Wandering into the town of Nain, Jesus meets a woman who is at a dead end, a trauma that makes her life a dead end of its own. She might as well be dead. She is a widow, a woman alone and vulnerable. In the Bible, “widow” is a code word for a person at the bottom, a person who cannot make it alone.

She is about to bury her son, a tragedy for any parent. It is not supposed to work like that; children are not supposed to precede their parents in death. We grieve deeply when this happens, because we know that it is out of order. She had a son. Yes, she had a son and in all likelihood he cared for her and supported her, he was her rock and protection. The mourners are weeping not only for the dead son but for the bereft and vulnerable mother who now is alone. In a society with little to no social safety net, the next funeral could be the widow’s; she is in danger.

It is into this situation that Jesus steps into action. “Do not weep,” says Jesus. What a strange thing to say to a mother who is mourning. But Jesus quiets the whole scene, stopping the death procession and speaking life into the body of the woman’s son. This is a miracle story; Jesus brings life where it looks as if only death exists. This is the surprising action of the one in whom the divine life bursts forth as it did when it spoke creation into being. This is Jesus surprising the merely dead - graves fill with light - a young man sits up and begins to speak and finds himself in the arms of his disbeliefing mother. Tears can change from fear and sadness, into joy, awe and wonder, and almost disbelief in something so passing strange but yet so wildly real. This is Jesus the wonder worker, the man with magic in the hands, healing in his voice, and compassion in his eyes. This is a man a whole village can become afraid of just because of a little resurrection miracle, a simple bringing someone back from the annihilation of death. This is just another day in the life of a messiah, complete with miracle’s nonchalance.

But wait, miracle! Yes, we love miracles. How fantastic! Miracles have a way of stealing the show. They are so interesting that they almost trick us into not paying attention to other aspects of the healing ministry of Jesus. We like the flashy life of miracles, but they do tend to monopolize the mind or if we are thoroughly modern send us into a skeptical frenzy of trying to explain them away.

As one commentator pointed out, our obsession with the spectacular and how it is accomplished is the downside of miracles. You might remember that the temptation of Jesus after his baptism was really the devil trying to get Jesus to impress people with the spectacular knowing the people are simply mesmerized by miracles and
the uncanny. The wow of miracles blinds people. The dazzling surface of the event keeps people from considering the deeper meaning of the miracle itself.

In this miracle story, the main characters are really Jesus and the widow of Nain. It is to be sure an odd story, but Jesus clearly has compassion on the woman who has lost her son. He not only wants her to stop weeping but his compassion extends quite a lot further. Here is a woman who has lost not only a son, but a husband as well. In the culture setting of Jesus’ day this meant that the woman was completely vulnerable. She does not belong to the house of any man and therefore is in danger of not having shelter and food. She is surely weeping for her son, but she could legitimately also be weeping for herself and what may become of her now that she is alone.

The truth is, that Jesus has encountered a funeral procession for not just one person, but for two. There is a way in which she is leaving the village not only to bury her son, but also to confront her own death. This is really a story of how the culture and society of Jesus’ day had a nasty tendency to abandon women who did not have men in their lives. This is the real meaning of this miracle, this is the revelation that the miracle is pointing to if we have eyes to see it.

If we can allow the glittery light of the miracle to settle and quit distracting our eyes, then we can begin to see the deeper meaning of this miracle. The miracle of Jesus is meant to take us more deeply into the compassion of God for the vulnerable and the poor. There is absolutely nothing wrong with understanding this miracle in the light of the resurrected Christ, the one who brings new life out of what looks like certain death. However, there is a way to read this passage that stretches us to consider the parts of our culture and our society where resurrection is hard to come by, especially if you have lived in the conditions that so easily create poverty and great vulnerability.

What I am trying to say is that the miracles and healing of Jesus are just as much social critique, as they are the stunning work of God. When Jesus confronts illness or demonic possession he is also unmasking the powers. He is creating an opening to understanding the tragic human cost of the principalities and powers that are constantly at work dehumanizing people, cutting them off from human thriving. The miracles of Jesus reveal divine compassion and love, and at the same time unmask the social conditions that turn people into the poor and the vulnerable, the invisible and the oppressed, the “disposable people” of our world that God continues to love.

It is easy to resist this kind of reading, because it requires something of us. In fact, I think that most of us would rather not think this hard about the Bible and the stories of Jesus. “Come-on Fr. Christopher can’t you just let this be a really great miracle story and leave it at that. You are such pain. Let the Bible be a mystery, a wonderful story that has almost nothing to do with our lives, just this once.” Why do we need allow scripture to tease our minds into active thought? Do we have to delve so deeply into the compassion of God for the vulnerable?
The truth is, that scripture is deeply subversive. I think people like saying that they don’t understand the Bible. I believe that proclaiming Biblical ignorance and ineptitude is a wonderful way to avoid the challenging work that this challenging book with all its strange stories wants to demand of us. Of course, it is okay to ponder the wonderful and strange compassion of God the Almighty. But it is dangerous to bring out of the shadows the cultural assumptions and social mechanism that lead to deprivation and death for the most vulnerable in our world. That is simply too close to home Fr. Christopher. Let’s just say we really like miracles and the much of the Bible is just too hard to understand for us Episcopalians. It’s all such a mystery.

