

“No Looking Back”

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BASED ON THE THEME, “EXPLORING CHRIST’S MISSION”

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Luke 9:51-62

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

⁵⁷As they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.”

⁵⁸And 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.” ⁵⁹To another he said, “Follow me.”

But he said, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.”

⁶⁰But Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”

⁶¹Another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.”

⁶²Jesus said to him, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

I have encouraging news for those who think things today are worse than ever. Things were not perfect even back in Jesus’ day. Things were not going well for Jesus at this point in his ministry. At this point in Jesus’ mission he takes a turn. The time has come, says Luke, for him to be “taken up,” a euphemism for his crucifixion and resurrection. Luke tells us Jesus has “set his face” to go to Jerusalem. It is an apt and meaningful description. But what I want to focus on is what happens immediately after that. Luke reports a

couple of strange incidents that invite us to ask how they fit into Jesus’ mission and what they teach us about our mission.

In the first incident Jesus is heading for Jerusalem, but he is once again, on foreign soil. He is among the Samaritans, who were a kind of half-Jewish, half-Gentile sect who were hated by the Jews and hated them in return. Luke seems to say Jesus sent in an advance team, almost like a politician setting up for an appearance, but the people of that Samaritan village are

having none of it. They refuse to receive Jesus. The disciples don't take this rejection well and they ask Jesus if they should command fire from heaven to come down and consume the. Images of Vietnam and blasts of napalm come to mind. But Jesus rebukes them, says Luke, without any comment or explanation.

We might wonder about this little vignette, but Luke is channeling a similar story from II Kings when Elijah was calling down fire on the soldiers of the king who had abandoned faith in God. What are we to make of this story where Jesus does not do what the prophet did? It is always hard to argue from the absence of something but perhaps the major point here is that Jesus wasn't going back to be some historical figure. We always want to compare present figures to past figures to see if they measure up. Ball players, presidents, wives – uh, oops, anyway we have a habit of continually trying to see whether the present measures up to the past. Maybe with faith that isn't the best of measures.

It certainly is a prevalent measure though. It seems that, more than in almost any other realm, people of faith look backwards. Churches try to “get back” to the way things were or the way they suppose they might have been. We always seem suspicious of anything new in religion as if somehow if we could just confine God to “back there” somewhere we would be safer, more faithful. I think sometimes the Christian church seems to be more in

full retreat than in marching forward in faith that God is the God of the future.

It reminds me of the story from the Civil War and what was known as the Battle of Bull Run. General George Steadman was addressing his Confederate troops just before the battle. He apparently had a premonition as to how the battle was going to turn out. “Gentlemen,” he said, “I want you to fight vigorously and then run for your life. As I am a bit lame, I'm going to begin running now.” Too often it seems to me the Christian church has begun running to the past in fear of the future.

But here comes the United Church of Christ proclaiming that God is Still Speaking, that faith isn't just a matter of returning to the “good old days,” as if that were even possible. I think Jesus refuses to call down fire because he isn't confined to past understandings of faith that use violence and fear as the basis of belief. I think Jesus has set his face for Jerusalem and there is no looking back.

This seems to be the message in the next series of encounters that Luke reports as well. Three times potential followers meet Jesus and choose to turn back instead of moving ahead with Jesus to Jerusalem. The first glibly promises the same thing Ruth promises Naomi – “withersoever thou goest, I will go too.” But then he finds out that Jesus has no housing plan for himself and his disciples: “foxes have holes, birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” So evidently the man turns away. The next

man gets a personal invitation from Jesus: “Follow me.” But the man needs to wait a while until his father dies and then he can bury him. In response Jesus invents a new occupation – that of the deceased undertaker: “let the dead bury the dead.” The third character Jesus invites to join the bandwagon needs to go say farewell to his homies... something that takes a good while in the oriental culture of that time and place. Jesus puts a wrap on that whole series by saying there is no looking back for people of faith. “No one who texts while driving is fit for the kingdom of God.” Not actually, but I wanted to put it in a contemporary vernacular. “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

If Jesus is a politician then his platform won't seem to sell any better today than it did then. He seems weak on his “housing and urban renewal” program and his “family values” platform seems a bit weak. But Jesus isn't worried. His time is at hand. He is ready to be “taken up.” He has set his face for Jerusalem and won't be turned away, won't be slowed by comparisons with the past, and won't be looking back to see who's gaining on him.

What can we take from this passage as 21st Century Christians? What is the message for those of us wanting to follow in the footsteps of faith? I would suggest to you that we can take three lessons, at least, from Christ's words and actions

First, and maybe most obviously, Christ was not looking back – he was and is moving forward. Peter wanted him to hold back. When Jesus proclaimed he would be handed over for crucifixion he said, “never, Lord.” But Jesus told him to get behind him and don't hold him back. When James, John and Peter were on the mountain with Jesus they wanted to build tents to stay there, but Jesus said he had to keep moving forward. When the disciples wanted to keep the Jesus movement for Jews only after Jesus' resurrection the Spirit of God said, no it is time to move forward let everyone in, don't call unclean what I have called clean, don't look back now.

We must remember what God has done in the past to give us courage to move into the future, not to hold us hostage to the way things have been. We cannot worship the past as some perfect image of God. God may not change, but we should be continually learning more about God so that we can better understand and represent God and God's mission in this day and age. It isn't a matter of forgetting the past and being doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past, it is about remembering the past and not repeating the mistakes as we move forward into greater understanding and faithfulness.

The second thing that I take from this passage is that this God who called Jesus to the way of the cross is the same God who said, “I will be who I will be.” This God is the God of the Future. God is already in the future so rather than

fearing the future we should move toward it confident that if we follow Christ we will meet the God who spoke through Christ saying he had overcome the world as it is. When Christ says "Follow me" he is not heading back to the past. He has set his face for Jerusalem and he will be lifted up. That is to say his future held both crucifixion and resurrection. In the same way our future still holds potential for pain and suffering but God's redeeming resurrection power will not be overcome. God has overcome it and will overcome whatever we face in the future.

This reminds me that the third thing we must remember if we choose to follow Christ in his mission to the future is that God is making all things new. Things are not as they should be. Is that not an understatement? Oil in the gulf, terrorism between religions, wars, poverty, illness, injustice all testify that whatever God has overcome it still is present today. So we must trust that God has the power to make all things new. Otherwise we are dependent upon our own power or we are left to despair that there is no hope or reason to do anything. Faith invites us to work with God knowing that God will supply inspiration and vision for hope because if we participate with God then we will be part of what God is making new. The hope for the future has to be based on more than us, but we must join God in bringing in the future that God intends.

If faith is about sitting and pondering the truths of the past then

Jesus would have had no reason to say "follow me." He would have said, "Let us sit here and fondly remember the past together." But Jesus was on the move because he had lives to change, powers to confront, evil to overcome, and death to conquer. That was his mission and it still is.

You and I have to decide if the lack of good housing will keep us from joining him in his journey to the future. You and I have to decide if we are too concerned about what is already dead – the past and all that holds us to it – to go with Jesus into the future to change lives, overcome evil, and conquer death. You and I have to figure out if it is too important to hang out with our homies, our families, our familiar routines to go to new places in the future where God has to go to create the future God intends. God will not hold back, but thankfully it appears that God's pace is slow enough even those of us who get caught up in the past can catch up.

God is out there on the horizon. He is visible but moving on. We can catch a glimpse of him but we may not catch up. He is calling us to join in the mission of Christ and to move with him into the future – to be part of creating the Kingdom of God, bringing God's reign of love and mercy and justice into existence. Let us not get caught looking back as we move into the future that God is calling us into. AMEN.