

Epworth Chapel on the Green
June 5, 2016
Pentecost 3
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

I Kings 17:17-24
Psalm 30:1-13
Galatians 1:11-24
Luke 7:11-17

Both our Old Testament and Gospel lessons today present us with miracle stories, where the only son of a widow is raised up from death.

In our Gospel, Jesus encounters a funeral procession as the body is being borne outside the city gates to be buried. Jesus sees what is happening, and we are told that his heart “overflowed with compassion.”

What an image. Have you ever stopped to consider that this is exactly the way Jesus feels when he looks at you?

If I gave each of you a 3x5 index card this morning and asked you to write how you feel about your life and your circumstances, no doubt the responses would be varied. One word summaries might include things like:

- *Frustrated
- *Angry
- *Sad
- *Grief-stricken
- *Discouraged
- *Failure
- *Confused
- *Frightened
- *Hopeless

These words may describe, or partially describe, how *you* feel about your life this morning. But have you ever considered what *Jesus* feels about your situation?

When Jesus looks at you this morning, none of the words I've just listed are in the picture. When Jesus looks at you, his heart is touched by the things that touch *you*. ***Jesus looks at you today with eyes of love, and his heart overflows with compassion.*** That's how Jesus sees *you*.

That's how he sees this woman in our Gospel story. He walks over to her son's coffin and commands him to rise up.

What strikes me here is not so much the miracle (great as it is!) but the *response* to the miracle by the crowds. Luke tells us that after Jesus raises the boy up, that *great fear* sweeps over the crowd. The word "fear" here is *phobos*, from which we get our English word "phobia." It is not so much "holy awe" (e.g., the "fear" of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom), as it is *abject terror*.

I suppose in one sense that witnessing someone being raised from the dead *would* be terrifying. I've never personally witnessed something like this, but when you think about it, it would be pretty frightening. But I wonder if there might be something more going on here that would frighten me, just as the folks in the text are gripped with fear.

What if it's not just the miracle itself, but what the miracle *represents*, that causes us problems?

What I mean is that the miracle itself is powerful, but that powerful act unleashes God's activity in our lives, and sometimes we are not sure how to deal with it.

Novelist Leif Enger says it like this:

Real miracles bother people, like strange sudden pains unknown in medical literature. It's true: they rebut every rule all we good citizens take comfort in. Lazarus obeying orders and climbing up out of the grave – now there's a miracle, and you can bet it upset a lot of folks who were standing around at the time. When a person dies, the earth is generally unwilling to cough him back up. A miracle contradicts the will of earth. (Peace Like a River)

Enger says that real miracles can cause fear in us because when we witness one, many of the things that we count on for order and stability in our lives seem “up for grabs.”

And there is the rub. With biting precision, he gives the real reason we fear miracles: *People fear miracles because they fear being changed.*

And suddenly, the words of this Gospel text from Luke confront *me*, not just those who heard them. I am brought face to face with the fact that when God shows up and goes to work in my life, things can go topsy-turvy in a hurry. Many of the rules I count on for order and stability now seem “up for grabs.”

Think about it. You may not have seen a dead person raised up to life. But chances are good that you know someone who has been healed from a grave illness. Chances are good that you know someone who by all measure of common

sense should *not* be alive today, but they are. Chances are good that you have witnessed a true miracle – if not in your life, then in someone else’s.

What do we make of that? Do we just toss it aside and go on with life? Or do we come to grips with the fact that when God intervenes in our lives, things will not be the same – and that usually means *change*. I fear God’s miraculous activity in my life because that means being changed. It means that I am no longer in charge. My life is not my own.

There’s another side to this. People fear miracles because they fear being changed, yes. *But ignoring those miracles will also change you.* You can try to deny them and push them underground, but with each passing day your heart will grow a little colder and become a little harder.

But usually no miracle goes without a witness. Someone is usually there to declare: “Here is what I saw. Here’s how it went. Make of it what you will.”

This is, in part, what happens in the Gospel text. The people see what has occurred, and they exclaim: “God has visited us today. God is on the scene.”

As we prepare to come to the Lord’s Table today, I am reminded that God often shows up in our lives to do something strange and miraculous. When that happens, it’s normal to be gripped with fear.

But the one we’re afraid of is the same one whose heart is overflowing with compassion. “Do not cry,” he said to the bereaved woman. And to us this

morning I believe he says: “Do not be afraid.” In the emblems of bread and wine he says today, “Do not fear my miraculous work in your life, for I am the Lord your God, and I do all things well.”

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