

29 June 2025
Proper 8 – Year C
Trinity, St. Louis
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1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21

Psalms 16

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

Luke 9:51-62

In the Name of the One, Holy & Living God. Amen.

The gospel this week begins a long section right in the middle of Luke that's typically called the "travel narrative." "When the days drew near for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set his face to go to Jerusalem."

By repeating this journey motif at least eight times in this section that occupies eighteen pages in my study bible, Luke is emphasizing that Jesus is heading relentlessly to meet his fate in Jerusalem. Nothing will stop him. The travel narrative ends ten chapters later (19) with Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

As with many journey stories (think of Homer's *Odyssey* or John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*), this isn't a travelogue. If you fire up Google Maps, and try to plot point to point, you'll see that the path that Jesus took to Jerusalem is erratic at best.

Setting his face to Jerusalem, Jesus sent an advance team to a Samaritan village to prepare for his arrival. But as had often been the case in the previous three years, "the people there did not welcome him."

It might help us to know that that the Jerusalem temple was a sore subject in Samaria, because the Jews had destroyed the Samaritans' own temple on Mt Gerizim a few generations earlier.

Nevertheless, when the villagers rejected Jesus, and James and John exploded in rage. "Lord, do you want us to call down fire from heaven to destroy them?" Some ancient manuscripts add "even as Elijah did."¹

It's no wonder that in Mark's gospel (3:17), James and John are given the name *Boanerges*, which means "Sons of Thunder" (and is the nickname for parishioners at St. John & St. James in Sullivan). In their fit of rage, they wanted a public display of God's wrath that would destroy their perceived enemies. Maybe they thought that claiming Biblical precedent justified their hatred. Or maybe they spoke figuratively, not literally...as if that makes any difference at all.

¹ Elijah called down God's fiery judgment twice (1 Kings 18:38, 2 Kings 1:10).

In any case, instead of rebuking the Samaritans who rejected him, Jesus scolded James and John who thought they were defending him. Just try to imagine how that felt. And the unexpected answers keep on coming.²

A convert says she will follow him, “wherever you may go.” Jesus replies, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests.”

Jesus invites a stranger to follow him, and that one replies, “First let me go and bury my father.” Jesus says, “Let the dead bury their own dead.”

And another asks simply to say farewell to loved ones. To this one, Jesus says, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of heaven.”

So, to recap: Jesus won’t approve of retaliation or violence as a response to inhospitality, and he avoids conflict by simply moving on.

But then he seems to say something like, “If you wish to follow me, you must drop everything and everyone in your life. Just give up everything and follow me.”

Follow him where? To Jerusalem, “to be taken up?” To betrayal, crucifixion, and death?

Can he really mean this? Can our Lord and Savior be ordering us to lay down our livelihoods, to walk away from our relationships, and to abandon our property in order to enter into pain, suffering, and the very jaws of death? This question is hard – especially on this day when we remember and give thanks for St. Peter and St. Paul.

Perhaps the answer depends on whether you see Jesus as someone to worship or someone to follow. Now, both worshipping and following have merit, they are certainly not mutually exclusive, both have their supporters, both are completely orthodox. But, for today, let’s consider the possibility that Jesus is asking us to follow. If we were to worship him, we might expect him to save us from trials, to rescue us from danger, to keep us from harm, maybe even to destroy our enemies.

After all, that’s what an all-powerful God should do, right? That’s how our God really ought to treat those he loves. And herein lies the problem. For to worship Jesus without following Jesus is to make Jesus into a mere religion, instead of a journey toward union with God.

Franciscan theologian Richard Rohr tells us that this shift—from following Jesus to worshipping Jesus—made us into a religion of “belonging and believing” instead of a religion of transformation. And that’s where the difference lies.

² Thanks to my friend the Rev. Dr. Barrie Bates for much of this material.

<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/enigmatic-jesus-proper-8-c-2016/>

A religion of belonging and believing is principally concerned about who's in and who's out, about subscribing to specific doctrines or ideologies, about "othering" those who don't agree, about weaponizing the Good News into a judgmental bludgeon.

A religion of transformation, on the other hand, requires change. Not, I think, change for the sake of change, which is usually following our own reflection in the mirror, unconcerned with how we got here. It is, however, allowing ourselves to be changed more and more into the people God is calling us to be.

