

Passionate Christ, Passion of Christ: Turning Toward Jerusalem

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Text: Luke 9:51-62

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*"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."*

It is that look of determination. The one my father used to get when he began working on a project at his work bench. The one my son gets when he's plotting to jump off of something or create something wholly brand new that the world has never seen before. The look that was surely on high school student's faces over the weekend as they sat for the SAT. That look of the runner beginning her marathon, or the musician placing bow to string at practice.

It is that look - of determined singlemindedness of purpose; The look that says - nothing will distract me, nothing can stop me: nothing. at. all.

This is the look that Jesus has in our passage for this morning. That look. It's a look that gets him into trouble from the very beginning, a look that seems to tell people where his attention and his allegiances lie. No matter how hard they might try to get him to look at them, to look at their petty ways or their insignificant distractions, his gaze is set on Jerusalem.

He sets his face on Jerusalem. He sets his face on Jerusalem and all that will become of him there. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem," Jesus cries, "how I long to gather you up as a mother hen gathers her chicks..." "Jerusalem," he says later in Luke's gospel, "is the place where prophets die." And so, he sets his face on Jerusalem, knowing what is in store.

There is something about that look in his eye, our scripture tells us, that turns off the people of Samaria. In part, perhaps, because of their different understandings of the importance of Jerusalem. For Jesus Jerusalem was the center of religious life, a belief not held by his Samaritan counterparts. So this theological understanding of the centrality of Jerusalem might be what Luke means here.

But it could also be the intent *behind* the resolve - the ways in which Jesus will continue to challenge power structures, the ways in which he speaks of overturning the cultural norms...the last shall be first and the first shall be last. Perhaps this is part of what lies behind his steely face and its pointed direction. That glint in his eye stays with him throughout the rest of the Gospel of Luke - as this passage marks the beginning of the journey that will take up the last third of Luke's Gospel message. It's a vision that perhaps dominates his intent and intensity as he journeys toward this place which preoccupies his whole being.

But there are some miles to go before he gets there. The look conjures up the prophets of Israel who set their face like flint as they prepared to preach God's Word of repentance and transformation to a wayward Israel. And so, in taking the long way to Jerusalem, Jesus begins to preach.

This Sunday marks for us the first Sunday in Lent, 40 days carved out of our liturgical calendar to prepare for our high holy days of Good Friday and Easter. The church began Lent as a season of intense preparation for new believers who would be baptized into the church on Easter morning. It was marked by confession, prayer, and study; Penitence, sacrifice, attention.

In our Ash Wednesday service this past week we were reminded of our mortality - a reminder painfully reinforced by the tsunami in Japan and the bus crash

yesterday in lower Westchester and the Bronx. Our time here is fleeting - from dust we came and to dust we will return. And so we mark this time noting the fragility of life, and calling each of us back to the One who seeks our attention and focus. In that great tradition of the church we take this time to center ourselves, to confess our sin, to pray and seek God's presence in our lives. And so in many ways we, too, have set our face on Jerusalem, as we begin this Lenten season.

This year your pastors have resolved to mark this journey by looking deeply at Christ's last week, those pieces of the story and aspects of our belief that mark the final days of Christ's life on earth. This is not to focus per se on what is traditionally called the "Passion" of Christ - that is, his suffering and crucifixion. But to look at some of the stories that mark the final leg of the journey...the passions of Jesus or passionate moments. Moments where Jesus stood against the powers and injustices of his day.

As Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan put it, "The first passion of Jesus was the kingdom of God, namely, to incarnate the justice of God by demanding for all a fair share of a world belong to and ruled by the covenantal God of Israel." It is that first passion for equality, for love of neighbor, for nonviolent justice that led inevitably to the second passion and ultimately his death from violent injustice." (pg 5)

So we will journey together, through passionate prayer in the garden, through denials of loyalty and identity, through communal table fellowship, through the challenges of betrayal and evil, through the layers of powers and principalities... Through all of this, we will journey together, to the cross and resurrection of Jesus.

It is a journey not for the faint of heart, as we hear in Christ's words to those who might consider walking the road to Jerusalem with him. How ironic it is that just after the Samaritans reject him, Jesus has three separate offers of followers who come looking to join up and sign on for the ride? You would think that he would scoop them up after the prior rejection. Instead, Jesus' words are harsh to the point of extreme, and we begin to understand a little more of what it might mean to join him on the road to Jerusalem.

The would-be followers come to Jesus with something less than that steely resolve. They are... preoccupied.

