

Pastor T.C. Arnold
16th Sunday after Trinity
Luke 7:11-17
October 5th, 2014

Fear seized them all, and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has arisen among us!" and "God has visited his people."

When a member of the military serving in faraway places come home after an extended deployment, great joy is realized by those who welcome them. You perhaps have even seen children, wives or husbands being surprised by their military family member who was able to return home sooner than expected. You perhaps have seen, maybe even experienced for yourself, the relief of having your loved by your side once again after they have been away for so long. These three words sum up our feelings in such a situation – joy, surprise, and relief.

In the Gospel text for today, joy, surprise, and relief were not feelings that were far from the heart of those who were there to witness this exciting miracle of Jesus raising to life the widow's son. Not only joy, surprise, and relief that the woman's son has been returned, but also joy, surprise, and relief that the Lord has come. "*Fear seized them all,*" it says. Think of this kind of fear that includes excitement, hope, not quite being able to take it all in at that very moment. "*...and they glorified God...*" Joy, surprise, and relief all wrapped up into one. Why were they like this? Because, a great prophet was among them, it says. Because, "*God has visited his people.*" That brought joy, surprise, and relief.

Visitation from people we love, we miss, we haven't seen in a long time, and we did not even expect to see, is wonderful – joy, surprise, and relief. Visitation from our Lord is like it – even better – joy, surprise, relief all wrapped into one. For sure, those who were there that day to see what had happened, that young man, a dead man, sitting up after the Lord calls out and commands him to get up. And you see, their reaction, their opportunity to see with their very own eyes what God can bring, what He had become for them, what He can do for them, was not a miracle just for the sake of witnesses present on that day. It's for us as well... so that we may have the same joy, the same surprise and the same relief when God visits His people. It's great to see a dead man alive again. It's even better for us to know that the one who makes the dead alive again, comes to visit, to be next to, those He loves.

And I say that in the present tense just like those in the text for today. Jesus comes to visit and it does bring joy. Joy because who or what is better? Joy because when God says He is with us to the very end of the age, just like it says in the Bible, we can be confident – no matter if the time He is with us is a good time, or a bad time. Joy because the presence of Jesus doesn't always mean we Christians are in a great mood, that we don't have our melt downs, that we don't struggle... joy because Jesus tells us that being a follower of Him might mean we actually struggle more, are more accountable, more susceptible to the devil's attacks. And by the way, brothers and sisters in Christ, you are attacked more by the devil than your friends who have not a care in the world about the Lord, because the devil doesn't need to fool around with them. He's already got them. It's you he wants. But joy is what we have because we have a Jesus who comes along side of us, visits us – which means that He is with us – and promises to remain and never leave – even when the devil's attacks get terribly brutal. Joy is knowing we have a visiting Jesus.

Present tense – He visits His people – and for many people in this world, that's a surprise. For Christians that's a "good news" surprise. For those who do not believe, it's an unbelievable surprise... maybe so much so that they can't believe it at all. This past week at I heard a presentation on reaching out to Muslims throughout history and in the world today given by Rev Dr. James Kroemer who is a pastor in Milwaukee, Wisconsin who has also taught classes on Christianity at Marquette University. Over the years he has had many non-Christians in his class with a number of them being Muslims. He mentioned two very big problems that Muslims have with believing what Christians believe. First, that

God would ever become man. Why would God stoop to such a low and demeaning level? And second, after he became man, why would he ever die at the hands of his own creation.

Our surprise does not lead to unbelief. Our surprise leads to wonderment of how our God would love us that much. That He would do what He did – for you. Our surprise is not disbelief but rather places upon us a state of awe over a love that knows no bounds, even to give up His Son into the hands of sinners.

And that last one, relief. Now that one is a little tricky. Young fathers are relieved when mom finally gets home from work or the store because dad just can't stand the kids a minute longer. Spouses, you have relief when you hear the door unlock and it's your loved one who is home safe and sound – especially if your spouse has a dangerous vocation like police officer, firefighter or soldier. You have relief to have your teenaged son walk through the front door at the end of the evening – knowing that they are safe.

I have a relief story for you. It's not one of those "feel-good" my son is home kind of stories. But it is a relief story.

Back in 2005 I received a phone call at about 3 A.M. On the other end of the line was a surprisingly calm mother of a soldier who just told me that she had a visitation. It wasn't her son. It was two representatives of the armed forces who came to inform her that her son, Matthew, was killed in combat. That's not the kind of visitation anyone would want. But, to her, it wasn't unexpected. She had a feeling, the family did too, that Matthew was not going to come home from his second tour in Iraq. She cried. Who wouldn't? But with a calm voice she told me – believe it or not – that she was relieved. How could she be relieved?

She was relieved to know Matthew was now out of danger. She was relieved to know that Matthew was not suffering. She was relieved to know that her son, Matthew, was in heaven.

As a pastor I understand that. As a parent I just couldn't wrap my mind around how she could be relieved to see two visitors at her door at 3 A.M. with neither of them being her son. I can't imagine being relieved at that moment in time when anything but relief would make the most sense to me – grief, anger, dismay, you name it. But not relief. Where will Jesus be on this one? When will he raise Matthew from the dead and give him back to his mother? How will we be able to say, God has visited (and redeemed) His people?

I don't know. But she could. And mom was visited. She was visited by her family who came along the side of her in grief, and she received it well. She was visited with the words of eternal life for Matthew and for her. In grief and despair, there was still relief. Because the mother knew the Savior and the she knew her soldier did as well.

Beloved, not just death, but our own sins bring us grief and despair. We bring it upon ourselves and sometimes with our missteps we bring it upon the ones we love. The pain sin brings goes deep and it lingers. The pain sin brings also sees death.

But Jesus teaches us something in this text from Luke 7. Death has no mastery over what Jesus brings when He visits His people. Death is thwarted, not with young men rising from caskets with a touch, but by a work that took the life of Jesus. Yes, God did become man for you and for me. Yes, God did die at the hands of His own creation for you and for me. Yes, death is destroyed, and for that reason, the only real death is a life without our Lord for eternity. And you, beloved in the Lord, have that. You have been raised from the dead. What Joy, what surprise (He would even love a sinner like me) what relief. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.