

## Dress Rehearsal

*This sermon was preached at Sts. Peter and Paul Lutheran Church in Riverside, Illinois, on June 5, 2016, the Third Sunday after Pentecost. The texts were I Kings 17:17-24 and Luke 7:11-17.*

“You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you forever” (Psalm 30:11, 12, NRSV).

As usual, there would be a dress rehearsal for the concert, this time for Mozart’s *Requiem*, about a week before the performance. The announcement went out several weeks in advance of the concert that dress would be slightly different for *The Requiem* than for previous concerts. Instead of the usual trademark blue ties, the men would wear plain black ties, more befitting the solemnity of Mozart’s final *opus*.

“You and I wear a lot of black,” I said to the bass at my right, also a Lutheran pastor, “but I’m not certain I’ve got a *plain* black tie. I’ve got one with Frosty the Snowman all over it, and one of my favorites has Pepe Le Pew wining and dining one of his girlfriends.” (Both are compliments, as some may know, of our friend and usher *emeritus* Wally Kessler, a man renown for wearing the classiest ties of all time to church; some might call them the *clashiest*.)

“I’m not sure I have a plain one either,” my friend answered, “but I do have one with Daffy Duck.”

“Okay, so I’ll wear the skunks,” I suggested, “if you’ll wear Daffy. Let’s wear them to dress rehearsal.”

On Monday evening, a few days before the concert, Pepe Le Pew and Daffy Duck showed up for rehearsal. Not everyone was happy about their guest appearances. Mary, the Concert Dress Manager, looked up from her musical score, fixed her eyes grimly, first on Daffy, then on Pepe, seeming to shrink them back to cartoon size, as if to command, “No funny ties at a requiem! *Confutatis! Dies Ire! Rex tremende!* Don’t you know, there is nothing funny about a requiem? There will be no funny ties at this requiem! *Confutatis!* There’s nothing funny about death! ‘Rest eternal, grant them, O Lord, and let light perpetual shine upon them.’”

I don’t know where Daffy Duck ended up, but Pepe is back in the closet until next Valentine’s Day.

There’s a requiem being sung in the little town of Nain on the day when Jesus comes walking toward its streets. Nobody is wearing funny ties. There is no “rest eternal,” and there is no “light perpetual” on the streets of Nain. The young man had

likely died earlier that morning. Jewish purity laws dictated that his body be taken out of town and laid to rest in the earth before sundown. The people walk alongside his mother, shaking their heads and whispering, “No parent should ever have to bury her child.”

There was another morning when this same mother sang her requiem—her song of tears and her prayer for the dead—when she had leaned upon her son’s strong shoulder as the men of Nain carried her husband to the grave. This second morning, however, there is no shoulder. Luke tells us that “he was his mother’s only son, and she was a widow.” Bereft of husband and son, this woman would have no means of survival except for what she could beg. So, the mourners sing with her their requiem. They shed their tears, not only for the dead child, but also for his mother, for the next funeral likely will be hers.

Despite all the Easter uproar earlier this spring about the resurrection of Jesus, by this time in June, I suppose, we may suspect that nothing after all has really changed. Since Easter in March, we have sung our share of requiems, three of them for our beloved within five days during a week in April.

Soon after the dustup with Easter, we brush ourselves off, take a few Sundays to get back to our routine, regain our composure, and continue trudging down that bleak trek through the streets of Nain and on to the cemetery. So, go ahead and set your goals and work your hardest. Spend a lifetime saving up for retirement, get the best health insurance (and don’t forget the long-term care insurance!) that money can buy, and locate the finest medical specialists in the world. Live to be a hundred ten. There yet awaits that grinning victor; you know him as that one who snatches even he who “floats like a butterfly and stings like a bee.” Death has already met us in so many smaller yet painful ways.

No funny ties at a requiem!

“So, teach us to count our days,” advises the wise psalmist. “Teach us to count our days, so we can have a wise heart” (Psalm 90:12), because the person who knows that her days are limited, that her life does not go on forever, that all of the dead ends and setbacks in life are part of the dress rehearsal for the last breath, this, says the psalmist, is wisdom.

Now, the funeral procession is interrupted. (How dare that crazy driver cut into a funeral procession? People don’t even have respect for the dead these days!) One “large crowd” craches into another “large crowd.” One “large crowd” is led by a dead man and his mother. The other “large crowd” is led by the risen Lord Jesus. Note that this is the first time in Luke’s Gospel that Jesus is called “the Lord.” Death bumps into

the Lord of Life, gets knocked on its can, and will not again be back on its feet. Death is down for the count.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, "We must allow ourselves to be interrupted by God. God will be constantly crossing our paths and canceling our plans... ." God interrupts our procession toward the grave. The living Lord Jesus disrupts our funeral processions, stops the "large crowd" in its tracks, and "had compassion" for the grieving mother. Death will not be the only preacher at this funeral!

Plainly, the Lord "got sick to his stomach with heartache," sick to his stomach with death, especially the kind that has afflicted this woman. Being "sick to his stomach with heartache" is the Lord's response to all those mothers, not so far from us, who must bury their young sons before their lives have begun.

When Jesus walked through the villages, seeing the crowds afflicted with disease, "he had compassion for them" (Matthew 14:14). When Jesus saw the multitudes who were hungry, "he had compassion for them" (Matthew 15:32). "And all of them ate and were filled..." (Matthew 15:37). When pressed upon by another "large crowd" of the lame, the blind, the crippled and the deaf-mute, Jesus said to his disciples, "I have compassion for these people" (Mark 8:2). When followed by yet another "large crowd," while two blind beggars screamed for help, "moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes" (Matthew 20:34).

In Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel entitled *The Idiot*, Prince Myshkin, who is "the foe of segregation and the apostle of togetherness," teaches us that "compassion is the chief and perhaps the only law of human existence."

"Be kind," said the first century Jewish philosopher Philo, "for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle."

God refuses to allow our the funeral processions to go on without interruption. This will be a different sort of dress rehearsal, not for death but for life.

Some of us think we know God, oh, so well. Maybe we ought to think again. Maybe God is not as predictable as we would like to believe. Maybe this longing for predictability, manifested in all our thousands of ways of measuring, testing and calculating—the weather, the time, our life-span, our blood pressure—is just our way of attempting to keep God from interrupting—even disrupting—all our funeral processions.

Nobody asked Jesus to raise the widow's son from the dead. Nobody put a prayer request in the bulletin for his resuscitation. There is no mention of anybody's "great faith" being involved in his healing. In fact, the mother says nothing at all. She simply grieves. That is her only prayer.

With this grieving mother, we are raised up from our “mourning into dancing” to defy death, maybe even to laugh at death, because we know that the only death we need fear is the one we have already died with Christ in Holy Baptism. “If we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him”(Romans 6:8).

So, go ahead, wear your funny ties, your funny scarves, to requiems—even to church, if you want, with our dear Wally! The dark, thundering requiem will come to an end, as does Mozart’s own *Requiem*, with a joyous, eternal song of light everlasting: *et Lux perpetua luceat eis, cum Sanctus tuis in aeternum, quia pius es... .* “And let light perpetual shine on them, as with your saints in eternity, because you are merciful.”