I had a seminary professor that used to say something about the Bible that I found stunningly true. He said, “It’s not the parts of the Bible that I don’t understand that bother me, it’s the parts I do understand that trouble me the most.” The Bible is a personally dangerous book, if you don’t want to change and grow.

When we say that Jesus’ miracles unmasked the culture and systems they can also lead us to ask difficult questions about our own. It is somewhat difficult to see culture and systems in a way that they can be directly observed. In so many ways, they are so taken for granted and accepted as the “just the way things are,” that they are often not examined. Yet, they are enormously influential.

Culture is a set of assumptions that people have internalized. In highly competitive cultures like ours, many of these assumptions are harmonized by a single overriding concern, how do I, as opposed to you, protect and promote myself at all costs. Just so we’re clear, that is not exactly a gospel value.

In a book entitled, Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination, by Walter Wink, he tries to name some of the delusional cultural assumptions that too often go unquestioned.

1. The need to control society and prevent chaos requires some to dominate others.
2. Those who dominate may use other people as a means to achieving their goals.
3. Men are better equipped by nature to be dominant than woman, and some races are naturally suited to dominate others.
4. Institutions are more important than people.

As we read a list like this, we may be troubled by the assumptions, but at the same time realize that this is how the world actually tends to operate, even if we don’t want to agree with the principles. When a list like this becomes discordant for us, it is, I hope, because the Gospel of Christ is calling it into question.

We all live with a whole variety of cultural assumptions and it might be helpful if we made a list of some of the more ordinary cultural assumptions ourselves. I wonder what your list might look like. There could be entries like these: people on top work
harder, so should be paid more; never share information that gives you and edge; never admit mistakes; whatever you do to someone is justified, because you can be sure that they would do it to you; charity begins at home; wishing people well is enough; some people are just unlucky, but then again everyone gets what they deserve, life never deals us more than we can handle, etc. The truth is, that we all live by assumptions and some of our assumptions never really are brought into consciousness or awareness. That, of course, is where Jesus and the gospels are so troublesome, as they are always threatening our comfortable assumptions, unmasking our unexamined ways of life, calling into question our systems of control.

Our cultural assumptions and the social systems we depend upon often are hidden from our view by a sense of inevitability: that is just the way things are. They sometimes seem like natures givens as natural and ordinary as the air we breathe or the water we drink. But then, the “Lord of Life” appears in the words and actions of Jesus and begins to operate in a different way, bestowing mercy on the very people that the cultural assumptions and the social systems have put down. When the Lord of all creation challenges these assumptions, then we too begin to realize that there is indeed another way to be, another way to live, that the culture and the systems around us are not set in stone or the only way to operate. Yes, Jesus says there is a more excellent way called, the Good News, there is in fact a different economy called the kingdom of God where the poor and the oppressed are not forgotten and there are no throw-away people, and building ever bigger walls is not the solution. In the light of this revelation the systems and assumptions are unmasked and then are ripe for change and intervention.

Suddenly, the Bible is not such a boring book. Jesus is not just a mild mannered healer but a subversive messenger of the most high God. In my preparations for this sermon, one of the most interesting things I came across was a title for Jesus that I had never heard. John Shea shared that one of the most provocative titles for Jesus is “peddler of choices.” In his life, his ministry and his person, Jesus revealed the both the deep mercy of God and the wretched oppression of people and in doing so he offers us a world of choices. We can see the assumptions and systems that limit and harm human thriving and so we are given the possibility of saying no to that way of life and moving in faith to embrace a different way. In light of Jesus, the “peddler of choices,” faith is about seeing the world anew in the light of God’s mercy. It is about walking into the villages of death that surround us and saying with our lives and actions, “do not weep” and “arise” we have choices that lead to life, we know the Risen One and the deep mercy of God. Things do not need to stay the way that they are, there is a still more excellent way, there is life in the Lord of Life and it is possible to follow him on the way.

We are not told what happened in the village of Nain after the son was brought back to life. It is possible that life went back to pretty much the way it was and people forgot about Jesus the “peddler of choices.” But perhaps life did not go back to normal. Perhaps people began to live a little differently. Perhaps the son seeing the
world as if again for the first time, saw it with new eyes that told him that things are not supposed to be this way, there is a more excellent way deep in Christ’s ways. Perhaps this story of the widow from Nain may work its way into our lives as well, reminding us that we too have choices thanks to Jesus unmaking the assumptions of our world through the vast mercy of God.

Note: I am deeply indebted to John Shea for his commentary and teaching on this passage. The notion that miracles are as much social critique as they are miracles is his as is the title of “peddler of choices.” I am very grateful for how John Shea gave this miracle story a new life in helping me to see how the pastoral care of the woman was really not just an act of mercy but an invitation into the work of justice - changing the systems that destroy and harm the creatures of God.