

Jesus Set His Face Toward Jerusalem
Luke 9:51-62
3rd Sunday after Pentecost, Year C June 29, 2025
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Good morning, friends. I, Nan, want to begin by thanking everyone for their love and support as I take summer Sundays off to care for myself. I'm so accustomed to pushing myself that I didn't realize how exhausted I was from the thyroid deficiency, and then from an asthma attack, the likes of which I haven't had for years. I'm on the mend now and will continue to follow doctors' orders. I will also continue to write and mail our sermons and worship packets, while members of the three congregations read the sermons in my place. Please know that I love you, I miss you, and I certainly uphold you in prayer.

This week we turn our attention to a pivotal verse in Luke, found in chapter 9, verse 51. The verse sets the time frame in light of Jesus' ascension ("days drew near for him to be taken up"), which we explored earlier in the month. Jesus has been teaching and healing in Galilee, but it is now time for him to go to Jerusalem. This verse is rich in meaning, because it's not only telling us that Jesus will be changing his geographic location but also that he will be on his way to meet his destiny on the cross. From here until about 19:27, the reader is invited to journey with Jesus by means of what is known as the travel narrative in Luke.

Notice that he hasn't just set some GPS coordinates to find his way, but rather, he has "set his face" in the direction of Jerusalem (9:51, 53). Luke is telling us that Jesus is absolutely determined to go to Jerusalem. While the disciples probably don't fully understand what's happening, Jesus and Luke's readers are well aware that he is making his way toward Golgotha, where he will be crucified. We'll talk some more later about Jesus' face, but for now, let's move on and follow the plot of the story.

Jesus had sent an envoy ahead to let the residents of the first stop on his itinerary know that he was coming. This unnamed village is populated by Samaritans. We know that there is deep and long-standing division between Jews and Samaritans, who they consider half-breed Jews. Normally, Jewish travelers took a different route to avoid this territory, but Jesus plans to plough right on through. We know that hospitality was the expected order of the day, but the Samaritans would not receive Jesus because he was going to Jerusalem. Just how that detail should be

interpreted is not clear, but Jews worshiped in Jerusalem, whereas Samaritans did not. So the Jewish temple was a sticking point.

James and John were rip-roaring angry about this lack of welcome. They asked Jesus if they should just go ahead and burn the place down (9:54). Now, this may sound extreme to us, but recall 2 Kings 1, where the prophet Elijah calls fire to fall from heaven on King Ahaziah's troops (1:10, 12). In case you think the connection may be far-fetched, be aware that a scribal reading of this verse adds the words "as Elijah did." Clearly a connection was made early on.

Although the two disciples claimed scriptural warrant for their idea, Jesus stops them with a resounding rebuke. His viewpoint is that if the villagers don't wish to receive him, he and his entourage will simply move on. They are not going to destroy a town in punishment for its failure to receive him. Jesus does not preach or practice retaliation. But the rejection of Jesus' messengers is tantamount to the rejection of Jesus himself. So, Jesus and his friends are on the road again, headed to another unnamed village.

As they travel, several people approach, wanting to follow Jesus. The first person claims willingness to follow Jesus wherever he goes. Jesus explains that he has no home; he is a nomad. The implication, of course, is that to be a follower of Jesus one must not be tied to a particular location and possessions that may be found there.

The second person also wants to follow, but he wants to wait until he can bury his father. He's likely not asking for a day or two, as we would think of a funeral ritual, but may be asking to wait until his father actually dies. And who knows when that would be? Jesus tells this seeker "to let the dead bury their own dead" (9:60). What this man needs to do is to "go and proclaim the kingdom of God" (9:60).

The final inquirer says he wants to follow Jesus, but not until after he has said goodbye to friends and family. Jesus tells him that once one makes a commitment, they can't look back. In Jesus' day, if someone plowing a furrow looked backward, chances are that the line would become crooked. Eyes and hands needed to be straight ahead. There was no turning back.

Please notice: None of these people responds to Jesus. We don't know for sure whether they turned aside or made the bold commitment to follow. What we do know is that Jesus has high expectations for those who will be his disciples. He wants us to be informed and to count the cost before "signing on." And these expectations are actually quite daunting. We need to take care of family and do the work necessary to earn a living. Yet, Jesus

tells us that we must be wholeheartedly devoted to him. That utter devotion surely makes sense, but we wonder how we are to achieve that level of commitment.

Today's reading, though based on incidents that supposedly occurred long ago and far away, have a tremendous bearing on our own discipleship. Remember that we said last week that during this Ordinary Time of the church year we will be looking at ways that we can grow and stretch ourselves as faithful disciples. So what does this passage from Luke teach us about ourselves...and about Jesus...and how we are to relate to him?

Let's come back now to the idea of Jesus setting his face toward Jerusalem. On the cover of our bulletin, you'll find an icon of Jesus Pantocrator ("ruler of all"). The original, located in Saint Catherine's monastery in the Sinai desert, dates to around 500 A.D. As you are undoubtedly aware, we have no actual portraits of Christ, but many experts contend that this icon represents the dual nature of Christ. The features on the right side of his face (left in picture) represent his human nature, whereas the ones on his left (right in picture) represent his divinity. Although not intended to be an illustration of Luke 9:51, this icon depicts Jesus' face in a way that, at least to me, seems determined to fulfill his mission by going on to Jerusalem. May I suggest that you take a few moments to look carefully at his features and see what strikes you. Is this how you would imagine his face? If not, what else might you expect to see—or not see? Can you feel Jesus' love and his vulnerability? Are you able to experience the reconciliation he has brought to bear between you and the Father?

Let's think now about how your own face might reflect that of Jesus' face. Here are some ideas, which you may want to mull over as you stand in front of a mirror.

As you think about your commitment to follow Jesus, can you see a conscious decision, a firm commitment to follow him written on your face?

Jesus' face is set toward Jerusalem, a place very important throughout his life. As he goes there this time, no one will be celebrating his birth, nor accompanying him as he attends an annual festival, nor listening to him teach the elders in the Temple. No, this time he will have to face suffering and crucifixion. Is there a place in your own life that may be comparable to Jesus' Jerusalem? If so, where is it? Why is it so important to you?

Again, as you look at the face of Jesus, you can see that he is determined to embrace God's will for his life. Can the same thing be said about your own determination to follow? If not, try to identify whatever is holding you back.

As you look at the face of Jesus on the bulletin cover, can you discern any sense of purpose? Likewise, as you look at your own face in the mirror, can you sense purpose in your own life? How would you state your own purpose in a sentence or two?

We know that Jesus did not allow himself to be distracted by the things or pressures of this world. What about you? Are there people or situations that pose real temptations for you, opportunities to get distracted? If so, how might you go about reining them in?

Perhaps you can see lines of suffering written on Jesus' face. He has suffered rejection before and will soon suffer that again. Moreover, this time he will be physically abused and crucified. Yet, his suffering led to redemption for us, to reconciliation with God. Can you think of any examples in your own life when suffering brought you closer to God?

So, having pondered these questions, what will you do to demonstrate your commitment to God? Maybe I need to ask another question first: Do you really want to make a 100% commitment to follow Jesus? I can hear some of you hemming and hawing. An enthusiastic "all in, Lord" might be the response that we'd like to make, but when we get down to cases and count the cost, when we truly consider how our lives will be impacted, do we really want to go all in? Well, maybe, but perhaps we'd prefer to be like the three persons in verses 57-62. We like to play the "yes, but" game: "I'll follow you, Lord, but first I have to tend to something more important."

Pastor Dale Barrick got so tired of hearing all the excuses of his people why they don't attend church, that he come up with this novel idea: A NO EXCUSE Sunday. He actually has some very good ideas. Pastor Dale suggests that there would be:

- cots in the church for those who like to sleep in;
- blankets for those who find the sanctuary too cold;
- fans for those who find the sanctuary too warm;
- sand for those who prefer the beach;
- televisions sets for those persons who prefer services on the screen;

- poinsettias and lilies for those accustomed to entering the church only on Christmas and Easter;
- stop watches for those who want to leave in exactly an hour and a whistle to stop the service;
- putting greens for those who enjoy golf;
- masks to hid the faces of those who have been gone for so long that they are embarrassed or feel funny coming back;
- money for those who, though able to do so, don't want to make a financial commitment but feel sheepish about not putting anything in the offering plate;
- meals to carry out;
- exercise bikes;
- a driver to be at your door every Sunday to bring you to church so that you get back into the habit you got out of.

I guess we could go on and on. We are good at making up excuses, aren't we? Jesus doesn't want our excuses, but our faithfulness, our commitment to follow him.

So what excuses do you need to shed? If you can really see the face of Jesus reflected in your own, what steps will you take to be a more faithful disciple, one who will go with Jesus all the way? Here are several ideas:

Make a serious commitment to follow Jesus. To do that, develop attitudes of love of God and love of neighbor. Recognize your dependence on God by acting with a humble spirit.

Seek to be transformed by Jesus, so that you may be conformed to his image. In turn, his light will shine more brightly through you.

Embrace the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20). Do all that you can to make disciples for the transformation of the world. This entails sharing the good news with those whose lives you can reach out and touch, as well as supporting those missionaries and ministers around the world by your prayers and financial gifts.

Strive to live a holy life.

Bear the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23)—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, and self-control—so that all may see Jesus living in you!

With thanks to our Sunday readers and love to you all, Nan