

10 June 2007
Pentecost 2

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Stopping the Procession!”

Text: Luke 7:11-17; 1 Kings 17:17-24

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

In the Introit earlier this morning, we sang: “*Though I walk in the midst of trouble, You preserve my life; You stretch out Your hand against the wrath of my enemies, and Your right hand delivers me.*” (Ps 138:7b)

To which I ask: *who are these enemies of yours, spoken of here?* Those who you wish God to stretch out His right hand against, deliver you, and crush them? Is it your loud, obnoxious neighbor? Or maybe the kid in school who makes fun of you? What about those idiots on the other side of the political fence from you – whether that be in secular politics or church politics? Is it the terrorists, seeking to destroy you and your way of life? Or abortionists, attacking the very littlest among us? Who is it that, in your mind you think: *wouldn't it be great . . . if God, just this once . . . just a little . . . teach them a lesson!* Doesn't such justice taste sweet just thinking about it?

But before you drink too deeply of that satisfying nectar of justice, know that there are folks who are right now thinking that way about *you!* That *you're* the pain-in-the-neck neighbor. That *you're* on the wrong side of the political fences. That the world would be a better place if only God would raise His right hand against *you!* And *you* were . . . what? Gone, disciplined, put back in your place, crushed. (Oh, I know, no one could possibly think that about *you*, right?)

The truth is that ever since the beginning, we sons of Adam and daughters of Eve **keep forgetting who the enemy really is** – which is exactly how the enemy likes it. Wrapped up in our own lives, wants, and desires, instead of fighting the *real* enemy, *we blame and fight and struggle against each other* and let our real enemy go merrily along his way, wreaking havoc, destroying life, and dragging us down even further. **And we need to**

repent. For in truth, as we bite and devour each other with our sin-filled thoughts, words, deeds, and desires, we have given aid and comfort to the *real* enemy – the enemy that is not just out to make our lives inconvenient, but who is seeking to devour us. That unholy trinity of sin, death, and the devil – or, to perhaps rename them: spiritual death, physical death, and the one who *causes* and *loves* both!

But Jesus has no such confusion! He sees the enemy, and what it is doing to His beautiful creation, and what it is doing to us. He sees the death and destruction, and (if I may speak like this) it makes Him sick. Like a kick in the gut.

And so it was that day outside the city of Nain, where Jesus met the funeral procession of a woman who had already buried her husband, and now was going out to bury her only son. It should not be so. The words of the Holy Gospel put it rather mildly, saying: “*And when the Lord saw her, He had compassion on her.*” But it was much more than mere pity or “feeling our pain” – it was the compassion that comes from the gut; from deep down inside. The compassion that caused the very right hand of God to come down from Heaven, take upon Himself our flesh and blood, and deliver us from this enemy.

You’ve seen such funeral processions like there was that day at Nain. Today ours are with black hearses and cars, but its really the same. And it used to be when a funeral procession was passing through town, and going through intersections, that people would pull their cars over in respect. Now? We’re in too much of a hurry. We get annoyed at the delay, at the inconvenience, at the . . . the *privilege!* (Oh my!) *How warped our minds; how limited our compassion. . . .*

Well notice that day in Nain, Jesus too does not pull over – although He should have! For according to the Law of Moses, dead bodies were unclean. Only those who *had* to touch it were allowed, and they would be unclean for a time. All sensible Jews got out of the way! *But not Jesus! He would not!* He had to touch it. It is why He came. That with His touch He might take the uncleanness, take the sin, take the death, transferring it (as it were) all to Himself, and giving life. The right hand of God in human flesh and blood driving back the life-stealing enemy.

And that is why Jesus is here today, among us, breaking into this funeral procession we call life. For although we may deny it, that is what the enemy has made this life of ours.

Exercising only works for a while. Hiding it with botox doesn't work. It even intrudes at our weddings, when a smiling bride and groom promise "Till death do us part." Eventually will, if it takes that long. For though we struggle mightily against it, there is really nothing we can do in the end. Our efforts fail, and we take our places with the widows of Nain and Zarephath, in mourning.

But even as we admit that terrible reality today, and the havoc that our enemy has wreaked among us and in us . . . open your eyes too to the One who stops that procession! Who does not respectfully pull over and get out of the way, and let us continue on our sin and death march, *but has compassion*. And in compassion reaches out to us and says, "*Young man, [young lady,] I say to you, arise.*" Arise from your sin. Arise from your death. Arise to a life that death cannot end.

And so it was when you were baptized. The right hand of God touched you in those waters, took away your sin, and gave you life.

And so it is when you are absolved. The right hand of God touches you in those words, takes away your sin, and gives you life.

And so it is when the right hand of God touches you with His body to eat and His blood to drink, taking away your sin, and giving you life.

Transferring (as it were) all of our sin and death to Himself. That He be unclean in your place. That He be the sinner in your place. That He die in your place. That His cross be planted between your enemy and you, that if the enemy want you, it would have to be over Jesus' dead body. . . .

And there the enemy has a problem, doesn't he? For while our Saviour once was dead, He is dead no more, but lives! Risen from the dead, the enemy has no power over Him. And so just as Elijah lay on the body of the boy three times to restore Him to life, so has Christ lay in the tomb three days for all humanity to restore us to life. That as He burst the bars of death, *so would we!* That as Christ trampled death, *so will we* - death now being but the bridge we will walk over, to pass from life to life. When on the last day we will hear once more those wonderful of Jesus, "*Young man, [young lady,] I say to you, arise.*" And our bodies will rise from the slumber of death with songs of praise, to die no more.

Does that change your perspective a bit? As to who your enemies are? *How could it not?* For as Jesus gives you life, so also He would give you compassion. His compassion. To see with His eyes the reality of this world – the havoc and devastation of the enemy upon us all – that we too might have compassion on others. And help them to see the One who has come to stop the procession. The One who fought the enemy and won. The right hand of God who delivers us through His death and resurrection. That we proclaim with the people of Nain that “*God has visited His people.*” And that He still is! That He is here. For all. Stopping the procession. And giving us life.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.