

Sermon for the Third Sunday after Pentecost

“When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.”

In the
Name of Jesus. Amen.

With
these opening words from our text, I suppose you could say the Gospel – that is, the story of God made flesh, come down from heaven to redeem us – to re-generate us and make all things new –

is really the story of a journey.

In
fact, as I pointed out in my sermon to the folks in Iowa last week,
in the same way that
Jesus made His journey to the “other side” of the lake to that dark,
demon-possessed world of the Gerasenes,

you could even say
that He made a journey to the “other side” when He came down from the light of
heaven into the darkness of our fallen world to cast out OUR demons, clothe US
in His righteousness, and set US free from sin and death to life everlasting.

Jesus
made that journey through death and the cross to pay the price for our sin,
reverse the curse, and open the way for us by His resurrection back to the life
for which we were created.

And in today’s Gospel reading,

we actually come to
that critical point in the journey where Jesus sets His face to go to Jerusalem
(Luke 9:51) - to the cross and to death -

in
order to do what had to be done.

And
clearly, He's bound and determined to do it!

"His
face is set" - fixed and focused on the goal.

Jesus is determined to do "what is necessary," namely,

to "suffer many
things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be
killed, and on the third day be raised (Luke 9:22)."

By God
- literally - Jesus is on a mission!

He's out to save the world.

And
every step of the way, He's inviting us to follow Him. Why?

Because
He wants us with Him -

He wants us to take our place with Him under His cross,

that
we might have our place with Him in His resurrection to new life.

Over
and over, Jesus says, "Follow Me!" An imperative verb - as in a command:

Do
this, as if your life depended on it... because it does!

No
choice... No options...

You
want to live? Then you had better follow Jesus!

And
there you have it: The very thing YOU must do to be saved!

You
need to follow Jesus! You need to give your life to Him!

You need to follow in the way that He leads!

You need to set YOUR
face, YOUR focus, and ALL your determination on going where Jesus goes and
doing what Jesus says,

so
that and in the end, you will have eternal life [pause]...

Of
course, you're not going to fall for that, right?

Especially since, in
practically the same breath that Jesus says, "Follow Me," He shows us in case
after case after case just how hard – or should I say, just how IMPOSSIBLE that
is for us to do!

He
gives us four example today, beginning with the few, the proud, the hand-picked-
and
personally called elite disciples who've had a front row seat to all that Jesus
has said and done to this point.

And putting aside for
a moment their whole refusal to even let Jesus chose the destination, let alone
follow Him there, as when Peter flat out rejected to go the way of the cross,

let's just assume

the disciples were overall a fairly focused and devoted bunch of guys.

They had, after all,
left everything to follow Jesus (Mar 10:28), right?

So
how's that working out for them?

Well, I
probably wouldn't have enough time in all the sermons between now and Advent
to
go into all the ways they botch the job,
but I'll just use the example Jesus provides today.

Because
here Jesus was, on a mission of mercy and rescue.

He had come to seek and to save the lost.

And as He journeyed
toward the cross, He planned a pit-stop in Samaria so that He could gather
those losers as well.

But
first He sent a couple of His best guys ahead to let the Samaritans know He was
coming.

Of course, when James and John got there,
they soon discovered
these fools would have nothing to do with Jesus.

So they report back
saying, "To hell with 'em, right?! Shall we light 'em up and burn 'em down?"

Well
guess what?

If you're a disciple of Jesus and you're following in the way
that He leads,

then

YOU DON'T GO AROUND NUKING YOUR ENEMIES!

On the

contrary...

you must love your enemy, even to the extent of losing your life for them.

You must pray for

those who have blown off Christ and His salvation, especially when they are persecuting you.

In fact, if you

truly want to follow Jesus, then you must forgive as you have been forgiven -

you

must love as you have been loved,

and you must

continue your faithful confession for the life of the world, even unto persecution and death.

Clearly,

James and John fail in that task - at least for now - just like you and me...

So,

what else do we learn about how easy it is to follow Jesus from our text this morning? I suppose the next case shows us,

Jesus doesn't want anyone focused on making a kingdom for themselves in this world...

In other words, the

super-pious, self-righteous, self-serving do-gooder who thinks he can make a place for himself in the Kingdom can just take a hike!

