

On Not Looking Back (Luke 9:51-62)

Sunday, June 27, 2010

The key phrase in the text we have just heard tells us that Jesus “set his face” to go to Jerusalem. This is not a geography lesson. We are not being given GPS coordinates so we can follow the map. This is not a history lesson. There are no dates and names to memorize. We are being invited to listen closely for our own lives. From here on Jesus will not look back. He is intent on the fulfillment of his mission. The text says he will be “taken up” in Jerusalem and we who are familiar with the story know that he will be betrayed, arrested, tried and “taken up” on a cross to die. But we also know that Jesus will rise in defiance of death, witness his new life to the disciples and then be “taken up” into the kingdom he has spoken of so powerfully and with such open yearning. Jesus has “set his face” beyond Jerusalem. He is headed for glory and everlasting peace.

We who listen carefully are being invited also to set our faces *beyond Jerusalem*. Jesus is not headed for glory for his own sake. He is making a way for us to follow him. He is asking us to remember that we, too, are sons and daughters of God who, however we may have wandered or gotten lost or felt struck down in life, have a destiny beyond trials and death. Like Jesus, we too have a mission that leads to glory and everlasting peace!

For now, in these last days of his journey, Jesus will teach us how to set our own faces. He will instruct us how to treasure our destiny while living each day of our lives purposefully and joyfully. A lawyer will come up to Jesus and ask what he must do “to inherit eternal life.” *Jesus will remind him to love completely and without hesitation.* Martha will come to Jesus complaining that her sister and fellow disciple Mary is not carrying her weight in the ministry, and *Jesus will invite Martha to reach for joy and not for comparisons and complaints.*

Here’s an amazing thing! Jesus touches each of us on the shoulder and asks each of us to come with him to God. He will walk beside us. He will make his pace our pace. He will sing and praise God and talk and open the meaning of scripture to us. Along the way he will show us how to let go all the things we don’t need for the journey to God. Turns out we don’t need

fear or guilt or shame or our memories of suffering or our anger about the state of the world or judgement of this person or that person. Jesus clearly shows us that we don't need our self-appointed roles or functions or jobs or failures or successes. Turns out that all God ever sees or wants from us are the love, and joy that God gave us in our beginning! For Jesus shows us that whatever we have added to God's love and joy is short-lived and of our own making – not God's.

Isn't this *an amazing thing*? We don't have to look back – *we can live forward!*

When I was down in North Carolina a few weeks ago for my daughter's wedding, I spent quite a bit of time with her fiancée's family. Her fiancée's name is Damjan, and his parents are immigrants to this country from the Balkans. His mother (Ubavka) is of Serbian origin. His father (Petar) is of Croatian origin. Ancient enemies, the Serbs and Croats! Ubavka and Petar lived early in their marriage in Zagreb, Croatia and in Split, on the Croatian coast, but later they lived in Sarajevo in Bosnia/Herzegovina, a city then of mixed ethnic origins. It was from Sarajevo that they escaped a terrible ethnic war on one of the very last flights out in early 1993. And came to America.

Imagine packing a bag – one bag for all. Imagine gazing upon everything you own – furniture, books, linens, toys, scrapbooks, laundry, dishes, bikes, family memorabilia – and knowing that you see it all for the last time. Imagine then closing an apartment door on it all, and locking the door behind you. Imagine climbing on a plane, with a ticket to a new country and a few names to contact, your bag, your lives and not much else.

Wouldn't you *want* to look back at all you were leaving behind – and wonder and worry and pray? But you *can't* look back, Petar (Damjan's father) told me when I asked. To heal and thrive you can *only live forward*.

And living forward requires a hope that what lies ahead is greater than anything you've left behind. A hope so great you believe all things past and present are already cared for! "Let me go bury my father," says a disciple to Jesus. "Let the dead bury their own dead," Jesus replies, "You go proclaim what is in front of us all."

I received an email the other day from a friend and mentor named Alan. His father is dying. The email doesn't avoid the fact of death or the loss, but it proclaims something distinctly hopeful, a shift and a glory unfolding now that his father is dying. The email asks me and all who receive it, to "hold my father in great love, courage, peace and beautiful surrender as he crosses over. (My father's) had a life-long passion for travel, and now he is embarking on the ultimate trip." And then we are asked one more thing: "Please hold me," Alan asks, "in your great heart of love as my relationship with my father shifts from this beautiful and heart-filled earthly connection to one that is timeless, ageless, and probably beyond anything either of us might have imagined while we walked together here as father and son."

Let us proclaim a miracle this morning! In all things we fear – loss, suffering, death – we are not only cared *about*, but we are cared *for*! We are held in great love and joy! Nothing that is truly important can ever be lost! All things alive and beautiful cannot be annihilated or abandoned, but change from glory to glory in the heart that Jesus calls the kingdom of God!

One thing Jesus asks of each of us thing morning: to take our hand off the plow and not look back. What a thing to ask! The plow is our sense of being in charge of our lives. And while we believe we have been in charge, we look back with a mix of pride and regret at what was done and not done. Some furrows are straight; some are crooked; some went where they were supposed to; some surprised us; some were plowed many times; some we haven't got to and probaly never will. There have been rocks and wet spots and contours that were too hard. There have been a few easy slopes where the plow cut long and firm and deep. We look back for evidence that we have done well enough and we are acceptable. Often we are afraid we are not.

But Jesus says looking back for evidence we are worthy is just a distraction. We do not need to look back for validation or affirmation. We are already wholly worthy -- and cared for. We are already accepted. It is time now to take our hand off the plow and let God take charge of the field.

What a beautiful thing it is to *live forward* instead of *looking backward*! What a miraculous thing to believe that when you shut the door behind you, you carry with you everything you

truly need. What an enormous relief to see your losses transformed into new adventures.
What a peaceful insight to see God's hand on the plow!

I invite you this morning to set your face as Jesus did. The text says that Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem – and beyond. That simply means he gave over his spirit wholly to God. In exchange he received what he invites us now to see, that the kingdom of God has come near, and we can live our days with great attention to the love and joy – and peace! -- that created us and is our destiny.

Amen