

Luke 9:28–36, 51–56 (NRSV)

<sup>28</sup>Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. <sup>29</sup>And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. <sup>30</sup>Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. <sup>31</sup>They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. <sup>32</sup>Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. <sup>33</sup>Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah” —not knowing what he said. <sup>34</sup>While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. <sup>35</sup>Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” <sup>36</sup>When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

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

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

*The time has come. Jesus turns toward the cross.*

When you visit Galilee the first time, it becomes apparent why most of Jesus’ ministry happens at the Sea of Galilee. Venture inland to the west and the terrain quickly becomes hilly and difficult; it is no easy walk from Nazareth to the Sea of Galilee. In the midst of the Galilean hills, Jesus took his closest disciples up a mountain where Jesus’ glory was revealed. Do we know exactly which mountain or hill? No, but Mt. Tabor is a good candidate and is often remembered as the Mt. of the Transfiguration. In addition, there are several wonderful look-out spots nearby that give amazing views of Galilee, enabling you to take in the big picture. Jesus would take Peter, James, and John up a mountainside, where all three disciples thought they had found the “big picture.”

### *The three*

Peter and James and John had known each other for a long time. They had met in Capernaum, a small town on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee. All three were fishermen and while they were working one morning, all three had been approached by a man from Nazareth named Jesus. “Follow me,” Jesus had said, “and I will make you fish for people” (Matthew 4:19). And they had simply followed. All three of them.

Soon, the three of them were caught up in the enthusiasm of the crowds who came flocking to this new miracle-worker. As the months passed, and the miracles and the healings and the teachings mounted, the crowds began to wonder who Jesus really was. There was even speculation that perhaps Jesus was actually John the Baptist or Elijah or Jeremiah. But Peter sensed that there was more to Jesus than even a great prophet. When confronted by Jesus, “Who do you say that I am?,” Peter had replied, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Though Jesus had inexplicably told the disciples to keep this to themselves, Jesus as Messiah was something the disciples could handle. The Jews had waited a long time for the arrival of God’s Anointed One and all Jews *knew* the Messiah’s job description – cleanse the temple and drive out the pagan foreigners. The Jews *knew* that the Messiah

#### Luke the Preacher

Luke wrote two volumes, Luke and Acts, sometime around 80AD, about 50 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection. 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, and, perhaps, a patron of Luke’s.

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 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.

would come in power and might and wonder and glory for all the world to see. Even fishermen from Capernaum *knew* all this. They might be surprised to be a part of such big doings, but they had things under control. Or so they thought.

*Rock my world!*

How shocked and confused Peter and James and John must have been. No sooner had Peter declared Jesus to be God’s Messiah then Jesus had begun talking about suffering, how he must die at the hands of the temple leadership and be raised on the third day. Peter and the others couldn’t make sense of such talk.

“Suffering Messiah” was an oxymoron – two words that simply didn’t go together. The Messiah was to lead an army in triumph, not die on a Roman cross. Jesus had even called Peter “Satan” for suggesting that Jesus need not suffer.<sup>1</sup> Take up your cross, Jesus said. Those who want to save their life will lose it, those who lose their life for Jesus’ sake will find it.

Then, Jesus led the three of them up a mountain in Galilee. There, Jesus was transfigured, *metamorphoomai* in the Greek. His face shone like the sun; his clothes dazzled. Alongside Jesus, Moses and Elijah appeared; the three of them talked amongst themselves. Nothing had prepared the disciples for this. Perplexed at the least, Peter asks an odd question – Can he build dwellings for the

three?! But Peter is cut-off by a blinding light and a voice from the clouds saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” The disciples’ world was being blown apart. They thought they understood, but they did not. They thought they had things under control, but they did not. In utter terror and confusion, Peter, James, and John simply collapse to the ground. Then, as any loving friend or parent would, Jesus comes to them, touches them, and tells them to get up, they need not be afraid. They could trust Jesus. They must.

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<sup>1</sup>Jesus knows the path that lies before him. The last thing he needs is Peter tempting him to take another path, to avoid the suffering that lies ahead. Jesus will be faithful all the way to the cross and it is by his faithfulness that we are saved.

We are struck by Peter's desire to set up tents for everyone on the mountainside, as if he could hang on to this moment for all time. As Rev. Allison Jean pointed out to me, Peter is ready to stand by Jesus' side during this transcendent mountain-top experience. But he would prove unwilling to stand beside Jesus at the cross. We are like Peter in this. We are ready for all the moving, inspiring, uplifting mountains that God wants to give us. But when it comes to darkness and suffering, we have trouble seeing Jesus in any of it. As Allison put it, "Jesus will always call us to leave the mountain eventually, because that is not where the work is to be done." This is Communion Sunday. Holy Communion is not about the mountain-top; it is about the 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, despite the Transfiguration, 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, 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."

So, as Luke beautifully put it, Jesus "set his face toward Jerusalem" (9:51). 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 (2 Kings 1), 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 toward Jerusalem and a Roman cross.

*How 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 barbecue 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?

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 stories on the journey to Jerusalem in Luke's gospel*

**Monday, Luke 11:1-13** Jesus teaches his disciples about prayer.

**Tuesday, Luke 11:37-54** Jesus confronts some Pharisees and lawyers.

**Wednesday, Luke 13:10-21** Jesus heals a woman on the Sabbath and teaches about the way small acts lead to great consequences.

**Thursday, Luke 13:22-30** Jesus teaches about the narrowness of the path to God. This is a teaching about obedience.

**Friday, Luke 15** Stories about a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son.

**Saturday, Luke 17:11-19** Jesus cleanses ten lepers.

## Scott Engle's Bible Classes

### Monday Evening Class

We are studying Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

### Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the book of Kings (1&2).

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

*About the weekday classes:*

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check [www.scottengle.org](http://www.scottengle.org) to make sure the class is meeting.

### Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Smith Worship Center

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Current series: *Deep Impact: crucial turning points in the biblical story*

Coming after Easter: *The Apostles' Creed: what it is and why it matters*

Video of each week's class is posted here: [vimeo.com/groups/scottsbiblestudy](https://vimeo.com/groups/scottsbiblestudy)