The first says, I will follow you wherever you go. But Jesus, reminds him that the way of Christ is a way that denies security. The second claims, I will follow you but first I have bury my father. But Jesus tells him that the way of Christ is a way that denies family. The last: I will follow you, but let me first say goodbye. But Jesus tells him that nothing, nothing is more important than that the road should begin, now.

In preparation for this sermon I've been thinking about the different ways we prepare for the journeys we set out on. I've been turning over in my head the ways in which it seems sometimes impossible to get a family of four out of the door of our house in a way that is at all efficient or linear. There is always something. Something to go back for, someone who has to use the bathroom again, someone who forgot this or that. In our family there is inevitably someone who wants to go over here and jump in that puddle or look at this blade of grass.

Elsewhere in the gospels Jesus seems to encourage this. Do not worry, he tells us. Which in some ways feels like an encouragement to take our time and relax. But now, in our text for today, there is something, more, important.

I've been thinking about the ways we pack for long trips. What do we bring? What do we leave behind? Sunscreen or snowsuits, depending on where you're headed. Airline tickets or GPS, depending on how you plan to travel. I've been thinking about the ways we plan for what lies ahead with tour guides or phone calls. All of the preparation that goes into the journeys we take - from stopping our mail to posting on Facebook, from setting those automatic replies on our email to getting someone to take care of the dog.

It's so hard to just, go... I'll follow you Jesus, but first I'd like to finish my Wall Street Journal and my cup of coffee and check out my portfolio one last time. I'll follow you Jesus, but first I need to make sure the kids are alright and the house

is cleaned. I'll follow you Jesus, but first I need to pack a bag and close up the house, and get some things in order.

Foxes have holes and birds have nests but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head, he says. No nest eggs are allowed for this journey, he says.

Let the dead bury their dead, he says. Family allegiances are not good enough reasons to stray from this path, he says.

No one who puts his hand to the plow and turns back is fit for the kingdom of God, he says. There is nothing more important than this, he says.

It is counter intuitive, to be sure. It is radical, strange, jarring. "To eschew violence, to embrace suffering for the sake of another, to refuse comfort, privilege, status for the sake of fidelity to God's vision and mission are, to say the least, countercultural; perhaps they even run contrary to the natural human instincts for preservation, safety and comfort." It is not natural, to let go of everything and follow.

In the JRR Tolkien's Fellowship of the Ring, there is a scene which marks the beginning of the journey, and the beginning of the fellowship itself. Representatives of each of the races of the world of Middle Earth have been gathered, and have been told about the ring of power, the need for it to be destroyed, and the journey that will have to take place to accomplish it. The first response is that it is folly; craziness, they say, to set out on a journey like that. Those gathered become distracted - by security, by power, by affiliations and prejudices. Only Frodo, a small hobbit with great resolve, finds his attention drawn toward the ring.

As Frodo watches the ring the distractions and fighting is somehow muted. He sees something reflected in the ring - perhaps pieces of the journey to come: pain and suffering, darkness and evil, maybe, maybe even a glimmer of the hope that might be possible after the journey has been fulfilled.

"I'll go." he says, without thinking, without hesitating. He sees nothing but the ring, and the inevitability of his journey. He stands in the midst of all the others, he stands and his figure is tiny against the distractions and arguing that goes on

around him. He stands even knowing that it may mean leaving all that he knows behind. "I'll do it," he says again, "I will bring the ring to Mordor."

"When other loyalties claim first place," Elaine Heath says, all of us "...will compromise God's call on our lives." And at first glance this is what this passage is about - the costs of discipleship, the primacy of Christ's call, the sacrifices we must make to follow Jesus.

But perhaps, too, this is about a road toward love: "a love that is so radical and all-encompassing that it is contrary to all human conceptions of love." A love that re-distributes power and justice in a way that is contrary to the ways of the world that we live in. Everything - friendship, familial connections, piety, discipleship - looks different when viewed through the lens of God's sacrificial love" (Daniel Lose) It is a love that stirs in us a passion for God, and God's hope for our world.

Perhaps Lent is a chance to set a new resolve, to question our loyalties, to consider deeply the things that we put first - security, family, responsibilities, and the ways that we sometimes let those things get in the way of following Jesus. Perhaps it is a time to consider the ways in which we can get distracted by our anxieties about the road that lies ahead, so much so that we cease to walk it. Perhaps it is a time to begin again those practices - prayer, bible study, sacrifice, service - that help shore our resolve and set our face toward the one who offers us the one thing worth our true and abiding attention.

As the old hymn goes, "I have decided to follow Jesus... no turning back, no turning back." May it be so for each of us this Lent. Amen.