

Luke 9:51-62

Proper 8C + Pentecost 6 + June 30, 2019
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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"Following Jesus"

The Word of the Lord from Luke 9: "When the days drew near for [Jesus] to be taken up, He set His face to go to Jerusalem." This is the Word of the Lord.

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

It's only Luke 9, and Jesus sets His face to go to Jerusalem. He *sets His face*: once upon a time, Isaiah prophesied of the Savior, "I gave my back to those who strike, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard; I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting. But the Lord GOD helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have *set my face* like a flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame" (Isaiah 50:6-7). This isn't any old trip to Jerusalem: the prophesied suffering and cross are near, waiting there. Jesus sets out for your salvation and He will not be put to shame.

His disciples follow Him. Others do too. Or they don't.

First up in our text, a whole village refuses Him. James and John take exception, so they ask Jesus, "Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" Jesus declines: in fact, He rebukes James and John. Following Jesus isn't about destroying anyone who doesn't fall in behind, or making their lives miserable as they regret their mistake. That's the way of worldly kings. Instead, Jesus leaves the villagers be, alive and well and – God willing – ready to hear His Word another day.

Here we're reminded that following Jesus isn't about getting your way. It's about patiently, faithfully sticking to God's Word, even when you're opposed for it. It's trusting that Jesus is the Lord, even when it seems like He is not.

As Jesus and His disciples move along, a man approaches and says, "I will follow you wherever you go." That's a little awkward: students don't choose their rabbis. None of the Twelve chose Jesus, but He chose them. Jesus doesn't say no, but He corrects the man's rosy ideas. Remember, He's set His face to go to Jerusalem. He says, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head." Following Jesus means going where He goes – even to places like the Sanhedrin, the Praetorium, Calvary and the tomb.

Jesus *does* invite the next man, saying, "Follow Me." Beckoned by the Savior, he replies, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." Jesus' answer sounds less than sensitive as He responds, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." It's a puzzling exchange – we would like more information, but some have noted that there's no proof that the man's father is anywhere near death. It might be that he wants to preserve family peace, to follow Jesus only after his unbelieving father is gone. Whatever the case, Jesus makes this clear: one is to have no other gods before Him, including those people we hold dear. It is time to move from death to life, and that life is found and given in the proclamation of the kingdom of God. Ironically, that proclamation of life will be about Jesus who sets His face and goes to His death.

Following Jesus, then, isn't about living the same way as usual with an added bit of joy. It's about leaving death behind and having life in Christ, even if that life in Christ seems strange to those closest to you, to those whose respect you desire the most.

There's one more would-be disciple in the text, another one who wants to choose Jesus rather than be chosen. He says, "I will follow You, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus responds, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." Perhaps the man's idea of farewell is to spend weeks or months tying up some loose ends, getting the harvest in and whatever else, before he actually follows Jesus. But that's in stark contrast to the twelve disciples who have followed Him from the beginning. Remember when Jesus called Peter, Andrew, James and John to be His disciples? "Immediately they left their nets and followed Him" (Matthew 4:20). Remember, after the resurrection, when Jesus said to Peter, "when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go" (John 21:18)? That's discipleship – following Jesus faithfully when you are taken where you do not want to go.

From this we're reminded that following Jesus isn't a casual, "I'll follow Him when there's nothing else on the schedule" sort of deal. It's "follow *now*." It's "follow the Son whose face is set on Jerusalem." It's "cast aside every idol, take up your cross and follow Him."

See, this is an urgent matter – a matter of life and death. One is either dead in sin or alive in Christ; and if you are to cling to other things and be a disciple of convenience, then you are not a follower of the One who sets His face and goes to the cross for your salvation.

It is not easy to be a follower of Jesus. In fact, it's beyond you from the start. You could never be a follower of Jesus if He did not say, "Follow Me." But so He has. He said, "Follow Me" when He said, "I baptize you." He repeated it today when He said, "I forgive you all of your sins." So that you might be a follower of Jesus, the Holy Spirit has called you by the Gospel, enlightened you with His gifts, sanctified and kept you – and keeps you – in the one true faith. It is only because Jesus has called you that you can be His follower in the first place.

Even then, it isn't easy. Facing loss and hurt, you'll be like James and John, wanting to call down fire from heaven on your enemies – wanting the Lord to knock some heads together and prove He's boss right now. You'll want to make your following Him conditional on Him healing right now, restoring peace right now, returning what was lost right now. But when James and John tried to run discipleship that way, Jesus rebuked them. He kept His face set toward Jerusalem and kept going to the cross. Hard as it is as long as the devil goads us, following Jesus doesn't mean we get to hold onto things in a world that is passing away. It means that, because Jesus set His face and went to Jerusalem, you're not going to pass away. Despite your sin and your presence in this world of loss, you're going to live forever.

Tempted to idolize possessions and people, you'll be like the three who wanted to follow Jesus in our text. You'll want to add "as long as" and make discipleship conditional: I will follow "as long as I may keep the conveniences and schedule that I like," "as long as it does not disturb the family peace," "as long as the Lord does not permit me to lose what I value most," "as long as I don't have to leave where I am," "as long as it doesn't conflict with *my* plans." The devil doesn't play fair, and he will take the gifts of God you value most and turn them into false gods to lead you away from Jesus.

The Lord may permit such things to be kept. He may permit them to be lost. But either way, He would bid you to remain His disciple. His follower. His beloved child, redeemed by His blood. And either way, He will use all things for your good; and He will use even opposition and persecution of His Church to open doors to proclaim His Gospel so that more might hear and follow.

See, Jesus set His face and went to His death for you. Where you are half-hearted in your attempts to follow Him, He wholeheartedly shed His blood and breathed His last on the cross for you. Where you would value people and things over following Him, the sinless Son of God gave up everything – even His own life – in order to redeem you, to save you from idolatry, to make you His follower forever. This news of His selfless sacrifice is not a guilt trip, a way to beat you up with the news that He's better at this than you. It's good news, the good news that your faith is not built upon your commitment to

Jesus. It is founded on Jesus' commitment to you. And where daily, in your weakness, you will falter in your following Him, He does not cease to offer you grace upon grace so that you might be His forever.

Dear friends, give thanks for the Savior you witness in our text as He somberly, purposefully sets His face and sets out for Jerusalem. It is for your salvation, for your eternal deliverance that He does so. He has died, and He is risen for you. The face once set on Jerusalem now shines upon you, to be gracious unto you. That's why, in the words of Hebrews 12:2, you keep your eyes on the One who set His face, "who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God." He gives you all good things, both people and possessions; and where He permits you to hold onto them, give thanks for His kindness and follow Him. Where there is loss, give thanks that the time of loss will end for His sake – that although all things in this world eventually come to an end, you will not. Your Savior, Jesus, calls you to follow Him, and gives you forgiveness and life to be His follower forever.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen