

You Are Ready? Really?

Pentecost – May 14/15, 2005

Sermon Background Study

Luke 9:51-62 (NRSV)

⁵¹When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. ⁵²And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; ⁵³but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. ⁵⁴When 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?” ⁵⁵But he turned and rebuked them. ⁵⁶Then they went on to another village.

⁵⁷As they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” ⁵⁸And 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.” ⁵⁹To another he said, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” ⁶⁰But Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” ⁶¹Another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” ⁶²Jesus said to him, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

Sometimes, our enthusiasm can blind us to certain realities. Today, we consider some disciples of Jesus and some would-be disciples who don't at all understand the journey that Jesus has begun.

Samaria is an area that lies between Galilee in the north and Judea in the south. In Jesus' day, the Samaritans despised the Jews and vice versa. So far as the Samaritans were concerned, the Jews were the descendents of those who had perverted the worship of Yahweh centuries before. So far as the Jews were concerned, the Samaritans were of a vague heritage who claimed allegiance to Torah but understood nothing of God. Jews and Samaritans were often at each others throats. Perhaps their shared religious heritage only made things worse, not better. And violence was common. Herod Antipas, before whom Jesus was hauled, was removed from office by the Romans after the slaughter of Jews in Samaria. And it is through Samaria that Jesus is determined to go as he begins his long journey to Jerusalem and a cross.

“He set his face to go to Jerusalem”

And so it begins. Despite the enthusiasm of the crowds, despite Peter's confession of Jesus as Messiah, the time has come for Jesus to begin his journey to Jerusalem. Jesus knows what lies ahead. He is under no illusions about the path forward. It will be difficult. As he told the disciples not long before, “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day raised” (Luke 9:22). No one would look excitedly toward such a day,

Pentecost

This weekend is the celebration of Pentecost, which has its roots in ancient Judaism and is still observed by Jews and Christians, though you'll see that there is a very big difference.

In the Jewish calendar, Pentecost, customarily called the Feast of Weeks, was the second of three major Jewish festivals, held between Passover (in early spring) and Tabernacles (in the fall). For the Jews, Pentecost was an agricultural festival, during which the community would show gratitude to God for the first fruits from that year's crop, i.e., the early harvest.

Jesus was crucified during Passover. After his resurrection, Jesus spent about six weeks with various groups of disciples, teaching them and preparing them for his return to the Father. Jesus promised that after his departure, God would send the Holy Spirit to be their comforter and advocate. Jesus' disciples were to wait in Jerusalem for the arrival of the Spirit.

The Festival of Weeks, Pentecost, came soon after Jesus' departure. Because Pentecost was such a major festival, Jerusalem was stuffed with Jews from all over the Roman empire. In Acts 2, Luke tells us that the disciples were gathered together on the day of Pentecost in a room near the temple, when there was a sudden sound “like the rush of a mighty wind” and tongues of fire leapt from disciple to disciple. The crowds were astonished at this, each person hearing in his or her own language the disciples' proclamations of God's great deeds.

This outpouring of God's Spirit marked the beginning of a new age. The disciples were new creations in God's kingdom and the Holy Spirit would forever be God's empowering presence in their lives. Indeed, the rest of Acts tells the story of how the Holy Spirit guided and directed the growth and development of the early church. Though we refer to Luke's book as the Acts of the Apostles, it really ought to be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit. And God's Spirit is today, for each us, God present with us, empowering us all to do God's work.

including Jesus. He must, using an old Semitic expression, “set his face toward Jerusalem” (v. 51, 53). Surely Luke intends that we recall Isaiah 50:7, “The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame.”

Luke

I am wrapping up my spring Bible Academy classes. This year, we tackled Luke’s Gospel in the winter session and Luke’s book of Acts in the spring session. Together, Luke’s two volumes comprise about 25% of the entire New Testament!

Luke wrote these two volumes sometime around 80AD, about 50 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection. It seems that Luke was a traveling companion of Paul’s during some of the missionary journeys, as portions of Acts are written as “we” not “they.” Luke is a well-educated man who writes in a sophisticated Greek. Luke’s immediate audience is Theophilus, who is a follower of Jesus but new to the faith. Theophilus may even have been Luke’s patron, commissioning Luke’s 2-volume history. Luke is generally believed to be a Gentile-Christian, making him the only non-Jewish writer of the New Testament. However, Luke’s books are so Jewish in perspective (just read the first three chapters of the Gospel) that some scholars are rethinking long-standing assumptions about Luke.

Though Luke is explicitly writing a history, he is also a preacher. He has a theological story to tell about Jesus, the Spirit, and God’s work to redeem humanity and all creation. Today’s passage from Luke is a great example. It marks the beginning of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem, the story of which spans ten chapters. The geography of this journey jumps around in ways that don’t seem too realistic if one’s focus is only on the itinerary. But Luke is less interested in the geography and timeline of it all, then he is helping us to grasp the growing tension surrounding Jesus’ ministry and Jesus’ determination to stay faithful to his mission. He uses the journey motif here and also in Acts as a way of helping us to see that God is always active and caring, moving us forward in history toward a goal, namely the full consummation of God’s kingdom. Jesus and his disciples are on a pilgrimage in Luke’s Gospel. Paul is on pilgrimages as he carries the Good News across the Roman Empire. We are on our own pilgrimages, a people seeking to be evermore holy and evermore a bright light to the world. We can’t build God’s kingdom, that is God’s work, but we can build *for* the kingdom and in so doing, we can find our heart’s desire.

So, Jesus resolutely sets out for Jerusalem. And he won’t begin by bypassing the Samaritan villages. Instead he will pass through them, sending messengers ahead to prepare the way. But the Samaritan villagers want nothing to do with Jesus. This is not surprising but the disciple’s reaction shows how little they’ve learned. Perhaps thinking of Elijah, they want to call down fire from heaven upon the village. But Jesus’ way is not that of vengeance and violence. If the Samaritans refuse him, he will simply go on – resolutely.

Committed are you?

As Jesus and the disciples travel along the road toward Jerusalem they attract some would-be followers who seem most enthusiastic about joining the movement. But each of them are not quite so ready to join up as they thought.

The key to understanding Jesus’ encounter with these three men is to see that all three have perfectly fine reasons for taking care of some things before they head out on the journey. One man merely wants to bury his father. What could be wrong with that? Another wants to say goodbye to his family. Who wouldn’t? But Jesus won’t have any of it. If these three men want to follow Jesus they must be prepared to drop everything, that minute, and go. There can be no other loyalties. There can be no other priorities. Elijah had at least let Elisha kill his livestock and throw a barbeque before heading out (1 Kings 19:19-21). But then again, Elijah wasn’t Lord. Jesus is.

If you’ve known Jesus only as Jesus-meek-and-mild or Jesus-of-the-nice-hug, then passages like today’s are jarring. Can’t even bury his father!?!? But hard teachings demand hard techniques. Jesus knows well that his followers simply don’t get it. They don’t understand where his vocation will lead. They haven’t counted the cost for Jesus, much less for themselves. They may consider themselves to be fully ready to be Jesus’ followers, in the strongest sense of that word, but they are not.

Are we ready? Am I? This is a question I keep asking myself. Do I really understand the shape of a Christ-centered life? It can’t always be the easy way forward. But can I see the hard way and, if I do see it, do I trust God enough to press on? My wife Patti’s brother-in-law is battling advanced prostate cancer. He is learning the hard way, a way that I pray I will never have to take, that though he suffers, God is with him every step of the way. Indeed, God has been there before him.

As Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem, he knows the difficult path ahead for his disciples even if they do not. But he will do all he can to teach them about commitment and submission, even if the lessons seem harsh. I guess that is what we might mean by tough love.

Daily Bible Readings

(more from Jesus' journey to Jerusalem in Luke's Gospel)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Luke 11:1-13 Jesus teaches his disciples about prayer.</p>	<p>Day 2 Luke 11:37-54 Jesus confronts some Pharisees and lawyers</p>
<p>Day 3 Luke 13:10-21 Jesus heals a woman on the Sabbath and teaches about the way small acts lead to great consequences.</p>	<p>Day 4 Luke 13:22-30 Jesus teaches about the narrowness of the path to God. This is a teaching about obedience.</p>
<p>Day 5 Luke 15 Stories about a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

A Special Four-week Teaching Series with Scott Engle

*Our Times and the End-Times:
A fresh look at biblical prophecy*

Beginning Today! Sundays at 9:30 in Wesley Hall

The popularity of the *Left Behind* series generated a lot of new interest in Christian teachings about the End of Days. Now, we have NBC's popular mini-series, *Revelations*. In this four-week Wesley Hall teaching series, we'll take a look at what the Bible actually has to say about the End-Times. Will there be one Antichrist or many antichrists? Will believers be yanked away into safety as the world descends into chaos and tribulation? When will all this happen? What does any of this have to do with heaven? What are we to make of the book of Revelation? What is our own place in all of this and what does it have to do with the lives we lead now?

May Book Recommendation

In God's Time: The Bible and the Future, by Craig Hill

Few topics interest Christians more than speculation about the End-Times. And few topics are so rife with misconceptions and poor biblical interpretation. But Craig Hill's book is a great antidote. Hill tackles subjects ranging from our understanding of Scripture to the books of Daniel and Revelation to popular, but unbiblical, teachings about the so-called Rapture. This is the probably the best book on the subject currently available for laypeople. You can pick up a copy at *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew bookstore.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem. I picture him setting out on this final journey with a seriousness and determination that is evident even in the expression on his face. Jesus knows what lies ahead, even if no one else does. Jesus knows that a confrontation with the temple leadership and with Caesar are unavoidable, at least so long as Jesus remains faithful to his mission. He will take the hard way, the right way, rather than the path of least resistance.

I suspect that we've all taken the path of least resistance at times in our lives. You might share some stories of times that you didn't take the hard road, even though you should have. Perhaps you knew this at the time but the road just seemed too hard to go forward. You might also look for some times in your life that you *did* take the hard road, avoiding the path of least resistance. Was it worth it? What did you gain from the experience? How would you talk to teenagers about hard roads and easy paths?

What do you find most difficult about the Christian life? Where are you most tempted to take the easy, but wrong, path forward? We'll talk more about this next week, but for now, what do you make of this business of undivided loyalty to Christ? Where does God really, *really*, rank in your life? Could others tell? How would they?