Someone

shows up and says,

"I will

follow you wherever you go.” To which Jesus basically says, the place this guy is seeking is not going to be found in Him the way it is with the “foxes and the birds” – as in the cunning and reptilian –

as in Herod (that fox (Luke 13:32) and the Pharisees (that brood of vipers (Matt 3:7) who have established THEIR places and THEIR kingdom in this world by way of their supposed merits.

Because
unlike that fox and those birds,

Jesus and those who
follow Him are not concerned about making a place for themselves in this world. FOXES have holes, BIRDS have nests... NOT the Son of Man (9:58).

Next we
have the guy who says, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father.” Nothing wrong with that, certainly...

not unless Jesus has
just called you to focus all your time and attention to serving faithfully in His kingdom, in which case,

even
when the pain and losses and concerns of this world come,

you
should remain focused on your journey with Christ.

Likewise,
to the guy who insists on turning his face back toward home to say good-bye,

Jesus explains that
anyone who loses their focus by looking back to the things of this world is not fit to follow Him in the Kingdom of God.”

For if you fear,
love, and trust in anything more than you do Christ –

if you are not absolutely
and steadfastly devoted to following Him and forsaking all else to remain
obedient to the work of His kingdom,

then
you are not fit for the Kingdom of God (v62).

Does
any of this make you a little uneasy? I hope so... because that's the point!

The point is, we
simply cannot escape our sin, our flesh, and our idolatrous attachments to this
world.

We cannot escape the
devil and his constant temptations to get angry, to get even, to call down fire
on those who disagree with us.

When bad things happen,
we simply cannot escape the doubts, fear and anxiety that come with them.

What's more, we will
never escape the temptations of our sinful flesh to look away from Jesus in
order to set up a comfortable nest in this world.

Which
is why, in the same breath that Jesus commands us to follow Him,

He shows us the sin that stands in our way.

He shows us that no
matter how hard we try or how committed we are, we will never be able to follow
Him worthily!

And so,
I guess the question is, how, then, can we be saved?

Well, with man - with you and me -

with all our power
and determination and commitment and all our good intentions combined, it's

impossible.

But
with God, all things are possible (Matt 19:26).

And if
you'll remember what I said at the beginning of this sermon, the Gospel – the
Good News of our salvation – is not about the journey WE make...

The Gospel is about the journey Christ makes FOR us.

For if
you'll notice, it is JESUS who set His face on the cross to do the will of His
Father – who never looked back –

who overcame the
devil and his temptation to find comfort in this world –

who set His face in
perfect obedience to suffer the death we deserved for our sins and who rose
again to gather us to new life.

Which
is why, to follow Jesus means nothing more than to participate in HIS journey
by faith – to believe that what He has done was done FOR YOU –

to trust in Him for
HIS perfect obedience and HIS life-giving sacrifice,

and to receive those
benefits through the gifts He pours out for you here in His Word and
Sacraments.

In
other words, if you want to follow Jesus, then set your face on your Baptism
where He UNITES you with Him into His journey – into His death and
resurrection
(Rom 6:3-5) – and MAKES you a new creation, holy and righteous before God.

If you want to follow

Jesus, then set your face on His Body and Blood that take away your sins and unite you with HIM for life everlasting.

If you want to
follow Jesus, then set your face on His Word by which the Holy Spirit provides a lamp to your feet and a light for your path (Psa 119:105)."

For it
is IN Christ that you are saved -

not by your
determination to follow Him by your own reason or strength, but by your union with Him through the gifts He gives.

As
Chemnitz wrote in yesterday's Treasury of Daily Prayer,

"Christ Himself is
present with us in the celebration of the Supper with both His deity and His flesh, and He comes to us in order to lay hold on us (Phil 3:12) and join us to Himself as intimately as possible" (475).

That is, after all,
why He came, right?

Christ
must lay hold on US if we are to be saved by Him.

So
confess your sin and turn from your failures -

your
anger, your hurts, your cravings and your worries,

and take your places
in this blessed Communion where He forgives your sins and unites you with Himself and all His benefits!

For it
is IN Christ -

in HIS journey - in HIS perfect obedience -

in

HIS cross -

in HIS forgiveness

that He pours out for you here today, that you do indeed have a kingdom and life everlasting.

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

Preached by Pastor Holowach

Sermon text: Luke 9:51-62