

TURNING THE SIGN AROUND

A Sermon for the Second Sunday after Pentecost, June 6, 2010

Text: Luke 7:11-17

One day Jesus and his disciples and a large crowd were walking to Pleasant.

The sign at the edge of the village said “Nain,” but in their language that meant “pleasant.” The village was probably called Pleasant because of its pleasing view toward the broad and fertile Esdraelon valley to the northwest. Approaching Pleasant, they came upon something a little *unpleasant*. A reminder of death. A large group of people bringing a dead body out to be buried. (You couldn’t bury the dead *in town*.) When they got close, they learned that this was the body of a young man who had been the only son of a widow. What an unlucky woman! Her life had just gone from bad to worse.

The crowd with Jesus could have politely stepped aside and let the other procession go on to the cemetery, the way cars yield to a funeral procession even today. But when Jesus understood the situation, he felt compassion *for the woman*. He told her not to weep. He approached the stretcher on which the body was being carried, and touched it. (Not the normal thing to do, and somewhat unpleasant, as this would have made him impure by contact.) Then he spoke authoritatively: “Young man, I say to you, rise!” The dead man sat up and began to speak. Jesus, always great on the follow-through, “gave him to his mother.”

At that point, Luke says, “fear seized them all.” I think not just fear but uncertainty and confusion and excitement. I think there might have been hysterical laughing and bursts of shouting, as well as some weeping. Because, one moment they all thought they knew what was going on. They might not have been happy, but they were taking care of business in an orderly manner, doing what had to be done. And the next moment, Jesus interrupted the proceedings with words and actions as surprising as the punch line of a good joke, and everything was up for grabs. Jesus had re-mapped their certainties. He had turned the sign around.

Before, things were what they were. Death. Sad day. Things go wrong. How things are. Too bad. Very sorry. Life is like that. Nothing much you can say, really. And her son, too! Tsk. Well, nobody promised her a rose garden. Life isn’t easy. You win some, you lose some. And then you die. Well, too bad for her. Probably, if she had had more faith, this wouldn’t have happened to them. To her. To Pleasant. After all, we get what we deserve, because God is not unjust. And isn’t her son dying before his time just another sign of how unhappy God is with his people? Clouds were obscuring the sun today, but the clouds would pass.

Then Jesus dramatically turned the sign around. **That very young man whose death had been a bad sign—became the son whose life was a good sign!** A sign that was like a rainbow set amid their clouds. A sign that made people exclaim things like: “A great prophet has arisen among us!” and “God has looked favorably upon his people!” A sign that reminded the people

of how their favorite prophet Elijah had raised a widow's son to life, some eight hundred years earlier, so that she began to believe in Elijah.

Jesus gave the man back to his mother. "Woman, behold your son." In the process, what he gave Pleasant was what he had been peddling throughout Galilee: the shocking news that God was now recovering his people. This news was flying like a rumor from village to village: "All is not lost." The people in Galilee, you have to remember, had been ripped away from their place more than seven hundred years before, by the Assyrians. The remnant left behind never fully recovered their place among God's people. They had no return from exile, like the Judeans who returned to Jerusalem in 536 B.C. Pharisee missionaries had tried to restore godliness to Galilee, but their work was not an overwhelming success. Galileans remained vulnerable to reminders that they were at best second class children of God. They were a people who were lost, not on a Pacific island, but *in their own land*. Which, by the way, had been the message of that prophet Elijah. Nain was not all that nain.

It is hard work to turn a sign around. I tried once, when I was eighteen. I was driving an ice cream truck on a back road outside of New Albany, and I sideswiped a road sign with an arrow which marked a curve. I wasn't texting; I was counting the money in my cigar box. When I hit the sign I twisted it. I thought I had better fix it so nobody read the sign wrong, so I got out and tried to twist it back the right way! But steel sign posts are not made to be twisted by hand, and I sure couldn't pull it out of the ground. Then I realized that the sign was still pointing the right way after all! I had not struck it all that hard.

People are always reading significance into things that happen. We take this or that event as an indicator of How Things Are. Different people and different cultures pick up on different signs, of course, but there is a common tendency to load a lot of significance onto things going wrong. In Nain, death was not a good sign. Very likely, when the woman's husband had died people had wondered what she had done to deserve that. You remember how the disciples of Jesus once asked him, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" The same dynamic was afoot at Nain. And when her only *son* then died, people probably dredged up a way to pin that on her, as well. They may even have treated her with some suspicion, held her at arm's length. Surely God would not have taken away her husband and her son and left her bereft if she didn't deserve it? Could they remember anything she had said or done, that might make sense of her double tragedy? She would ever after be referred to as the woman whose husband and then her only son had died, as if that were who she really was. Her fate was her stigma.

But then Jesus pulled that sign out of the ground and turned it around, by raising her son to life.

The Bible offers us an interpretation of reality that is not totally cheerful. There is no Book of Pollyanna. It does not tell us to *ignore* bad signs and just be happy. We are not told, "always look at the bright side." The Bible is realistic about sin, and it lays the responsibility for what is

wrong with the world at our feet. The judgment from the time of the flood has not altered: "God saw that the world was corrupt and full of violence." Signs of that still surround us.

What the Bible offers alongside of that interpretation of sin, and the condemnation of sin, is a powerful insistence that God's love for us is able to overcome our sin, so that the bottom line about us will not be sin, judgment, and death; but holiness, righteousness, and life. Not just for the Pharisees among us, but for all of us.

At the center of our faith is a sort of rainbow-sign that God has not given up on us but wants the world to be rescued, and that is the cross. "Christ crucified." The cross was a heinous sign of cruel oppression in the hands of the Romans. The Roman general Crassus once crucified six thousand slaves by the side of the roads in Italy as a sign to the other slaves: don't rebel again. Do not attempt to get free.

That heinous sign was turned around when God raised up his only Son on Easter. He made that sign a sign of life and freedom. And he put that sign upon us so that we might also be, by our living for him, signs of hope to the world, signs of God's love for all.

We are all shaped like crosses, and our lives should be, too. Turned around like St. Paul in the second reading today, living no longer for ourselves but for others, and thereby giving glory to God, rather than being a big disappointment. Amen.

