

He Set His Face to Jerusalem

by Christy Wetzig

Luke 9:51-62

When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make preparations for him. But the people did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" But he turned and rebuked them. And they went on to another village.

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." And Jesus said to him, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Yet another said, "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

I have to confess something. I don't know about you, but sometimes I don't really like Jesus. The way he comes across sometimes in the Gospels can be pretty harsh. As much as his kindness, wisdom, and love must have been magnetic and constantly drew people to him, sometimes the things he said must at the same

time have driven them away. Like these three who approach Jesus on the road to say, “I want to follow you, but there’s something that’s getting in the way.”

These people who want to follow Jesus are confronting very real obstacles from real and concrete lives. Like a desire to have a bed to sleep in at night, or to take care of valid family obligations, or nurture family ties. Remember that even Elijah, having called Elisha to be his disciple, permits him to first turn back, to have a farewell feast with his family, before he leaves them for good to follow Elijah. It’s while he’s turning back that he kills his oxen, cooks them on his burning yoke, makes it impossible to return to his old life. What makes Jesus’ call so pressing that he can’t respond with the same compassion and understanding and appropriate accommodations? Instead, the urgency of his call is so great that he fairly shouts at them, “No! You follow me now!” His demands are so uncompromising as to be alienating.

We don’t know what any of the would-be disciples chose, but how would we respond? How do we respond to the unyielding demands of Jesus? I want Jesus to be more understanding, to let me get on with my life and maybe just sanctify it a little. I want Jesus to walk along my path with me, not demand that I walk his iron-straight path, with all its dangers and difficulties.

Those listening knew that a furrow, once begun, if the farmer looks back, gets crooked and wanders. Just like a runner who, looking back, loses time. Jesus says, I require you to not turn your head, I require your utter devotion, your unswerving resolve on this mission I give you.

But even the disciples, after Jesus died, went back to fishing. They had, as Jesus asked, put their hand to the plow, but, conquered by fear and doubt, they looked back. Were they also unworthy of following Jesus?

But I've skipped the first half of our passage. The first sentence again: "As the days drew near for him to be taken up, Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem." This is the opening sentence of Luke's travel narrative, ending with his arrival in Jerusalem at Passover-time, to meet his appointment with the cross, and it's worth remembering that all the passages from Luke that we'll be reading this summer take place on this journey. It's a journey overshadowed with the dread of his final destination. Dread, yes, but also knowledge of fulfillment, obedience to God, and ultimate glory, of being "taken up."

Jesus "set his face" to his destination. We feel his determination, his single-mindedness. He has put his hand to the plow, and he does not look back. This is also prophetic language. In Ezekiel, God says to the prophet, "Son of man, set your face to Jerusalem to preach against it." Isaiah says, "The Lord God has set my face as a flint." We might recognize Isaiah's phrase from a longer passage not only referring to Isaiah, but to Jesus as well, speaking of Jesus' suffering before his death. So Jesus set his face, flintlike, determined, to go to Jerusalem, knowing the suffering ahead for him.

It seems like an ill-fated trip, since the first stop on his journey goes awry. As they approach a Samaritan village, Jesus sends his disciples ahead with the assumption of hospitality, even though the Samaritans were rival siblings to the Jews. Back in the Assyrian exile, the Samaritans were Jews who mingled with the Assyrians,

intermarrying and assimilating some of their culture and beliefs. They still, like the Jews, maintained their veneration for the Torah, but the Samaritans rejected the temple in Jerusalem, in favor of worshipping at a temple on Mount Gerizim, thirty miles north of Jerusalem.

Previous to Jesus' day, the Jews, zealous for what they saw as correct worship, had actually destroyed the Samaritans' temple (I know it's hard to believe), an act that, as you can imagine, heightened the tension between the two rivals, until by Jesus' day it had reached a boiling point.

So it's understandable when the text says that it was because Jesus was going to Jerusalem that the Samaritan village rejected him. Heading toward Jerusalem made him, for the Samaritans, into the Other. But I wonder if another understanding of this could be that "setting his face toward Jerusalem" was shorthand for Jesus embracing the difficult will of God for him, heading toward his destruction. For the people of this village, the cost was too high. They wanted nothing to do with his journey.

