

“Journey”

The Rev. Jim Trimble; St. Matthew’s Episcopal Church, Louisville KY

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2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14; Psalm 77:1-2, 11-20; Galatians 5:1, 13-25; Luke 9:51-62

Blessed be the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I always have to go back and read today’s passage of Luke just to make sure my ears aren’t playing tricks on me. I get confused when Jesus, responding to folks who actually want to follow him, basically responds with, “You say you want to follow me, but you put conditions on the journey. You must drop everything and never look back.” That always sounds kind of harsh. You’d think that a recruiter like Jesus would welcome anyone who had inkling to follow him and his disciples. Even the prophets of old weren’t this strict. When Elisha requested to go say goodbye to his family before he left on the journey, Elijah allowed it. But Jesus is a different story.

The folks who approach Jesus along the journey down the road put a lot of “but firsts” in their desire to follow him. But first, I must bury my father. But first, let me say goodbye to my family. But first, let me finish writing my book. But first, let me pay off my car. But first, let me find time to go to church. But first, let me get my life in order, and then I’ll have time for your journey. And it’s the journey that I see as the important lesson for us to explore today. Luke begins a new section of his book today...the journey to the Cross.

There was a wonderful special on PBS last week about the latest album from Sting. He explores and brings to life the music of 16th century English composer John Dowland, “Songs from the Labyrinth.” It’s Sting’s vocals and the music of a lute and it’s quite wonderful. Although he says it probably won’t be a huge radio hit. It was important to explore this music and to travel that journey. There were some great shots of Sting and others walking the way of a labyrinth amidst the grass and a trees of an English cottage...quite breathtaking. And I was reminded again that it is the journey that’s what’s so important. That’s the great thing about the labyrinth. In contrast to a maze where the mission is to get out, the labyrinth invites you in to travel, to contemplate, to pray, to be washed over with prayer, and to journey.

“When the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.”

Jesus knew what was in store for him in that Holy City, yet he didn’t just find the quickest route there, bypassing all the villages and people so he could get this over with. He knew that the journey is a prophetic mission. He is being sent out to teach and proclaim the Kingdom of God. This missionary journey will, indeed, end at the Cross and beyond, but the journey there cannot be denied. So, the three would-be followers of Jesus approach Christ with their heads and hearts still on earthly things, on things of the flesh as Paul refers to in his letter to the Galatians. “I still have things in my life that need my attention, but once I get those things squared away, then we can talk about this journey, about this mission to proclaim the Good News.”

A friend of mine has gone through a rough patch, especially in the area of employment. He’s been unemployed for a year now, not because he can’t get a job, but

that he chooses not to work. His military pension has covered his living expenses; with not much to spare, but his time is spent watching TV rather than interacting with the world around him. He explains that there are things that need getting done before he can even think of a new job. Cleaning up his house, doctor's appointments, taking care of another friend who's ill but has now moved. My response to him has been that life can happen not apart from these things, but amidst these things. You can work and have a life along with cleaning the house, going to the doctor every now and then. Because life won't wait around for our putting things in little boxes and dealing with them first before we live our life, before we continue on our journey.

Jesus is teaching us today that this path of discipleship, this journey of faith, is not one that he is just modeling for us, but is one that we will actually walk with him, even if our journey takes us to death. Jesus is not declaring an either/or with this journey to Jerusalem, but a both/and. That's an important distinction, I believe.

We look at our to-do lists and know that we have things to do...always. Meetings, appointments, laundry, grocery shopping, vacation. And Jesus is saying...that's great. I know you have lives to lead, but what I don't want you to do is to put this journey with me as another item in your palm pilot. This is not a task to just check off when you're done. This journey with Christ is a way of life, not an event of life.

Throughout all the gospels Jesus explains that this kind of discipleship, this new way of life, would be different than anything else they've experienced. Jesus is trying to explain that this life of discipleship does not preclude everything else in our lives, but must come first above everything. This duty and commitment to follow Christ along The Way has to come before our duties to care for our selves, our families, and our dead.

When we make this discipleship, this journey, our way of living, it shines forth in everything we do. And Jesus makes it clear today that it is not something we can do when we have time for it, or when other things get done first, or after the kids leave home, finally. It must be our foundation from where we start everything.

Jesus also makes it clear that it won't be easy. The fact that this journey we travel with him leads to the Cross and not immediately to the bright, shiny everlasting, is a big clue. And sometimes, we think that this isn't the journey I signed up for. I go to church on Sundays, say my prayers, and send a check to the charity of my choice. Isn't that enough? Can't I check those things off my to-do list and secure my spot in the great hereafter? Do I really have to have not a place to lay my head? Or have the dead bury their own dead? Or never look back? Jesus is saying and he does throughout the rest of Luke's Gospel starting right here, that it's not so much what we do, but who we are. Not, "What Would Jesus Do," but "Who Would Jesus Be." Follow me and become a new being. Travel this journey with me and you'll live your life in a new way.

We are called not to rush into this journey of discipleship without first considering and discerning the demands of this life and the cost it will have. We are called to put Jesus first and move ahead without looking back. Once we commit ourselves to this journey with Christ, as we recognize our friends and family members on the path with us and invite others to join along, we become new people in Christ. We approach the living of our lives with a new lens to see the Kingdom of God alive in the creation all around us. We live our lives by the Spirit and let ourselves be guided by the Spirit. The fruit of that Spirit, Paul tells us in the letter to the Galatians, is "love, joy,

peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” The psalmist sings to God that “You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.”

With our new faces set on Jerusalem, with this path and its journey to look forward to, how can we ever look back? How can we ever look back?

Amen.