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The Third Sunday after Pentecost

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Luke 9



Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem. He set his face toward Jerusalem. And everything was different after that. The tone of the story changes. His engagement with the disciples changes. The text moves from the story of his ministry to the last things of his ministry. Those who want to come with him are given an unequivocal message – don't look back. Perhaps because there is no time. Everything is going to change. This is a pivot of history. What a statement of determination, of grappling with, and turning toward, destiny. Setting his face toward Jerusalem is as momentous, in this moment of choice, as Gethsemane. No more itinerant ministry, it is a move toward action, toward addressing the root of the problems. The first line of our reading, that "the time approached when he was to be taken up" identifies this moment as the beginning of the story of the Ascension.

Now, if you are traveling from Galilee to Jerusalem, the shortest path, a three-day journey on foot, is through Samaria. Most Jewish travelers would avoid Samaria and take a roundabout path through the TransJordan because the relationship between Israel and Samaria was politically and religiously fraught, and had been so for a thousand years. These irreconcilable differences were still present in the land through which Jesus walked, and thus a village turned Jesus away. The fact that he had his face set toward Jerusalem made it clear that Jesus was not a Samaritan, and the village wanted nothing to do with him.

James and John asked Jesus, "Do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" That places the story right back 800 years before when Elijah called down fire on the injured and dying Samaritan King Ahakiah's troops as they tried to force their way past Elijah to consult with the god Baal Zebub, as to what to do, and who would be the new king, rather than appealing to the God of Israel. Ahakiah died, and this encounter led to a regime change in Samaria. The worship of Baal Zebub faded from the

scene, but Israel remembered this past, and Samaritans were still seen as impure. All this did nothing to help the relationship between Samaria and Israel. These tensions persisted into Jesus's time, and James and John reacted in the context of this history. But Jesus was not tempted to punish the Samaritan village with power and chose instead to break the ancient cycle of separation, vengeance, and destruction. He simply found a different place to stay. Some translations of Luke simply say that Jesus rebuked the disciples for proposing destruction, others tell us that Jesus said, "You do not know what manner of Spirit you are of, for the Son of Man came not to destroy men's lives but to save them."

Like Elijah's last moment transferring his ministry to Elisha in this morning's reading, Jesus knows that his ministry will soon rest with the disciples. This parallel between Jesus and the disciples on the one hand and Elijah and Elisha on the other, conveys a historical continuity of prophecy and ministry, and points to its fulfilment in Jesus, the new Elijah. More people want to become his disciples - some ask and some are asked by Jesus. One who accepts is told that there will be no place to lay his head, and the way will be hard. Those who hesitate, who want to honor their parents or their families are told that the times are so urgent, the moment of history so imminent, that there is no time – duty, relationships, respect for the past must be abandoned, and Jesus followed to his destiny and beyond. These are hard requirements indeed.

The theologian Francois Bovon points out that this story of Jesus traveling through Samaria can be seen as relevant to the journeys of our lives. I think that's true. I also have found these last sentences in our reading to be difficult, like all passages that are absolute in what they ask from our lives: Leave everything behind, sell all that you have, for instance. I think that when we encounter these points of scripture, perhaps the message is that we be guided by Love, that when the moments come

when God speaks to us, listen, pay attention, hear the directions and the questions, and then act.

As many of you know, I was, with your help, ordained as a transitional deacon a few weeks ago (and Thank You!). It took a long time to reach that point, a journey that I started in 1993. I sought a bivocational ministry before the church saw a need for it, and my calling came into a pre-existing and to some extent pre-defined life, with a wife, children, a job and a mortgage. It just didn't seem pastoral to abandon my family, my friends, my work, my past. I saw all creation, and in fact our human endeavor as blessed, and progressing us toward the end point of history. I read most things that Thomas Merton had to say in his life and formation as a monk. I read Eric Bonhoeffer's book, *The Cost of Discipleship*. His interpretation was very clear: that in these passages from Luke the hardship of discipleship and the spiritual shortcomings of those who struggled with the call or with the desire to follow Jesus were the main message. And I always asked myself, should I have gone all the way? What holds me back? And always, hard texts like this morning's – set your hand to the plow and don't look back, and if you do, you aren't fit, sort of haunted me. But we do get to ask in our lives, "What's the plow?"

When Jesus places these difficult requirements on the would-be disciples, we aren't told what they said or did. We can also observe that in scripture the requirement, the caution, the commandment is sometimes situational. In a different circumstance, Elijah let Elisha say goodbye to his family before they set out together. Still, will we know when there is urgency? How will we set our faces? Will we look back? Will we bring the fullness of our lives, their contexts and who we are to that moment?

In my life, one of these moments came when I did Clinical Pastoral Education as a requirement for ordination. That required being on hospital floors, in this case, at Boston Medical Center, as a chaplain, for

ten hours per week, and being on site for training all day on every Tuesday for six months. How was that going to work? Getting into South Boston was not an easy drive. Did I mention that there was a pandemic on while I was going to do this? Did I mention that I'm not young? It felt logistically, emotionally, and epidemiologically impossible.

I was afraid.

Yet, with the help of my workplace, my family, and Trinity Concord where I was then stationed, and some faith and courage that I managed to summon, I set my face toward Boston Medical Center. I said the words of Job to myself, "Though He take my life, yet will I trust in Him." I was part of a team of chaplains there that did a great deal of good, and I see that time as being one of the hardest things I've ever done, and also one of the best things I've ever done. I don't know if I have measured up to these words from Luke in my life, but I may have in that moment.

The answer, for me, is that our lives have to be one thing, a prayer to and an offering to God, an expression of God's love, and we have to submit and admit that we are owned by God. Whether I hammer the dross of the workplace, the silver of science, or the gold of the church, I try to be the same hammer, trying in my heart to always work toward the same end. This journey of our lives, for all of us, must be navigated with all the authenticity that we poor humans can put together.

In closing, there are critical moments in our lives, moments of calling. We should try to be ready for that, we should try to do the best we can to respond in the most faithful, and most authentic way that we can. And we should remember that while some moments are unequivocal, some are less clear, and that we worship and are loved by a loving God, who knows that we are frail, and is thankful when we just try.

We are in a time, and after a week of government

decisions in this country that have left many feeling frightened, hurt or angry, when it feels as though half the people in the country want to call down fire on the other half of the people in the country, when inexplicable wars and geopolitical omens loom large and it feels as though half the countries in the world want to call down fire on the other countries in the world, and when persistent diseases afflict and somehow manage to divide us. We are weary, and sometimes it feels as though there is no place to lay our heads.

Yet as Christians, we set our faces toward eternity, that is our real journey. It isn't always an easy journey, and it is filled with things to set aside and things to move toward as we navigate the Samarias of our lives. Set your face toward eternity. That is our absolute, unequivocal task. When the big questions come, God will help us, and strengthen and guide us. Things seem impossible when we think we are alone, and we are not alone. Be comforted. Know the spirit of love, let that be our aid to navigation in our journey.

Amen.

References:

Bovon, Francois. *Luke 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke, 9:51 – 19:27*. Fortress, Minneapolis, MN. 2002.