James and John, stoked by the rivalry between their two peoples, responded to the Samaritans' inhospitality quickly and instinctively. They had, incidentally, just been arguing about who was the greatest, and now, hellbent on following that scent despite Jesus' teaching to the contrary, they wanted Jesus to claim his true identity as a prophet, to act like Elijah, who twice sent down fire from heaven to consume his enemies. They were eager for God to affirm their own position and annihilate their supposed enemy.

Jesus would have none of it. The text is minimal here: "He turned and rebuked them." Some manuscripts add a word of explanation:

“You do not know what manner of spirit you are of; for the Son of Man came not to destroy people’s lives but to save them.”

“He turned and rebuked them.” As if that was all he needed to say. As if they should have known better.

They should have. Earlier in Luke, when Jesus preached the inaugural sermon of his ministry, he read from the prophet Isaiah, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...to proclaim good news to the poor...to set at liberty the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” And he pointedly left out the next phrase of Isaiah’s: “...and the day of vengeance of our God.” The disciples, from their front row seat, should have known by now that Jesus was not about fire and brimstone, but about healing, feeding the hungry—redemption, not judgement.

“He turned and rebuked them, and they went on to another village.” Jesus’ response, instead of unleashing a diatribe against his recalcitrant disciples or the inhospitable Samaritans, is to continue with the journey. Having “set his face to Jerusalem,” having put his hand to the plow, he doesn’t look back. He simply goes on with the work of the kingdom of God.

It’s tempting to wag our fingers at James and John, or point out that this cycle of violence has spiraled to this day until it defines the Middle East. But I’d like to remind us that this is a common ailment of human culture. The closer we are to someone, the more offensive our tiny differences become. The Jews and Samaritans, with their common roots, common beliefs, and diversity of practice, are like siblings who fight to no end, rival schools that almost always neighbor

one another, rival companies that make the same things. It's the minute differences that divide us the most.

We, like James and John, continually desire to police those minute differences we find with our neighbors. We are just as quick as they were to condemn those we see as different from us, politically, doctrinally, philosophically, when really we have more in common than we'd like to admit—our nationality, our region, our love of family, our desire for a better world. What Jesus is modeling for us here is that when we feel the need to call down fire and brimstone on our neighbor, what we should do instead is pivot 180 degrees, and get on with the work of the gospel. When I feel that impulse to attack, to justify myself over and against my neighbor, that feeling should be my cue to turn on my heel, to look at myself, to ask, "What am I attached to that's keeping me from following Jesus more closely?" Because when I focus on my neighbor's failures, my face is no longer set toward my goal; I'm turning back from the plow, and the furrow I make wanders.

What am I holding on to that isn't the plow of God's good news?

What would Jesus have me let go of in order to more fully grasp the heights, depths, and lengths of his love?

What would Jesus have me take hold of in order to more fully take hold of him, and participate in the Kingdom of God?

One of the earliest names for Christianity was "The Way." Like Jesus, who set his face to Jerusalem, we who follow Jesus are also on a journey. People speak of Christians as pilgrims, on the way. But sometimes that's not really how it feels, is it? A roadtrip to a golden destination, a straight, clean furrow? Philip Scharper, a Christian

thinker, writes, “A more apt metaphor should be that of the people of God as nomads. Pilgrims know where their journey is headed...

Nomads are called to go by uncertain paths to a place that shall be made holy at some indefinite time by something God shall say or do.

And there is no guide, no guide except a pillar of fire by night and a wind-driven cloud by day—sounds and symbols of the Holy Spirit.”

We’re called to be on the move—we’re not sure where, or what it looks like; we’ve seen no timetables. We are bound to wander, to get lost, to double back, to go back to fishing. After two thousand years it’s easy to lose the urgency that Jesus was communicating, but the call of Christ is no less urgent than it was on that day on the journey to Jerusalem. The world is still so full of people who need to receive the love of God in a way that we can demonstrate for them.

As much as we, like the disciples, fail in this urgent task, we’re still the stuff of the kingdom of God. The only stuff God has to work with. So we’re not alone. The holy flame and wind, the breath of God, goes before us and behind us. The Spirit, God alongside us, keeps setting our turned faces back toward the goal, keeps pulling out of our hands that which we’ve been grasping that isn’t the kingdom of God, keeps setting both our grubby, distracted hands back onto the plow.