

“Facing Forward”

Valley Presbyterian Church – February 14, 2021

6th Sunday of Epiphany

Psalm 5:1-8

Rev. John Wahl

Luke 9:51-62

A principle often used in deciphering God’s Word is this: use scripture to interpret scripture. In other words, understanding one particular phrase or statement can be made more certain by comparing it to other parts of the biblical record. The more something is mentioned, the clearer its meaning might well become.

In the first verse of today’s reading, we hear Luke telling us that Jesus “set(s) his face to Jerusalem,” for “the days drew near for him to be taken up.” In the final chapters of the gospel, when Jesus finally reaches Jerusalem, we will learn well what it means for Jesus to be taken up: to be lifted or raised into the air. First, that will be at Calvary, as Jesus is lifted up onto a cross to die. Three days later, Jesus will be resurrected by God to new life, then appear to his disciples as the risen Lord, before being taken up into heaven in glory.

So, while – here in chapter nine – the disciples may not understand the significance of this turn to Jerusalem – a journey which will not be complete until chapter 19 – Luke’s readers already understand how God will elevate, lift up Jesus as Messiah and Lord.

Readers steeped in the tradition of the Old Testament would have also interpreted Luke’s description that Jesus sets his face to Jerusalem to mean a focused, unwavering determination. In Ezekiel 21, the prophet is instructed by God to “set (his) face toward Jerusalem and preach against (it).” Then, in Isaiah, chapter, 50 – what is known as the servant song – the chosen one does “not turn backward;” despite knowing that hardship and suffering lies ahead.

If not yet understood by his disciples, Jesus’ resoluteness in purpose appears to be on display to the Samaritans in the village where his messengers are sent to find accommodations. In this journey from Galilee in the north, where Jesus is from, to Judea in the south, where he is now headed; the most direct path goes through the land of the Samaritans. For centuries, the people of Judea and Samaria

have been locked in an ongoing feud. And so, maybe we should not be surprised that, when James and John – these envoys of Jesus – are met with rejection, their first inclination is to command fire from heaven to consume their enemies.

Not only is this a harsh remedy for simply being denied overnight lodging, it makes you wonder how these two followers thought they had the power to make such a thing happen. Just earlier, in the very same chapter, the disciples had tried to heal a child possessed with a demon and were unable. Maybe they understand it to be an act of loyalty to their leader to strike out against their perceived enemies, but in the verse immediately before our reading began, they had heard Jesus clearly state, “whoever is not against you is for you.”¹

Jesus is focused not on being slighted – he has already and will experience this time and again – his face is set on Jerusalem. Even if, for some reason, the Samaritans did not accept him, he shows no animosity against them. It will be a Good Samaritan who – in a parable he tells in the very next chapter – is held up as the exemplar of a neighbor. So, Jesus and his disciples simply move on to another village, likely shaking the dust off their sandals as they go.

During the Christian season of Lent, which begins on this coming Ash Wednesday, we symbolically take this journey to Jerusalem with Jesus. Rather than shaking the dust off of our feet, though, we trace the sign of the cross on our foreheads – or on the back of our hands – using the earth’s soil or burnt ashes. In today’s liturgy, you will be invited to undertake this Lenten journey with Jesus; to set you face resolutely toward Jerusalem; focusing on the meaning of the death and resurrection and how it inspires us to be fellow travelers along this road; disciples and servants of Jesus.

The three short vignettes in the latter verses of today’s reading teach us something about what it means to be one of Jesus’ followers. In the first, a would-be disciple approaches Jesus and offers to follow “wherever you go.” Jesus responds with the warning that to do so might mean giving up the comforts of home, including somewhere to sleep. Jesus does not forbid him from following but makes no empty promises about the road ahead being easy.

In the second example, Jesus is the one making the invitation, but his potential follower wants to first fulfill the sacred obligation of burying his father. Jesus, who has already shown he has the power to raise the dead to life, here shows

¹ Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, *Bibleworm Podcast*

not even enough patience for the funeral to be concluded. So resolute, so focused on his mission to redemption in Jerusalem is Jesus that the lesson we can deduce is this: sometimes even our family obligations cannot get in the way of fulfilling our call to serve the wider, common good.

And in the third, Jesus again reveals the urgency of his mission in responding to this final would-be disciple's request to bid farewell to his family before departing; by saying, "no one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." We are not certain whose idea here it was to come; again Jesus is warning that being a follower will require leaving much behind, but that there is also something – a wider perspective, a deeper purpose, a greater impact – to be gained.

Satchel Paige – long known as the best baseball pitcher in the Negro Leagues before helping the Cleveland Indians win the 1948 World Series – is renowned for saying, "Don't look back; something might be gaining on you." Anybody who has plowed a field, or simply tried to plant a straight row of seeds in a garden, knows you have to watch intently in order to keep the furrows straight. Look backward and you will undoubtedly swerve one way or the other.²

The point Jesus is making, it seems, is that following, discipleship, the life of faith is not something that can be done half-heartedly. To be "fit for the kingdom" means to be invested as fully as possible; to set our faces – resolutely – toward Jesus and not turn away; no matter how uncomfortable or difficult things may become.

For those of you who have Lenten Kits from the church, you will find inside a cork that has been blackened on one end. Once it has started to burn, there is no turning back. Last week, when I charred these corks, the smell was unavoidable; it filled the whole room. It reminded me of a bag of popcorn that stays in the microwave too long: it might only be a few kernels that have burned, but the smoke they produce is enough to ruin the entire bag.

You are welcome to use this cork – either today or on Ash Wednesday – to mark the sign of the cross. If you don't have a cork, you can light a match, blow it out, and use it once cooled. Or, you could use dirt from a houseplant. Where the ashes come from does not much matter.

² Michael Rogness from *WorkingPreacher.com*

Some people prefer to put ashes on their forehead as a sign to others of having chosen to observe a holy season of Lent. You may choose, instead, to mark your hands; a reminder easier to see for yourself, unless – of course – you are washing your hands as often as recommended. Either way, the symbol calls us to remember that being a follower of Jesus requires resoluteness, focus, and commitment. Backward glances only divert from the mission; just as being overly concerned with the comforts of home or family can easily morph into distractions from the ways we can impact our neighbors and the wider world in which we live.

What does the Lord require of us? If we rely on the wisdom of using scripture to better understand scripture, then – here and so many other times – we hear Jesus telling us that, in order to follow him, it cannot be done half-heartedly. We cannot see the journey forward when we are looking backwards. We cannot love our neighbors without including even those who would fail to welcome us. We will not see Jesus raised up in glory unless we journey with him to Jerusalem where he is lifted up on the cross.

People of God, we are being invited this week to embark on a journey; to observe a holy Lent: a time that is consecrated, set apart by God. We know that in this season, in this particular time in history in which we live, there is much to be done: our nation is divided and frustrated; our neighbors around us are hungry and hurting; people are looking for meaning and healing and hope. The central message of the gospel – repeated by Jesus again and again – is that even now, even in a time such as this, the kingdom of God – the realm of justice, wholeness, and peace – is upon us. It stands squarely in the path which we are called to trod; and we have been called to follow Christ our Lord in order that it might be fulfilled. May we – like Jesus – be so committed, focused, and resolute that our neighbors will know that we are Christians...by our love. Amen.