

Requiescat in Pace – Benjamin Joshua Whittier

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Hebrews 10:19-25

Luke 7:11-17

A mother wept. She, along with her friends and family, was in a dreary procession of death. No parent dreams of delivering their child to the cemetery. It was not a chance encounter, what happens next. An entourage of life was making its way through the streets of Nain. The Author of Life led this procession and He had planned this encounter. He had come to undo what death had wrought. “Young man, I say to you, arise” (Luke 7:14). Death yields to this voice. The Author of Life speaks with authority, a grave shattering authority. “Young man, I say to you, arise;” and it was so. Right then, Easter broke out on the city streets of Nain. The one who was dead was now alive. Death would not the victor be; not this day; not this young man. “God has visited his people” (Luke 7:16). That’s what the witnesses shouted. They were absolutely right.

The Bible is way more than a collection of dramatic stories. The Bible is way more than a history book, way more than a cold account of past events. Holy Scripture is a window into the world in which you walk. That Gospel episode of the Lord Christ in the streets of Nain is the reality that surrounds us, the reality that defines this day. We are not detached from that story. Ben is in the middle of that day, that event, that encounter. The widow of Nain, the mother, she is nameless. The young lad who was raised – we don’t know his name either. We don’t know his character, the color of his eyes, the way he laughed, how good of a swimmer he was, how he smiled. What we know is Ben. A gentle lad, humble and kind, so easy going, so naturally mellow. Every single one of us knew Ben – he was so marvelously unflappable. I was with him a few summers ago when he trashed his knee pretty good. No self-pity, no whining – he described the pain but that was about it. He hobbled across campus, leaning on my shoulder – and he wanted to call his mom. Linda knows Ben; Joshua and Linda both, they know him. Benjamin warmed their hearts – he was loving, responsive as a son – an enormous blessing.

More than them, more than Joshua and Linda, on a deeper level, the Lord of Life knows Ben. Even before God formed Benjamin Joshua in the womb, God knew Him (Jeremiah 1:5). The Almighty knit Ben together in his mother’s womb (Psalm 139:13). Ben was fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139:14). God knows all of us. In every way imaginable, God knows all of us. Love allies Him to us – His love knows no boundary. Love created us. Love redeemed us. Love sanctified us. Love brings us home. When Jesus encountered the grieving mother in the dusty streets of Nain, He took her in. His eyes saw her – completely. St. Luke is keen to tell us what stirred in Christ’s heart. He had compassion. Do you know what divine compassion is? Do you know what divine compassion does? God sees us in our sin and our death and He acts. The only begotten Son of God leaps into Mary’s womb for He comes to act. Conceived by the Holy Spirit, God takes up our human flesh to venture in our dusty streets, streets that are stricken by grief, by pain, by loss. Compassion for you; God sees you and He extends Himself into His own creation to ally Himself to you, to bring you life.

It is nothing short of tragic that Ben died on a hike that was meant as cheerful recreation, as youthful adventure, as a happy diversion. But look around, this life is full of tragedy. Life in this world is fragile. Threats abound. We have attempted to insulate ourselves from death, but it

is always near. This world is broken. There are forces around us that we cannot master. Man is not in control of life and death. We are so obviously in need. “Do not weep” (Luke 7:13). That is what Jesus said to the mother bereft of her son. “Do not cry.” Those weren’t maudlin words; it wasn’t an encouragement for her to pick up her emotional bootstraps and carry on. It was a verbal prelude to sorrow’s demise. Jesus doesn’t administer spiritual anesthesia to our broken hearts. He confronts death head on and unleashes the power of the resurrection. Young man, I say to you, arise! That is Ben. That is our young lad! The brown eyed, chocolate milk skinned young lad who swam with grace and smiled with easy charm.

The only begotten son of the widow was called to life in the streets of Nain by the Only-begotten Son of God. That episode was tied to Golgotha, Calvary, the place where Christ defeated death once for all. Compassion for us all led Him there, led Him to the altar of the cross. Sin would not have free reign. Death would not speak its dark sentence without a divine rebuttal. Christ laid down His life. As a vulnerable man, God exposes Himself to the forces of evil. As true God, Jesus contends for us. He bears all of our sin in His body. The devil spent his rage against a nature that was subject to his attacks. Satan demanded the tribute of death and Jesus died. By this bloody sacrifice, Jesus raises the widow’s son. The Holy One died in such a way that death lost its power. Beneath the sin of others, there – hidden beneath the sin of you and me – in Jesus Himself was a holiness so great, so marvelous and powerful that death could not hold Him. He is risen. The next moment came earlier, the next moment came prior to that chronologically, but the next moment is an extension of Easter – Young man, I say to you, arise.

The very next moment after that is Ben. On that trail, with human tragedy playing itself out in his fragile body, Ben met with Easter, Ben met with the Lord of Easter. Come to me, Ben. Take the yoke of my resurrection upon you and learn of life. I have known you Ben, and you have known Me. In Me is life and you are in Me. Young man, I say to you, arise. The Lord Christ breathed into Ben the breath of resurrection and Ben became alive in every sense imaginable. Christ is risen and life is the Victor. On that trail, in our young lad – life is the Victor.

Linda says that it was Ben that brought her to church. Isn’t that beautiful? The baby she had prompted her to join St. John in Colton. Mother intent on seeing that her son grew up in the faith, which was prompted by God giving Ben to her. It is so marvelously reciprocal. Linda knows that Ben belongs to God, always has. Poignant words, words that will break your heart are these: Linda says that Ben never belonged to her, God just gave Ben to her for a time. For that time, she will be forever grateful. To be sure, we all belong to God. He is our Father. But we do belong to each other as well. We are a family of faith, calling each other brother, sister. Some members of our family precede us into heaven, but we shall reunite. There is a reason that we don’t curl up in a ball and fade to black when we face grief. We *are* strong. We *are* courageous. We are consoled in grief because Christ is active among us – bringing us the hope, the confidence that comes from His Word, comes from His cross, comes from His empty tomb. We are not alone for the Lord God Almighty is with us. He emboldens us to live, not for this life, but for the one to come. Therefore, we do not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but we encourage one another (Hebrews 10:24-25). Faith makes itself known in difficulty. Christ makes Himself known in difficulty.

Ben's confirmation verse is exceedingly apropos. "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful" (Hebrews 10:23). The empty tomb makes us resolute. He who promised *is* faithful. We are sure of what we hope for because we are a people of faith. God breathed that faith in Benjamin. God saved him by the blood of Christ. God washed Ben in that holiness when he was baptized and God brought Ben through death into life eternal. Ben has life to the full. More than any of you have ever known, more than what this world offers. He has gone ahead of us, but we will all follow, each in our own time. May our ears pine for the words Ben has heard: Young man, I say to you, arise.