

9 June 2013
Pentecost 3

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“Jesus Finds Death and Gives Life”

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

[This is a gentle reworking of a sermon preached three years ago, after a particularly long and arduous week.]

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

A favorite Christmas hymn of many people in *O Little Town of Bethlehem*. Today, however, it is the little town of Nain that is ground zero on the battlefield between God and anti-god. Between the Lord of life, and the death-dealing, life-robbing anti-god of this world, satan.

For this day in Nain, life and death meet. Neither willing to give an inch. Jesus in compassion, death in its cold finality. The procession stops and the battle commences. And with only a touch and a Word, life wins. Death, which looks so big and bad and powerful, is forced to flee and relinquish its grip on this young man. And suddenly where there was sorrow, there is now joy. Where there was mourning, there is now faith. **“God has visited his people!”** they cry. He has come to give life from the dead.

It is a preview, a prologue, of what will take place at Calvary, where on the cross the battle will be taken up again, between God and anti-god, between life and death. And there, on the cross, just as at Nain, the only son of a widow will die. For Him there will be no great crowd of mourners - only a few faithful disciples who take His body down, and a few faithful women who follow to the tomb to see where He is laid. And death again, will look very big and bad and powerful indeed.

But the victory of life here with Jesus will be even greater! For when death is defeated in the resurrection of Jesus, it is not just the resurrection of a single son, like at Nain - Jesus’ resurrection is the resurrection of all. For not just the son of Mary, but the Son of God has passed through death to life, and left the power of death defeated once and for all. **God has visited his people**, and there is life from the dead.

And this, too, is what happened in the case of the apostle Paul, who we heard from in the reading from Galatians. Yes, Paul. For though Paul was very much alive

physically when Jesus came to him on the road to Damascus, he was *spiritually* dead. He was born that way, spiritually dead in his trespasses and sins, just as we. And no matter what he did, he could not give himself spiritual life. And he tried! He *really* tried. He tried harder than any other person. He was doing everything he could to make sure he was going to have spiritual life and eternal life - *persecuting the church, advancing in Judaism, being extremely zealous for the traditions of his fathers*. The early Christians perhaps looked at him as we look at radical Islamists today. And if anybody - *anybody!* - could have done it, could have saved themselves, it was Paul. But *only* when he was visited by Jesus on the road to Damascus was Paul raised from the death of his sin to life.

But . . . was it really a *resurrection* that happened to Paul? A new life? You tell me - Paul went from focusing on what he did, his own efforts and his own advancement, to preaching Christ and what He had done. And, in fact, so great was this change, this new life given to Paul, that the people were utterly, jaw-droppingly, amazed. All they could say was: ***“He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.”*** And they didn’t glorify Paul because of the change he was able to make in his life; because he was able to turn over a new leaf. No! *They glorified God because of [Paul]*. They glorified God because of the resurrection and new life that only God can give, when He visits His people.

And this is what has happened to you as well. God has visited you and given you life from the dead - not immediately, as He did with the widow at Nain and the apostle Paul, but more like He did with Elijah and the son of the widow at Zarephath. There we heard that Elijah took the widow’s dead son, stretched himself out on the boy three times, and prayed to the God of life for life. And God gave life, so that the widow then confessed, ***“the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth.”***

That is a preview, a prologue, of what takes place here at the Font, when the battle between life and death is again taken up by God in Holy Baptism. For here, sons and daughters are brought dead in trespasses and sins - but they are taken up in the arms of the pastor, have water applied to them three times, and the Word of God spoken upon them. *And the Word of the Lord spoken here is truth*. Like at Nain, with simply a touch and a Word, death is forced to flee and sin is forced to relinquish its grip on you - and you are raised and given a new life. For here, in these waters, *God visits His people* and gives life. Here in these waters, you were joined to Jesus and raised in His resurrection. Here in these waters, your spiritual resurrection is the prelude and promise of your physical resurrection, when in the end your body, too, will be raised from death *to live before God in righteousness and purity forever*.

We sang in the Office Hymn, right before the sermon, *“When in the hour of deepest need, we know not where to look for aid . . .”* (LSB #615 v. 1) That sounds like

the widows we heard about today, and Paul, who was looking but in the wrong place - in what *he* could do. And how often does that describe us? For all the needs that arise in our lives, the trials and troubles that never seem to stop coming, the stresses and challenges that are ever new. And when we are faced with death - either our own, or of a friend or loved one. Deep needs . . . and how often we *know not where to look for aid*. It all seems so overwhelming. So final. Or maybe we know, but still feel lost, or unworthy, or think that since we got ourselves into this mess we have to get ourselves out of this mess, or even think that God *won't* help. For all of that is what Satan wants you to believe. That you have no place to go; that you have to do it yourself.

We know not where to look for aid. As I was thinking about that I thought of the recent tornados in Oklahoma and the people standing around and looking around and wondering where to go for aid. Or the pictures we see from Syria of the innocent people caught up in the fighting there. Or maybe for you it's a smaller thing but just as damaging - the sin-wrought devastation in your life. What others have done, what you have done. Sin and death continue their assault - they're not going to stop. And how often *we know not where to look for aid*. Or we know, but we doubt, or we forget, or our minds get so clouded with fear or hurt or pain . . .

But did you notice in our readings today - the widows and Paul, who didn't know where to look for aid? **God found them.**

He positioned Elijah to be with that widow in her grief; Jesus came to that widow burying her only son; and Jesus came to Paul while he was on the way to get more Christians. **We may not know what to do, but Jesus knows and comes to us.** Maybe this week's building collapse in Philadelphia is a good picture of that. Trapped under the rubble of sin, Jesus comes and finds us. And through the power of His own death and *burial* and resurrection, He now raises us and washes us clean from the filth of sin that has covered us, and sets us free with a new life to live.

And so just as the little town of Nain became ground zero for Jesus in the battle of life and death, so for us ground zero is here, where Jesus is still coming and visiting His people to give us life. First at the font, but now also at the altar, as the very body and blood of Jesus are placed into your mouth and poured over your tongue. Here, as you hear those sin-cleansing words: *I forgive you all your sins*. Here, where in your deepest need, your compassionate Saviour comes to you and says: *Fear not. I am with you*. And where I am, the jaws of sin, death, grave, and hell cannot harm you. For I have defeated them all. I have won. And in me you have life.

And living that new life given to you, ground zero for the Lord's visitation also then becomes wherever the Word of the Lord goes with you; wherever God positions you for others - in your home, in your workplace, at your school. For where you

speaking His Word of truth, there our Lord is, and there He is working. Working in the hearts of those who hear. Working to give life from the dead. Doing battle against sin and death, that all may have life.

For when God visits His people, there is life. For widows, for apostles, for you. Not a life that means the end of troubles, but one that endures through them. For the life that your Saviour gives is no mere life, but His life. The life of the cross, of love, of suffering, of service, of victory. That life is yours in Him. That life you now live. That life we now live together. A new life, a good life, a good works life, a forgiven life, a resurrection life, a Christ life.

O Little Town of Nain . . . It doesn't quite have the ring to it that O Little Town of Bethlehem does! But how blessed are you, O little Nain, and little towns just like you, like *here*, where God visits His people. Blessed indeed, where God finds death, and gives life.

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

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.