

3rd Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 6.26.22

Luke 9:51-62

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

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

I have a friend. I knew her best when we were both in graduate school. She was at Harvard Law when I was at the divinity school, which tells you about how we're different and how we're the same. We met in high school, prep school; but we weren't close then. She was driven, successful—or at least that's how it seemed to me. I was mostly just scared all the time—or at least that's how it seems to me looking back.

At Harvard, she came to the morning prayer service at Memorial Church in Harvard Yard where I was a member of the choir. She'd come during Lent, and no other time. It was her Lenten discipline, and I was surprised that first time she showed up, in late winter, early morning. I hadn't known she was at Harvard. I hadn't known she was religious. I could have guessed, though, that she was disciplined.

I lost track of her after graduate school, would just see her name in our high school alumni class notes. Turns out she was on the 9/11 Commission. I have no idea how one comes to be a part of something like that, but I imagine it involves a lot of specially appointed people, smart, serious, sifting through a lot of paperwork about incredibly important things to a fine point. I was impressed, and I bought a copy of the report.

It's somewhere around here.

Next, I heard she was in seminary. Ten, twelve years later, she was in the long, slow process of ordination in the Episcopal church.

Didn't see *that* coming.

A trip I took had me in her area, Washington D.C. We scheduled a visit, coffee.

I told her I was surprised about her move to seminary. Like, *really* surprised.

She'd always wanted this, though, she explained. As a kid, even in high school, something she never quite allowed herself—and she said something about the Morning Prayer services at Memorial Church, and about the course which I'd forgotten she'd taken at the div. school, which I also took. A little break from her law school coursework, a course on the Psalms. A famous scholar taught it, but, boy, was he a lousy teacher.

Sipping coffee, I started to suspect *she* was admiring *me*. I seem to remember her wondering about how I'd bucked expectation and joined the clergy, a famously middling profession. Sure, we have our Luthers and our Calvins, our Barths and Bonhoeffers. But most of us just settle into a parish and do the unambitious work of falling in love with regular people living ordinary lives.

I imagine she asked about how I'd gotten to where I was, and I probably explained that I always just take the next step that shows itself in front of me. "I've really never had a plan. You were always determined," I said, admiring that.

"*Too* determined," she said, sounding almost regretful, like she'd missed her life. She overshot.

She's ordained now, seems very happy when I see her on Facebook. A lovely parish, a gorgeous church, stone, stained glass.

"*Too* determined," I think I've never heard anyone say that about themselves before.

With this passage from the gospel of Luke this morning, we begin what's called Luke's travel narrative. From the ninth chapter to the nineteenth chapter, Jesus according to Luke makes the long journey to Jerusalem. There he would, like countless prophets before him, be killed for not going along with the people's belligerence and for insisting that rather they join him on the project of living gently, seeing to one another, choosing love instead of power, preferring peace over pride.

Admittedly, there *was* a certain determined quality to it all. Jesus had known all along that he would end up in Jerusalem. Indeed, he had known all along that he would *end* in Jerusalem. The capital city of the people Israel and Judah, the pride of the people, this gleaming city, Jerusalem was where the temporal met the eternal, the powers of this world met the powers of God. It was compelling. It was dangerous, the sort of place where people met their fate.

Jesus' fate was suffering death, and rising to eternal life, and bringing the people who would follow along with him on this journey. He was like Moses in this way, bringing the people to the edge of existence and then helping through to the other side. He'd even said as much, just

prior to this reading we heard this morning. On the mountaintop where he appeared to Peter and James and John, appeared with Moses and Elijah, he was heard to be speaking with them about his soon-to-come departure, his *exodus*. And it was just following this that he's remembered to have set his face to Jerusalem.

This was an exodus he had coming, a departure as if from enslaving power, some ensnaring, exploiting power.

