think he sees all of that is because of how powerfully he responds.

Jesus has compassion for the widow, which may not seem like a big deal, but the word Luke uses here is actually a very strong word. It means more than just feeling bad for someone. It's a form of the Greek word for guts, which is where ancient people thought emotions come from—not the head or the heart, but deeper down, in the belly. So the feeling Jesus has when he "sees" the widow is a feeling that comes from the pit of his stomach, from the core of his being, and it stirs him to action. It moves him to be more than just a bystander, but to actually step in and do something.

And that's it. That's the roadmap. That's how we follow Jesus and raise people like the widow. It's pretty simple, and it starts with "seeing" in a fuller sense. It starts with opening our eyes to what other people's lives are like and what kinds of challenges they face. And that might mean we have to do some work. It might mean we have to acknowledge that someone else's experiences are fundamentally different than our own. It might mean we have to recognize that someone else is dealing with problems and pressures that we don't even know about. It might mean we have to educate ourselves about class issues, or gender issues, or racial issues, or other issues that maybe we don't know much about because they don't personally impact us.

Then, once we've done that work, and our eyes are truly open, the next step is to let what we see affect us deeply. And I say *let it affect us* because it's easy to push compassion aside. It's easy to look the other way, or pass judgment, or victim blame, or in some other way invalidate. So that part takes some effort, too. We have to be willing to open ourselves to someone else's reality and listen to their story and not dismiss it. But the last step, that's the really hard part. That's the part that requires the most determination. We have to make the leap from seeing and feeling to doing, which can be really daunting. Fortunately we don't have to do it alone, like Jesus did. We can act together, as the church. We can work together. We can volunteer together. We can raise our voices together. We can pray together.

So I'm going to wrap this up with a shameless plug for our Mission Committee. If you want to follow the roadmap Luke lays out for us in this story and make a difference in people's lives, getting involved in the mission of the church is a great way to do that. And this is the perfect time because the Mission Committee has just started meeting again. So if you're interested, reach out. Give me a call, shoot me an email. You won't be sorry you did. I promise. Amen.