

When God Comes to Visit
Luke 7:11-17
June 5, 2016

Soon afterward [Jesus] 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. 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. Fear seized them all, and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has arisen among us!" and "God has visited his people!" And this report about him spread through the whole of Judea and all the surrounding country.

Have you ever had your doctor or your dentist or your chiropractor ask you, "On a scale of 1 to 10, describe the pain you're feeling – with 1 being no pain at all, and 10 being very severe pain."

In the world of medical practice, that question is fairly new. Doctors used to figure a certain amount of pain went with the territory. Your job, as the patient, was to bear it with a stiff upper lip. Groan or cry out, and you might be lucky enough to receive some form of crude pain medication, but apart from that small mercy, you were pretty much on your own.

Today, things are different. Today, there's a whole field of medicine called *pain management*. More and more, doctors are treating pain as a disorder in itself. "Idiopathic pain" – pain with no clear reason – has become an accepted medical diagnosis.

Back in the old days – the really old days, a couple hundred years ago – pain was taken for granted. It was considered a part of life. There wasn't much anyone could do about pain, so no one wasted time trying. There was no science of anesthesia.

If you were sitting on a Civil War battlefield with a bullet wound through your thigh, and you saw the army surgeon coming your way, with amputation saw in hand, the first thing you'd do was drink a pint of whiskey. Then, you'd bite down on a chunk of wood, or maybe a lead bullet. That's where the expression, "bite the bullet," comes from. There was nothing else you could do.

In his book, *The Problem of Pain*, C. S. Lewis gives us this very sobering thought: "Lay down this book and reflect for five minutes on the fact that all the great religions were first preached, and long practiced, in a world without chloroform."

As Jesus walked the highways and byways of Judea and the surrounding area, he saw a great amount of human pain. In every marketplace there were beggars, many of whom suffered from physical deformities no doctor, at that time, could correct – cleft palates, club feet, broken bones that never healed properly.

There were bands of lepers, wrapped in filthy rags, fingers and toes and noses slowly lost to the dread disease. There were mentally ill people, lost in their delusions, with no psychoactive drugs to help them keep a grip on reality. Most folks figured they were possessed by demons, and walked a wide path around them. Jesus knew pain, all right, it was all around him, everywhere he looked. He even knew the pain of the cross.

This brings us to the widow in the Gospel reading. As Jesus and his disciples enter the little village of Nain, they come upon an especially gut-wrenching display of pain. They probably heard it even before they saw the funeral procession: the woeful lamenting of a grieving woman. The woman was walking along behind a sort of stretcher. Laid out on the stretcher was the body of her only son.

This woman is already a widow. But now, she was doubly cursed, because she had also lost her only son. We might be tempted to think, “What an unfortunate woman, having to bear the pain of severe grief not once, but twice!” But that’s only the half the story. This poor woman was weeping over her son, just as she had wept over her dead husband, but her losses went far deeper than that. With the loss of the only two males in her family, this woman had lost her livelihood, as well as her position in society.

It’s hard for us to imagine, but in those days, women were dependent on their husbands for everything. When a girl was married, usually as young as age 13 or 14, she left the home of her parents forever, and went off to live with her husband’s family. Legally, she became part of that household. If she bore her husband sons, her position became secure, because, if her husband died before she did, her sons would take care of her. That was one of the most solemn obligations in that culture – the bond between a mother and her sons.

All of that, besides the genuine grief of losing another loved one, was why the widow of Nain was so devastated. First, her husband died, and her financial security was pulled out from under her. Then, she lost her son, which threatened her with utter ruin. If she was lucky, some male relative of her husband would take her in, as a sort of household servant: room and board, in exchange for manual labor. If she was unlucky, and there was no male relative, she would be consigned to a life of begging – or, if she still had her looks, the miserable and short life of a prostitute.

It was at this point in the widow’s story that Jesus came up to this woman, who was so utterly grief-stricken and said to her: *Do not weep* (LK 7:13 ESV). What an extraordinary thing to say! A seminary pastoral counseling professor, grading Jesus’ counseling method, would have scrawled a big, red “F” on the top of that case study. These days, counselors are taught to listen carefully to clients’ feelings and validate them. To walk into a situation of terrible pain and say, “There, there, don’t cry” seems to contradict the whole counseling approach. Yet that’s exactly what Jesus said. Amazing!

Even more amazing is what he does next. Luke tells us: *Then he came up and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still* (LK 7:14 ESV). Sure, they stood still. They would have been

looking at Jesus with a mixture of horror and astonishment. Jesus was a rabbi, a teacher, and he actually touched the stretcher on which a dead body was laid out.

That made him ritually unclean. Because of that innocent little touch, Jesus was supposed to go out and wash his entire body in a ritual fashion, all the while chanting special prayers for purity. Only after he had completed those actions could he take up his religious duties once again. However, Jesus knew full well what he was doing when he touched the boy's stretcher. And he did it anyway.

What happened next is even more amazing. Jesus commanded the young man to rise, which he did. Luke tells us what happened after that: *Fear seized [the people], and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has arisen among us!"* (Lk 7:16 ESV).

The people could only have one prophet in mind: the mighty prophet Elijah, who worked wonders and raised the dead. In the Old Testament reading from 1 Kings, Elijah raised the son of the widow of Zarephath after the boy had died.

Elijah saved that boy's mother from exactly the same fate as the widow of Nain. Luke follows the details of the 1 Kings story almost exactly. His message is crystal-clear: Jesus, was more than just great prophet. Jesus was the one who held the power over death. Jesus was the one and only true Son of God.

The other thing the people of Nain said, after witnessing this miracle, goes even further: *God has visited his people!* (Lk 7:16 ESV).

The Greek can go one of two ways; it literally means "visited," but also means "come to help." Both widows, the widow of Zarephath and the widow of Nain, were experiencing the worst tragedy imaginable, the loss of all their male relatives. But even though society would shun them, the Lord visits them. These women are not forgotten, after all. They are remembered. They are loved.

One of the worst things about being in pain, whether physical or emotional, is the thought that you may have to face it alone. Nurses, Stephen Ministers, pastors, very good friends, all of these people can be a Godsend in times of pain. The understanding presence of another human being is a great comfort.

We're in a very different place, these days, when it comes to treating pain. But this doesn't mean pain has been banished from our world. At times we may pretend that's true – believing, against all evidence, it's possible to have a pain-free life – but if we do, we'll be disappointed sooner or later.

There will come a time for all of us when we find ourselves hard up against some sort of pain. Modern medicine may blunt the pain, but it's powerless to eliminate it completely. In such a time, there's nothing to do but to seek the Lord for help to deal with it. This help doesn't come from within ourselves. It only comes from the One who, by grace, lives in our hearts: the Holy Spirit.

When Jesus told his disciples: *I am with you always, to the end of the age* (Mt 28:20 ESV), he meant it. Jesus promises us his presence in good time and bad times, in pleasure and in pain. Our God knows how we feel. How does he know? Jesus knows the pain of having loved ones die. Jesus knows the pain of being betrayed by a friend. Jesus knows how badly physical pain can hurt. You can't have a pain that your God has not personally experienced. That's why he is so close to us when we hurt.

Jesus doesn't promise us a life that's pain-free or trouble-free. What he does promise us is this: *In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world* (Jn 16:33 NIV). This side of heaven, what more do we need?