

**Luke 9:51-62 (NRSV)**

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. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" But he turned and rebuked them. Then 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, first let me go and bury my father." But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." 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 a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

One part of my seminary education was called Clinical Pastoral Education, CPE. In it, the seminarian becomes a hospital chaplain for a summer – Jon Wolf is doing his CPE this summer. Every seminarian has stories from CPE. Not necessarily miracle cures, not necessarily wonderful heart-warming moments. Sometimes it's the absolute failures that stick with you. As I walked with the texts for today, those were the memories that came back to me.

One was a fellow that had just been diagnosed with lung cancer. He was pretty matter-of-fact about it. It was, for him, a death sentence, or, at least that was how he had taken it. He didn't much want to talk. He'd decided it was his own fault. He'd read the warning labels on the cigarettes that had killed him. He didn't think the labels applied to him, and he was wrong about that. So, we sat a little while. I said how sorry I was and moved on. He had set his face toward his Jerusalem.

I remember a woman, also suffering from cancer. She had a brain tumor, pressing on her nausea center. She had been at the State Department, a high ranking diplomat until just a few weeks before. This proud, articulate, cultured woman felt sick all the time and the anti-nausea medications made her sleepy and listless. We'd had some wonderful conversations, but now she was shutting down, not talking. When people begin to leave life, often they withdraw, not just from chaplains, but from their relatives, their brothers and sisters and children, people they've loved for a lifetime. They set their faces toward Jerusalem.

I began my walk with these texts in an innocuous enough way. I wondered why it was OK for Elisha to go back, slaughter his oxen and boil them before following Elijah in the Older Testament reading, while the followers of Jesus had to come right away. One potential disciple says, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father," but Jesus says, "Let the dead bury their own dead." Now, burying your father, honoring your parent, was a bigger deal then than it is now, and now you would have to be a mindless beast to leave your parents unburied.

A second says, "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus tells him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." If you are looking back as you plow, your row won't be straight.

Once you've set your course, once you've set your face to Jerusalem, there's no looking back.

This is really a very grim, awkwardly-written passage from Luke, full of dark portents and evil omens. Up until now, Jesus has been ministering in Galilee, in and around his home base of Capernaum. Peaceful, pastoral Galilee. Oh, he hasn't been accepted everywhere, far from it. His first sermon wasn't a great success – his home congregation chased him to the cliff and nearly encouraged him to take in the view. He'd had some successes chasing out demons, confronting Satan in the wilderness. But remember, Satan just retreated, “until” the text tells us, “a more opportune time.”

And now that time was coming closer and Jesus can sense it. Jerusalem, the holy city of peace, the city named for peace was also the killer of prophets. This passage begins the long Travel Narrative, a section that will take up the next 10 chapters of Luke's Gospel, really the heart of Luke's Gospel, describing Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. In this long Travel Narrative we learn about Christian life as a journey, a journey of faith. We encounter some of the great parables, the great teaching stories of Luke.

But this beginning passage sets a tone that is hard and unforgiving. The time has come for Jesus to be taken up – taken up onto the cross, taken up into a waiting sky. He means to pass through a village in Samaria. Most Jewish travelers would not go through Samaria – there was bad blood between the Judeans and the Samaritans, there had been ambushes and massacres. Jesus sends messengers ahead, but the Samaritans refuse to receive him, “because his face was set toward Jerusalem.” What does this mean? That he wasn't really interested in preaching to or healing the Samaritans right then? Or maybe simply that anyone who looked as grim or as determined as Jesus evidently did just seemed

like trouble and the Samaritans didn't want any. Sure enough, James and John want to bring down a heavenly air strike on the town, maybe sensing and misinterpreting Jesus' mood. Jesus rebukes them – one ancient manuscript of Luke has Jesus saying, “you do not know what spirit you are of, for the Son of Man has not come to destroy the lives of human beings but to save them.” I imagine Jesus is thinking, good grief, and you guys are on *my* side?

So, perhaps it is appropriate that Jesus is short with James and John and the three disciple candidates. Jesus is absolutely focused. He has set his face toward Jerusalem. His life, his ministry have drawn down to a single point, and that point is Jerusalem and the coming battle.

In a short while, during the anthem, we'll be singing from the Battle Hymn of the Republic. Jean told me that I could preach from that text. She was right – one verse goes,

I have seen Him in the watchfires  
of a hundred circling camps,  
They have builded him an altar  
in the evening dews and damps,  
I can read His righteous sentence  
in the dim and flaring lamps  
His truth is marching on.

And I picture the night before the battle, dark and quiet. In the morning, people are going to go out to kill and to die. There will be smoke and noise, there will be screaming and yelling and gunfire and confusion. And I'm trying to hold onto my belief that I'm doing the right thing, that my friends are going into battle with me, that they'll be strong even if I am not. And I don't want to be surrounded by people who are laughing and carrying on, because

this is a time that is deadly serious. And I picture Jesus grim, determined, his disciples fickle, petty and unreliable, but he is certain, rock-solid. His face is set toward Jerusalem.

We sometimes look at the Bible as a set of timeless truths, rules to live by and when we do, we are frequently disappointed. So we read today's passage and ask, well, does this mean we shouldn't bury our parents? Does this mean that we should leave and not say goodbye to our families? But I don't think this passage intends to answer questions about funeral etiquette or farewell practices. This passage intends to tell us that there will be times in our lives when we have set our faces toward our own particular Jerusalem and at those times, we will want to be accompanied by someone who is serious and purposeful and focused.

There are times when our lives come to a point. Has this happened to you? When everything comes down to a very narrow focus, and it is going to go this way or that way, yes or no, up or down. If this has happened to you already, you know what I'm talking about. If it hasn't happened yet, then I have some good news for you. Your God will be there with you; your God has been there before you. There are times that have to be met with determination and with purpose. The night before the battle. The morning of the operation. The day of the game, the test, the presentation. Times that are deadly serious, where nothing else matters. When those times come, and they will, Christ will be there, Christ has been there, in a sense, Christ is always there, rock-steady, reliable, focused, his face set toward Jerusalem.

I think back to the people I met at the hospital during my CPE experience. And I think that I did my best and that I probably helped some people, I probably did more good than harm. But what I know is that all of those people had a companion much more capable, more focused, more steady and reliable than I was. And his face, like theirs, was set toward Jerusalem.

Amen.