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On the Road with Jesus

Luke 9:51-62

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Do you like going on trips, seeing new places and people and having new experiences? Some people do and some people would rather stay home where things are familiar and comfortable. If we're honest, we'd also admit we enjoy traveling with some people more than others. Can you think of a person you enjoy traveling with? I've been blessed to be able to travel with Jill to many places around the country and overseas and there is no one I'd rather travel with; she's smart, adventurous, great with maps, and handles the unknown with ease. Do you have memories, good or bad, of particular road trips, journeys, or vacations you've taken that have impacted your life or stayed in your memory? Sometimes we remember the more extraordinary trips or encounters we've had; the family vacation when you got a flat tire, ate something unusual, someone got sick, you saw something amazing or met an unforgettable person.

I'm guessing some of you would say you like Jesus, many of you would say you love Jesus, others might be curious about Jesus, but I wonder how many of us would want to go on a road trip with Jesus. Before you reflexively say, "*Yes, of course I would!*" think about if you really know what you're saying, "*Yes!*" to. Would you truly like to go on a journey with Jesus? To walk with him, to share whatever welcome or opposition or criticism or threats he faced; to stay where he stayed and eat what he ate...or would you prefer to stay home where things are familiar and comfortable? Do you think you could handle being on the road with Jesus...even if he said things you didn't like or didn't agree with; even if he corrected or rebuked you for opinions you held or questions you asked? Do you think you know what Jesus is about, what's important to him? Could you serve him as a messenger and represent him honorably and faithfully on the road? Would you be willing to let him set the itinerary? Would you be willing to go wherever he chose?

Like many of us, Jesus' first disciples thought they could answer, "*Yes,*" to these questions and in Luke's Gospel beginning at chapter 9:51, we begin to hear their recollections and stories of a trip they took with Jesus to Jerusalem

that was so impactful and memorable they never forgot it. They shared the stories of that trip to Jerusalem so that others could benefit from all they experienced and witnessed even if what they shared wasn't always flattering to them. They had the humility to tell those stories so others could learn from their mistakes and misunderstandings. Others they met on that journey thought they had what it took to be on the road with Jesus too. In today's scripture we'll learn about people on the road with Jesus and maybe we'll learn a little about ourselves as well. Listen to Luke 9:51-62.

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

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

The first verse tells us the purpose for the trip and the destination.

"51 When the days drew near for him to **be taken up**," "Taken up" (Greek: *analempseos*—going up, ascending), can have several meanings here; it could refer to Jesus' going up to Jerusalem (uphill to Mount Zion) or his being lifted up on the cross—but a parallel between Jesus and the great prophet Elijah suggests that Luke is referring instead to Jesus' ascension. There are many Elijah-Jesus parallels in Luke's Gospel. At the ascension of Elijah into heaven, his disciple Elisha received his request to inherit a double portion of Elijah's spirit (2 Kings

2:9-12). In a similar way, after Jesus' ascension (Luke 24:50-53; Acts 1:6-11), the disciples will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-21).

“He set his face to go to Jerusalem” (v. 51b). This phrase, *“set his face”* is familiar Hebrew Bible language for showing strong resolve (Isaiah 50:7; Jeremiah 21:10; Ezekiel 6:2; 13:17; 21:2). Jesus is determined to go to Jerusalem. His commitment regardless of the danger lurking in Jerusalem helps us understand the demands that he places on would-be followers in verses 57-62. Luke will keep reminding us over and over that Jerusalem is where Jesus will die (13:22; 17:1; 18:31; 19:11; 19:28). Saying that Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem is a veiled way of saying that he is on his way to his death. In verses 51, 52, and 53, Luke in Greek mentions Jesus *“face”* reminding us of Jesus' determination to do what he has come to do—to obey the Father's will to bring salvation to humankind. Most English translations fail to capture the full force of verse 52, which repeats the phrase *“his face.”* Literally, it says, *“And he sent messengers (angelous) before his face (prosopou).”*

“52 On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; 53 but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem.” **This is the only place where the Gospels mention Samaritans negatively.** During his journey to Jerusalem, Jesus praises a Samaritan who shows mercy to a person in need (10:25-37) and highlights a Samaritan leper (17:16) who returned to give thanks for being healed when no one else did. In his ministry to a Samaritan woman in John 4 and his inclusion of Samaria in his charge to his disciples to be his witnesses to others in Acts 1:8 Jesus consistently challenges his disciples assumptions about other people they perceived negatively and deemed to be less godly or worthy than themselves.

