

*I say to you, rise* (10Feb19) Luke7:1-17

A Narrative Lectionary bonus! Two stories for the price of one! Not really much connected, but piled together. Maybe they both have healing and Jesus saving somebody, sort of like last week we had two different reflections about sabbath.

The second part seems like a bigger deal, but let's not ignore the first part and so pause for a couple introductory observances.

One: I'm not sure of the centurion's sense of how it works. I like his line for not troubling Jesus, which is repeated in Catholic churches before communion ("Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and your servant shall be healed"). But I'm not exactly sure what the centurion is comparing the business of his bossiness to.

Mostly when Luke uses the word "authority," it is about having power over demons and unclean spirits. Jesus can share authority as he sends out the apostles with the same task. Very clearly it's telling us that in Jesus, we are seeing God's work. Jesus is powerful because God's Spirit rests on him.

But it's odd to me that the centurion would say that Jesus' authority is in giving commands from afar, as if that's the main point. Maybe he's commanding the illness to go away, giving orders for some uncleanness to release the servant. If it's not that, I'm not sure whom the centurion figures Jesus is in charge of. At any rate, it's impressive that he recognizes Jesus' authority from God, especially since he wouldn't be obvious to compliment Jesus.

That leads to observance two about this first story: These should be opponents. Jesus shouldn't want to help these guys. A slave would be written off as lower class, or not even quite human in some eyes, property instead of a person. But Jesus isn't going to be held back by that negative or shameful view of humanity.

More surprising is the centurion. That title means he's a commander of 100 soldiers. He's living in Capernaum, next to the lake, where Jesus lived, a town of maybe 1500 residents, which

would mean that for every 15 peasants, there was one soldier, all under this officer, there enforcing the empire's intimidating order, collecting taxes, confining what was possible in worship and everything else. Maybe this centurion was a decent guy who tried to get along with his neighbors, but his role was still the office of an enemy and big enough that he was well-compensated for doing it.

We don't have much way to envision this. We don't have experience of being watched and restricted as we simply try to proceed with life. It's some of what Palestinians have to deal with now, in the occupation under the Israeli surveillance state. We might make rough estimates of these weeks in Venezuela or the #BlackLivesMatter sense of police oppression, though those are both domestic forces and not a foreign occupier.

The point is, Jesus here is helping the empire, the opponent, the bad guy. He's giving a gift to the commander of the powers that were violently against his own people and their way of life. If it's about sides, Jesus is on the wrong side.

But this is bigger. This remarkable statement about the spread of salvation is God's mission leaves nobody out, so all flesh and people of every nation may know it. Slaves won't be disregarded. As much as we'd want to say the villainous deserve vengeance against them, to be burned by God's wrath, this won't exclude even them from blessing. This isn't for Jesus' siblings or compatriots alone, not even for his race and clan first. This is for all. And for his part, the centurion recognized that in Jesus.

This passage is one of the small turning points in Luke's Gospel. In chapter four, Jesus had launched his public ministry with a declaration that the Spirit of the Lord was upon him, anointing him to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (4:18-19). For three chapters, Jesus had been doing more and more of that, healing and releasing from illness and for those trapped in

cultural obstructions, offering life. And it keeps spreading.

His fellow citizens probably wanted him to proclaim release from captivity of the empire, a revolution to kick out the occupying powers, but instead Jesus is working something even bigger than that, so is liberating the captor, releasing the oppressor, helping the centurion.

That may not get our vote, and just how wide this spreads still continues to surprise us. We want to restrict it, to say it must be earned, to make it reciprocal, to qualify it with qualifiers or qualifications, to rule out some and maybe to question whether it could even be too good to be true in our own lives.

The book by kind of the premier Old Testament professor these days Walter Brueggemann that GEMS were reading has a good line: “It is as though Jesus starts every meeting by asking, ‘Are there any here with withered hands, any widows, any orphans, any aliens, any lepers, any blind, any poor, any homeless? Come forward and be the focus of healing attention.’”<sup>3\*</sup> Those we would be most likely to leave out, Jesus is most insistent on. Those we would reject, he includes. Those who seem beyond help are his first choice.

And then comes the grand capper, the top story, the ultimate surprise of this section of the Gospel. It includes not only a widow, but a widow whose son has died, a woman who would’ve been at risk anyway and now is entirely without assistance, as good as dead herself. Yet Jesus is intent on this spread of life and release from what would confine or destroy it. So he finds himself in the middle of the funeral procession.

Now, it’s one thing to bring good news to the poor. It may even be impressive to heal lepers or to offer restoration to untouchables. It may stretch our imaginations and risk our self-preservation to break protocols of decency in reaching out to those deemed socially unacceptable and outside the limits of typical concern. These are things Jesus has been up to, and it’s already been a lot.

But this will blow all that out of the water. The most we might think is to offer condolences to the mother, to set up some aid program to meet her needs, to create some new social bonds and structure now that her son is gone. But those still operate within the limits of death, and Jesus won’t be so confined.

Young man, I say to you, rise.

And he gave him back to his mother.

There is none who is beyond the help of Jesus. Ever. There is no physical way to be outside the bounds of his saving work. There is nothing that can shut up his word of life.

This is so phenomenal that words can’t quite express or capture it. I’m amused by the term here that seems to effect the miracle. Jesus says, “Rise.” On the one hand, it’s the word that applies for Easter morning, for the resurrection, for that lifesaving event that turns all expectations of existence on their head: Alleluia! Christ is risen!

But it’s also extremely ordinary. Rise is the word for standing up when you’ve been sitting. It’s a word for parents telling you to get out of bed. Even death is only like sleep to Jesus, as he gently rouses you saying, “hey, it’s time to get up.” Awake, O sleeper, rise from death, and Christ will give you life! (ELW 452)

While proclaiming the unstoppable goodness of God’s blessing and work of life, I would mostly like to let fly with the promise and let it echo as broadly and resoundingly as it should.

But I also want to make sure the qualities or qualifications of your life don’t let you feel removed from this release, beyond the reach, somehow left out. There are illnesses that don’t go away, diseases that never feel eased. There is suffering that just keeps going and going. There are struggles and sorrows we can’t get past. There are reverberating Why questions never answered. There are times when being told “Do not weep” would seem cruelly uncaring rather than reassuring. There is captivity much too long confining. There generally feels like more bad news piling up than good, not only for the poor but for many of our lives.

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\* *A Gospel of Hope*, p63

And especially when this isn't ultimately our own story of a son brought back to life. We face death. We don't want it to be the end. We want the funeral procession interrupted. We want Jesus to reach out with his miraculous and powerful word, with his full authority, to drive away the demonic enemy of death.

For you who have had to encounter the intimacy of death, who know its sting, who have asked why, who have wished it would be kept at bay, who haven't gotten relief and have had to continue with the diminished dimmed life of your own but without a loved one, this story may bear the feeling of loss, of being ignored. Why did Jesus see that widow and call to this young man, but not to you?

But this story doesn't stand as an isolated incident, a peculiar exception. This story is the assurance that salvation in Jesus spreads for all, that his gift of life will not be stopped. Just as much as infirmities and germs can't stop this blessing, just as political boundaries can never wall it off, just as societal standards crumble by comparison, so not even death will be its undoing. The word of eternal life is already today for you to rise up. Get up. Go on your way. Your faith has made you well. Jesus saves. Awake and stay woke. As I say to all, I say to you, Rise.