**3 Pentecost, June 9, 2013, 1 Kings 18: 8-16; Ps 14; Gal 1: 11-24; Luke 7:11-17**

The bull-moose was right in front of me on the trail. I did my best to be as quiet and invisible as possible. Here in the Park, I have been a bystander a lot lately. I not only have been watching the beautiful mountain views and the incredible wildflowers, but I also am wildlife watching. A bystander is defined as **“someone who is an onlooker, a spectator, a person who is watching but not participating**.” Yes, I am happily and contentedly a bystander-as a person who “leaves no trace.” As I hike here watching a wolf or elk run by, a bison munch in a field, I try not to be a part of the ecosystem they live in—because then I would be disturbing it and they would not be here. Most of these species shy away from us humans, and are adversely affected by us. So with them it is good to be a bystander, but there is a not-so-good-way to be a bystander too. This not-so-good way is labeled by social psychologists as the “**bystander effect**.” The “bystander effect” refers to situations where individuals do not offer help to someone who is in need of help. In our society the “bystander effect” is not uncommon and is well documented. People go by as crimes are committed, and don’t help out. Oh sure, we hear about wonderful examples like Flight 93 on 911, but more often we seem to be a society of on-lookers who care deeply only about those who are really close to us. What is the cause of the bystander effect? Researchers report many reasons but the bottom line is we don’t want to get involved: we are fearful of becoming tangled up, for fear of the consequences. We watch and feel sad, but we don’t want to be directly, personally involved. It is easier that way. Is God like this too? Is God a bystander with us, as we go about our lives? Today’s Scripture readings answer this question.

In today’s Gospel we see Jesus on a road trip - a walking road trip. By this time in His ministry on earth, Jesus is well known - for His miracles, healings, and profound teachings. He is a celebrity who has his “handlers” to protect Him from the crowds. So here He is is going along, surrounded by a throng of people. He is approaching the entrance to a town called Nain; Nain is a small town about 9 miles south of his hometown of Nazareth, in a mountainous area near Mt. Tabor, which is also the Mount of Transfiguration-which happened not long after this Gospel story occurred (*you wouldn’t consider this mountain to be a real mountain compared to the ones here, as it is only about 1800 feet high, but it is considered a mountain there compared to the surrounding desert, which includes the dead sea which is about 1300 feet below sea level*). In this context, we expect that Jesus will just keep on going through the crowds to His destination-- He was probably longing to sleep and eat after an exhausting day. What happens in this Gospel scene, however, goes against our expectations. As Jesus proceeds toward the gate of Nain, a funeral procession passes by and He watches – at first as a bystander. Jesus saw the mother of the deceased, weeping. Being fully divine, Jesus knew her situation and His heart was touched: she was not only grieving her only son’s death but she was also grieving her own probable death. You see, in the culture back then, widows had nothing (there were no social services); as a widow her security totally rested with her son – without her son, she was now homeless and destitute, her own life lost hope. Jesus knew this, and on His own initiative reached out to her. No “bystander effect” here. Jesus gets directly, personally involved with these people He did not know And, He gets involved actively in many ways: He noticed the mother, had compassion, spoke to her, came forward, touched, told her son to rise.

George was an incredibly wonderful person, strong, bright, caring; a father, a friend, a servant, a leader. On this particular day, I was there in the room with George who was dying—way too young. Things had not been easy, there had been pain and discouragement; many prayers had been prayed for George, yet this was the end. Where was God? George prayed with us, and it quickly became clear that George was touching God and God was touching George – and we in the room were direct witnesses. This deathbed scene turned on a dime, from a scene of sadness to a scene of life, of hope, of excitement. George did die that day, yet God’s presence was so tangible that eternal life in God’s kingdom was what we were left with—rather than a void.

In both the Gospel and this example from George’s life, God was fully present and involved in moments of human suffering! **Here we see the heart of God!** When Jesus said, “***do not weep***” this was not idle reassurance. Instead, Jesus knew soon there would no longer be a reason to weep. God came and brought hope, love, and compassion. The Greek meaning of the word “compassion” includes a gut connection – the grieving mother’s pain was God’s pain, as though this woman’s tears were the tears of His own mother. Your tears are felt the same by the Lord. Jesus suffers with us, is actively intervening in our lives, and raises us up.

There are many people today who do not believe that God intervenes in their lives. They see God as an uninvolved bystander; God watches, and lets it happen. This philosophy has been around for centuries; it is called **“deism.”** People who are deists believe that God created the world and humans, and then left it and us to our own devices, and does not intervene.

We know that the “deism” philosophy is invalid, not only from today’s Gospel but also from our other three Scripture readings today. In our Old Testament reading, we heard about another dramatic divine healing. In our Psalm for today, we read that God ***gives justice to the oppressed, food to the hungry, sight to the blind, caring for the stranger***. In our Epistle reading from Galatians we heard Paul talk of how God turned him from being a persecutor of Christians to one who proclaims Jesus as Savior.

Oh yes, God meets us in the midst of our pain, in the midst of our life challenges, with compassion. God who became truly human with us in Jesus Christ suffers with us and for us. God is active, involved in your life too; He is not a bystander. Yes, your life will have curve balls that change your well-laid-out plans – know that Jesus is there, active in your midst. Amen.