However, the Samaritans in this village refuse to receive Jesus, *“with his face was set toward Jerusalem”* (v. 53). Their refusal isn't surprising, because there was a good deal of animosity between Jews and Samaritans. This began centuries earlier when the Assyrians took most of the Jews from that region into captivity and re-populated Samaria with foreigners who intermarried with the remaining Samaritan Jews. Samaritans became known for pagan worship (2

Kings 17:24-29), and Jews regarded them as tainted racially and religiously. When Zerubbabel led the return from exile to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem, he refused Samaritan offers to help. Samaritans then built their own temple on Mount Gerazim and tried to prevent the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem (Ezra 4:1-10). Samaria's location between Jewish Galilee and Jewish Judea makes the situation worse. Jews often travel through Samaria—many of them pilgrims going to or returning from the Jerusalem temple—a temple the Samaritans do not acknowledge. We shouldn't be surprised that Samaritans would fail to welcome a pilgrim whose *"face was set toward Jerusalem"* (v. 53).

What's interesting is how Jesus and how his disciples respond to not being welcomed. Remember most of you said you'd want to be on the road with Jesus. Well now you're getting to experience prejudice personally; no one in this village will welcome you, feed you, or give you a place to stay because you're on your way to Jerusalem. How does that make you feel as you realize you may have to sleep outdoors and without a nice bed or a satisfying meal? Would you treat someone that way if they believed differently than you do or worshiped differently than you do?

"When his disciples, James and John, saw this" (v. 54a). Remember that Jesus called James and John *"Sons of Thunder,"* presumably because of their personalities (Mark 3:17). I envision two big fishermen with leather jackets that say on the back "Sons of Thunder" with a big storm cloud and a lightning bolt through it. They were fishing partners with Peter until Jesus called them (5:10), and they're now part of Jesus' inner circle (which also includes Peter), which only recently accompanied Jesus at the Transfiguration (9:28-36). James and John ask, *"Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from the sky, and destroy them, just as Elijah did?"* (v. 54b). Their request alludes to the story of Ahaziah, the son of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, and ruler over Israel in Samaria (1 Kings 22:51). When Ahaziah sent a captain and 50 soldiers to seize the prophet Elijah, he called down fire from heaven to consume them—and he did it not once but twice (2 Kings 1:9-16) (think kind of like the scene at the end of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*). James and John think that if it was okay for Elijah to

call down fire from heaven to kill people, it must be okay for them to do so also because of the Samaritans' refusal to receive Jesus.

“But (Jesus) turned and rebuked them” (v. 55a). Rebuked (epetimesen) is a strong word. In Luke's Gospel Jesus rebukes demons (4:35, 41; 9:42), fevers (4:39), and storms (8:24), but never until now disciples. Jesus responds strongly to James and John because he's instructed them to love their enemies (6:27-36) and not to judge others (6:37-42), much less to kill them. Are you sure you want to travel with Jesus even if he'll strongly rebuke you for words or actions that are contrary to how he's told you to treat or regard other people? Jesus gave the disciples explicit instructions on how to deal with rejection. When rejected, they're to shake the dust from their feet as a testimony against the rejecters (9:5; and again in 10:10-12)—but are not to respond with violence or vengeance. James and John failed to listen and act accordingly. As closely as Jesus' ministry might parallel that of the prophet Elijah, his mission was not to call down fire from heaven on his opponents but to save them. God will judge those who reject Christ (10:10-14; 13:1-9), but disciples are to leave such judgment in God's hands.

Jesus is moving toward Jerusalem and the cross and he offers no easy discipleship to those who have been with him like James and John or to those he meets on the road. In verses 57-62, he clarifies the extreme nature of his call and what you must be prepared to do if you want to journey with him. Those who would follow him must first count the cost, because they will share his suffering. They must not give anything—even good things—priority over Jesus. Are you willing to make that commitment? The key word that links these three little encounters is the verb, ***“follow.”*** The first and third would-be disciples volunteer to follow Jesus—**the only people in Luke's Gospel who volunteer to do so.** Jesus calls the second of the would-be disciples, saying, *“Follow me.”* The second and third would-be disciples ask if they can take care of other important priorities before beginning their discipleship. The first would-be disciple makes no such request but Jesus apparently sees in him some lack of commitment that occasions a warning. The man's commitment seems strong. *“I will **follow** you*