If Jesus doesn't sound like a very good recruiter, that's because he isn't, for example, a social media influencer, seeking a following for his own sake. Instead, he's seeking followers on the path that he himself is walking.

Joining Jesus requires us to change. One of my best friends has correctly, I think, labeled me as an Old School High Church Anglican Cleric. So, I can say with some authority that leaving some things behind can be massively difficult. Sometimes treasures from the past can become idols that we worship rather than windows onto the life into which Jesus calls us. The phrase, "we've never done it that way before" often becomes a strip of flypaper that immobilizes us.

It's also difficult to leave behind the distractions that clutter up our lives. The disciples of Jesus are distracted by their mistrust of the Samaritans. The people that Jesus encounters on the way are distracted by their material possessions, their familial duties, and their social conventions.

You and I are not so different. For us, distractions abound, and we appear to seek them out. We view multitasking as a virtue. Check our phone during dinner? Sure, doesn't everyone? It persuades us that we have full, busy, important lives. We flit from one shiny thing to another, wowed by things that compete for our attention, things that conspire to take our minds, and our eyes, off the ball.

Beyond the idolatry of the past and the clutter of the present, it's harder still to put down some of the elaborately monogrammed baggage that weighs us down. There is a stunning portrayal of what I'm talking about in Roland Joffe's 1986 film *The Mission*.

One of the characters, Rodrigo Mendoza (Robert DeNiro), is a slaver of indigenous people, and a murderer. He ends up in jail, wallowing in self-pity, effectively waiting for death because he sees no future life for himself.

Fr. Gabriel (Jeremy Irons), who heads the Jesuit mission that serves the indigenous Guarani, visits Mendoza in jail to provoke him out of his self-pity and challenges him to name his own penance. This sets up one of the most powerful sequences in the film.

Mendoza accompanies the Jesuits up the mountains and waterfalls to the Guarani mission. Tied to Mendoza is a large, netted sack, brimming with swords, armor, and other

weapons, the tools of Mendoza's old life. As he climbs, he bears the burden of that life and the pain it has caused. The weapons of his former life are quite literally the weight pulling against him as he pursues his penance.

When the sack gets stuck on undergrowth, one of the Jesuits (a young Liam Neeson) hacks it off and lets it fall below. Mendoza climbs below again, reties it, and begins to climb once more. He's clearly not prepared to put his burdens down.

When the Jesuits arrive at the mission, the Guarani greet them with cheers, but they fear Mendoza, who has kidnapped and killed their people. One of the Guarani brandishes a knife, shouting and threatening to kill Mendoza, who doesn't react, perhaps thinking he deserves death.

Yet the Guarani does not kill Mendoza. Instead, he cuts the rope and pushes the sack off the cliff into the river below. The weight of his past life is lifted, and Mendoza, weeps profoundly. And his life begins anew.

Idols, distractions, and burdens. These are the things Jesus is calling us to lay down in order that we might follow him.

Sure, we could hope and pray that Jesus would solve all our problems for us. Or we can settle down and do the work God has given us to do: to share love, to spread joy, to wage peace, to foster patience, to nurture kindness, to exhibit generosity, to seek faithfulness, to cultivate gentleness, and to strive for better self-control.

This is what it is to follow Jesus, rather than simply to worship him. To accept our baptismal calling to become dead to sin and alive to God. To try, by word and example, to proclaim the Good News of God in Christ. To seek and serve Christ in all persons, to strive for justice and peace, and respect the dignity of every human being.

This path may lead us into storms or through the valley of the shadow of death. But this is also the path that has been trod by Jesus, who trampled down death by his own death. This is the path that can leave the world a little better, a little kinder, and a little safer. This is the path that can leave us stronger, more spiritually fit, and better able to cope with whatever lies ahead. With that sort of path to look forward to, who would want to look back?

I leave you with a poem-prayer by Wendell Berry, from his book called *Leavings*.³

I know that I have life / only insofar as I have love.
I have no love / except it come from Thee.
Help me, please, to carry / this candle against the wind. Amen.

³ *This Day: Sabbath Poems Collected & New, 1979-2013*, Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2013.