There was a certain determined quality to it all. De-termined means the end is decided ahead of time. De-termined means the terminus is known before the moving toward it has even begun. As opposed to meandering, as opposed to wandering and then just happening upon something: there are those days I wind up at the grocery store because I was out and about, and I remembered I needed bananas. And there are those days where, if nothing else happens, I will be getting to the grocery store. I'm that determined. The end is that much decided before anything else.

We see this in Jesus' initial interactions as he began.

Like, upon Jesus telling one person to follow him, the person responded, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father," a perfectly justified final task to complete before setting out on a great journey. On the face of it, anyway. A second look suggests it maybe can't be taken so literally. It's unlikely this is a literal person whose actual father recently died, and whose path crossed with Jesus in the couple of days between when his father died and the burial was to take place. It's more likely this is a figurative story, one to press upon the hearer the urgency of Jesus' task, the priority that following in the Jesus way should be for those who aim to follow.

Another, though, had an even milder request before going. "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." But even this wouldn't do for Jesus. "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." But this too, and moreover, is a perfectly justifiable final task, and this one more plausible.

Karoline Lewis is a New Testament scholar whose work I read a lot. On this lection she wrote, "...my first response was, Sorry, Jesus. You are wrong. Sometimes we have to bury our dead and you are just going to have to wait. Sometimes we have to say goodbye to those we are leaving or to those we have lost, and we will catch up to you eventually. Sometimes we have a few things that need tending before we jump on the discipleship bandwagon..."

"But then," Lewis continues, "I started imagining this text from Jesus' point of view. Not from an historical perspective that gives attention to Jesus' own situation — although that might be

worth considering – in another sermon. But from the perspective of the urgency of God’s favor. That every minute matters for those to whom it really matters.

“That every moment counts. [And] Perhaps Jesus recognizes our tendency to put off the moments in time that might actually make a difference [in the life of the world] ... Perhaps Jesus simply says stop making excuses and start imagining experiences that invite ‘let’s see what happens’ instead of ‘I need all my stuff figured out.’”

(Let’s see what happens: the mission statement among those of us less determined.)

What these exchanges also suggest to me is the importance of the future as opposed to the past. As we’ve been studying this gospel narrative this year—following the Gospel of Luke through this, Year C, and therefore studying it from various perspectives in our church book group—I’ve been struck again and again by this quality I think unique to Luke: the future *matters* in Luke’s understanding of Jesus. The future *matters* to Jesus especially according to Luke—and not just the future as in the world-to-come but also the future of this world, *this* world.

This isn’t always true. In the other gospel narratives, there’s less of a sense that the future comes to bear. In Mark, Jesus himself has effect, and it is immediate, all time coming to now. In Matthew, the significance of Jesus is in how he fulfills scripture, thus tying him with continuity to tradition and the past. In John, Jesus’ effect is deeply personal, intimate and spiritual, while also cosmic, taking into its consideration all creation from the alpha to the omega, from the big bang to the end of time. Only according to Luke, that is in both Luke’s gospel and in his second book, the Book of Acts, is there a sense of history and its future, of life in the world and how it must be shaped if we have any hope. Only according to Luke-Acts is there a concern with the world’s future, how this whole thing would play out, *should* play out—an urgency as to how to live in response to Jesus, an urgency about what the church would look like in the world and what effect its people gathered as church would have in the world. Luke, and Luke’s Jesus, are concerned about the future of the world in the world. Jesus, and the Jesus way, which is to say Church, would have real effect, and it would be for the good and it would extend into the future, even the unimaginable future.

The unimaginable future. I’ve heard that’s the most terrifying thing: that which can’t be imagined.

Hence the urgency. Hence this Jesus’ apparently favoring the following of him over some recourse to what’s past. The imploring, “Let the dead bury their own dead,” which sounds so heartless: might it rather be strong rhetoric to press upon the people that life beckons, life lived in

love beckons? Life lies ahead, and it might just be good. It depends. It depends upon us. And it also doesn't for God is at work in all things for good.