wherever you go.” (v. 57). He offers to follow Jesus “wherever,” but Jesus offers only “nowhere.” Jesus has no hole, no nest, and nowhere to lay his head—and his disciples can expect nothing better. From the beginning, Jesus “*emptied himself, taking the form of a slave*” (Philippians 2:7). He humbled himself at the beginning of his life, being born in a stable and cradled in a manger. In the same manner, he will humble himself at the end of his life, dying on a cross. In between, he focuses on ministry rather than personal comfort, and expects his disciples to do the same. He blesses sacrificial service and ministry. He doesn’t think too highly of excuses. The second would be follower says, “*Lord, first let me go and bury my father.*” This doesn’t mean the man’s father had just died, but that the son was putting off following Jesus until he was free of obligations to his father – the last of which would have been the duty of providing for his burial, a duty that took precedence over all other religious obligations. Following Jesus outweighs even responsibility to family. Jesus challenges disciples to give kingdom proclamation top priority. The burial of one’s father is an urgent responsibility, and an honorable person will not allow lesser responsibilities to intrude on it. Jesus says the one more important responsibility, however, is that of proclaiming the kingdom of God.

When the third person just wants to go home and say goodbye to family, Jesus gives an illustration. Plowing behind a large animal is exacting work, because the farmer must control the plow with one hand and goad/guide the animal with the other hand. He must watch a fixed point directly ahead to plow a straight furrow. Looking back will cause him to lose sight of the fixed point and to lose control of the plow—causing him to plow a crooked furrow—the mark of an amateur. The crooked furrow will be there for all to see until next year’s plowing. That farmer will then be the butt of jokes during the coming year, and will try his best to plow straight furrows next year. A modern metaphor is the person who turns to look into the back seat while driving a car. When the driver twists sideways, s/he will lose sight of the highway and will tend to pull the wheel in the direction that s/he has turned. Such a driver is dangerous—not fit for highway driving.

We want to be careful about condemning those would-be followers who offered excuses. Who among us has not done the same? What excuses have you used to “get out of” following Jesus more closely? Here are some examples I’ve heard, *“I’ve done my time; it’s someone else’s turn; I’m working, I’m retired, I’m too busy, I don’t have time, I’m too old, I’m too young.”* How do you think the Lord would respond if you offered one of these excuses to him in a face to face conversation? What do you think he might say to you?

We can perhaps take a little comfort in the fact that some of the giants of the faith first offered excuses before they finally and fully accepted and responded to God’s call.

- Moses protested, *“Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”* (Exodus 3:11). *“O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue”* (Exodus 4:10).
- Gideon pleaded, *“But sir, how can I deliver Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family”* (Judges 6:15).
- Jeremiah protested, *“Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy”* (Jeremiah 1:6).
- Isaiah said: *“Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips...!”* (Isaiah 6:5)

And yet each of these people, however reluctantly, did what God asked, and God blessed their reluctant discipleship. This is Good News, because it means that God does not grade us with an indelible “F” when we sin or protest or offer excuses. Every failure is an invitation to repentance and a new beginning.

A final note on how verse 62 is translated into English. The NIV changes the sense of the Greek to lessen the impact or starkness of Jesus’ words to read *“is fit for service in the kingdom of God.”* Every other English translation I looked at (KJV, ESV, NAS, and NRSV), all **make it plain that it’s a question of fitness for the kingdom itself**. Obedience to Jesus’ call must take precedence over every other duty or love. Do you want to journey with Jesus or is there something else that takes precedence for you? I wonder if any of the people in our Gospel

lesson thought about it and dropped their excuses and followed Jesus. I wonder what story they might tell if they did?

I wonder how many of us truly want to go on a road trip with Jesus? What story can we tell? How are we proclaiming the kingdom of God?

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. Why did Jesus need to “set his face” to go resolutely to Jerusalem? What do you imagine he was thinking and feeling as he began his journey?
2. What kind of response does Jesus elicit from Samaritans? Why do you think he rebuked James and John when they asked about destroying those who didn’t welcome Jesus?
3. What excuses have you used to “get out of” following Jesus more closely? Here are some examples – feel free to circle all you’ve used (I’ve done my time; it’s someone else’s turn; I’m working, I’m retired, I’m too busy, I don’t have the time, I’m too old, I’m too young). How do you think the Lord would respond if you offered one of these excuses in a face to face conversation?
4. How does Jesus respond to the excuses offered by the potential followers in Luke 9:57-62? In your own words, how would you describe Jesus’ answer to each of them?
5. How do the Lord’s words in Luke 9:51-62 challenge you in your own journey of faith? What may the Lord be calling you to re-prioritize or lay aside or move forward from in order to follow Christ more closely?
6. How “fit” (Luke 9:62) do you think Jesus would you say you are for the Kingdom of God? What can you do improve your “kingdom fitness?”