

## Road Trip!

These lessons are a perfect connection to this time of year. Most of us have recently gone, or are planning to go on a road trip. We go for various reasons: from fun and frivolous, to intentional and structured, to even terse or grim. We have two road trips or journeys in our lessons today:

- the end of the story of the great Elijah “Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind...” (2 Kings 2:1)
- and the continuing saga of Jesus and his ministry. “When the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” (Luke 9:51)

Clearly, neither of these is incidental or casual. But they are both important. As we have seen over the last few weeks, Elijah has been challenged, pestered, and even the subject of a manhunt by the notorious Jezebel. Through it all, he has remained steadfast to God, despite his fear and his wondering if he was ‘good enough’. Jesus continues his journey through the countryside beyond Jewish settlement.

Today, he is in Samaria a region, the people of whom had a less than friendly relationship with Jews. We sense that isolation and discomfort when we hear that the Samaritans “did not receive him”. In part, Luke tells us, because he had “set his face to go to Jerusalem”. Not only did this make him intent on the preciousness of his days, but also he knew what awaited him. He knew the circumstances, events and people who he would encounter in Jerusalem would be *at least* life-changing. As a result, Jesus is laser-focused on his mission. Nothing will stand in his way. Nothing else will have as strong a priority. He will not get distracted by the disciples, by those who would follow him, and those who want to pull him away from his mission to deal with their issues.

In both of these lessons, we realize that not only is life made up of many adventures which are mini-journeys, but life and faith itself is a journey. Often used to describe the narrative of a life, it is so true, isn't it? Some aspects of life are comfortable and easy; others are challenging and confronting; while still others push us beyond our known limits. Taken all together, that's life—some good, some not so good.

In his encounters today, Jesus is sharing with the disciples what the journey of faith will be like as they continue with him. There will be times when others reject you because of the color of your skin, or your cultural or ethnic background. Still others will want to come along, making light of the seriousness of your calling. Still others say they are coming, but will want to cling to the needs of the past.

At first look, Jesus' words today seem really harsh: "Let the dead bury the dead" *and* "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom." Jesus is really illustrating how challenging it is to be a true disciple. And Jesus knows that many will anticipate that discipleship is rigorous, but not confrontational to their lives.

As Professor James W. Thompson says, "To 'look back' is to place the demands of the family above the call of discipleship."<sup>1</sup> In other words, even *family* comes after God. That doesn't mean that we are expected to reject family out of hand, for Jesus knows how important family is. We all gain strength from people who love us, hang in with us, and bind themselves to us. But we need to be really clear that when we put family **first**, we are not putting God first.

Unlike Jesus who is not easily distracted, I am/we are. I get caught up in the details of running a church, or making sure that my yard is neat, or that I am up on the latest news. I get frozen in my now, full of the things that have brought me to this moment. I am not always ready for when Jesus says, 'Let's go on to tomorrow.'

Maybe, what Jesus is saying to the would-be follower is that what is before him is tomorrow, that yesterday has come and gone and that there is nothing more for him to do back there—that what is for him now is to proclaim, to testify, to share the good news, to be about God's business because he has already done what he could for what he was leaving behind.

Either way, what Jesus seems to be saying is that the road of discipleship is not easy. And by naming the most important challenges that will confront our desire to be faithful to him and the life of faith, we must be aware of the cost it will be. He does this by pointing out the extremely hard choices ahead of us, whether soon or far off.

It seems to me that this is what Paul is articulating for the Galatians—that Jesus has set us free from the struggles of the world. It is our lack of faith, our internal agonizing that invites us to become slaves again. The bonds are not of iron, but of will. We worry about the feelings of family; we are consumed by the guilt spit on us; we wrestle with feelings of inadequacy; we languish in complacency; or we hunger for the desires of the flesh. These are the things that drive us away from God, the things that get us locked into only imagining we can be so much, can give so much, can be so free.

When we get locked into these chains, we do it to ourselves. Jesus has freed us—has invited us to become all that God intends, all that God hopes for. If we reject that, we fall back into the bondage of less than. So the choices of faithfulness might seem stark because they can be. But the joy of living fully, abundantly, in all our being—this is Jesus' offer, and his path. We might well wonder what it is that binds us, and how much are we willing to let go of the past to become the future.