This seems especially crucial a message these days. The future seems so scary. With so much that for so long has felt so steady as to be a stasis, so steady as to be states that we can count on to sustain forever, as if they were fixed by the laws of physics, as if history itself had come to an end and that end was entirely known and stable: now all is in flux, fluid as a flood that leaves nothing of firmament, nothing firm at all, just chaos. The future is practically unimaginable—neither its politics nor its peoples, so many unsettled and intermixed, nor even its climate.

No wonder so many of us want to make America great again, for to make it good in a new way is a challenge not only of will but also of imagination. And our imaginations have become so impoverished. Everything is so literal, so fixed and therefore brittle.

As it happens futurelessness of this sort opens a way for fascism. Hannah Arendt discovered it in her writings following the fall of Naziism. Naziism, whose imagining of the future was always of a return to some mythic glorious past. Peter Pomerantsev has returned to the insight in his study of Putin's Russia, where a politics of appearances dominates, where reality can only hardly break in and the aim is there, too, a return to come mythic glorious past.

It doesn't help that here at home nearly none of the political movements shaping our common life offers much imagining about the future as anything other than a replaying of various pasts. Not that I look to politics to fill in all of life's blanks. Hardly. But many do, especially with the retreat of religion in common life, real, practiced, traditional religion, with its regular stirrings of the human imagination, its poetry and art and music and silence. So much even of religion these days is just more literalism, brittle, unimaginative, driving out of Holy Spirit.

The future: if you're looking for it, my advice is to join up with the one demographic group that persists in its hope, Black activists, these for whom no point in the past presents an alluring vision of what might be (again), what *should* be (again). For Black Americans, the future has always been where it's at. A favorite play of mine is Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, which featured family bearing the name the Youngers, these who throughout the play give preference to the youngest generation in the household, the elders doing whatever it takes to make the next generation live better than they.

That's a good pose in the world, wouldn't you say? Luke would, Luke's Jesus would, all because of their strength of faith in the Holy Spirit, this one who calls from the future, this aspect of God who alights the way. This is the one who generates all action according to Luke, in his

gospel and in Acts, that each and all might progress toward God's glorious end, and that this glorious end might also manifest as God's loving reign along the way. The Holy Spirit: both the means and the end.

There's a certain determined way about this.

And yet this is also the longest continuous section of the Gospel of Luke—this journey which will take us through to the end of November as we follow along this church year. It takes Jesus a long time to get to Jerusalem. It involves a lot of wending and meandering, into Samaritan territory, into Gentile territory. Messengers would go ahead of the group, would prepare places for the arrival of this caravan. But that was it for planning. It really was a matter of "let's see how this goes," Jesus even preparing those who claimed they'd follow him: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." As much of the determined as there was about this, there was an equal measure of itinerancy. You just had to trust.

You just *have* to trust.

We just have to trust.

Steer the ship, but lightly. Keep your hand on the tiller, but lightly.

I led a backpacking trip once, ten teenagers, four days, three of the presidential peaks in the White Mountains—Washington, Jefferson, Madison. I happened into it as a young adult because the person who was supposed to lead it got sick.

I'd never led an overnight trip before. I was intimidated. "What if I can't do this?"

I trained. I broke in my hiking boots and got used to a heavy pack. ("But what if I can't do this?")

I had an experienced co-leader, Gary.

Our first hour in the woods I was out front. ("Because what if I can't do this?") Setting the pace seemed like a good idea. Otherwise, I'd fall behind. (Because I probably couldn't do this.)

We climbed and climbed. Trees. Leaves. Sunlight dappled. The birds and frogs and bugs and sounds of the woods.

We climbed and climbed

Eventually Gary came up beside me. "Hey, Liz, look," he said, pointing down beside the path we were on. There was a brook there, falling water, trickling down beside where we were climbing up.

I looked. I didn't see though. "What?" I asked, getting nervous.

"Look," he said and pointed again. The brook again.

I looked again, but I still didn't see. "What?" I asked again.

"A brook," he said. "It's pretty," he said.

Thanks be to God.