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From the Pulpit

Sermon Series ~ *A Long Road in the Same Direction: Jesus' Journey Towards Jerusalem*
Sermon ~ *No Turning Back*

The Rev. Dr. Steve Harrington ~ March 13, 2011

I Kings 19:19-21
Luke 9:51-62

Last Wednesday night many of us gathered in this sanctuary for our Ash Wednesday service and began together the season of Lent – a season of spiritual journey, reflective preparation, and prayerful repentance. The name Lent derives from a word meaning the lengthening of days – Lent/lengthen – and refers to the time of the year in the spring when the season occurs. Lent is the 6 weeks before Easter when Christians are called to walk with Jesus the road of sacrifice and commitment as he makes his way towards Jerusalem and the cross. Lent is a season of spiritual journey. This year we're going to be walking with Jesus on his journey towards Jerusalem. And we're going to track that journey through the gospel of Luke as it begins here chapter 9 verse 51 until he comes into Jerusalem with the triumphal entry in chapter 19 verse 28.

In this church we often use the language of journey to talk about the spiritual life and our experience of faith. We speak of journey, not just because it's a biblical image, but also because it's a helpful image - because it expresses well the reality of what our souls experience. The concept of journey recognizes that between where we began in our spiritual lives, and where God calls us to be, is this large section of life that we call, 'growing in faith.' And we all are somewhere along the way in that journey - no one has arrived; no one has been disqualified - no one perfect; no one beyond hope.

Here in this church we are each in the process of an emerging faith that seeks to live out the call of discipleship in the reality of this world. This means we don't expect everyone to be at the same place - there is no line of holiness that we use to measure spirituality in order to approve of some and reject others. No, our goal is to simply help one another take that next step of faith that will bring us a little closer to Jesus Christ.

In our text Jesus begins his final journey to Jerusalem. As Luke records it in Chapter 9, just before this, Jesus has been talking about the barren road of discipleship. In verse 24 he spoke to his disciples about losing one's life for his sake. He now begins that journey for himself with determination and commitment.

Our text says that Jesus "set his face like flint" towards Jerusalem. It's an idiom that refers to a deliberate and committed intent, to a fixed and set purpose – the text is telling us that

what will ultimately happen in Jerusalem is neither a tragic misfortune nor a terrible injustice: Jerusalem and its cross is the goal and destination of Jesus' journey.

And as he begins that journey he talks with 3 different people who want to take up the call discipleship and follow him. But each has something that hinders and holds them back from their discipleship; and as we look at their reasons for hesitation we can learn something about our own journey of faith. Each one has something that calls them away from the journey to Jerusalem and the cross. Perhaps as we reflect together on the text we will understand some of our own stumbling steps of discipleship in the choices and challenges of these men.

The first person in the text initiates the conversation on discipleship by saying to Jesus, "I will follow you wherever you go." One might imagine from what we have seen of Jesus' open encouragement and inclusive spirit that he would say, "Come along then and join me; you are welcome on this journey!" But Jesus' response is a little surprising and frankly rather abrupt: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." What is Jesus saying about the spiritual journey, about the road to discipleship?

Well it would seem that Jesus sees in this first would-be-disciple a qualification in his faith that would ultimately reduce his discipleship. Jesus discerns the man wants to hold onto his past life and not let it go. The problem with his discipleship could be captured in the phrase, *as long as*. In essence the man is saying I will follow you "*as long as* it's comfortable; *as long as* it doesn't uproot my life; *as long as* I still have a place to be and belong". Jesus' reply about the foxes and birds tells the man that discipleship cannot be qualified by comfort nor compromised by reservation.

Jesus knows the man's discipleship has its conditions: *as long as* it's comfortable, *as long as* it's easy, *as long as* it doesn't ask too much of me or put me in a hard or difficult place... The truth is much of what we would pass off as discipleship has been domesticated and reduced down to something that does not disrupt our lives – a kind of discipleship-lite. But discipleship as Jesus defined it is not tempered by what is manageable or comfortable or easy – it's a call – to use Eugene Peterson's phrase – to a long obedience in the same direction. *As long as* discipleship puts conditions and qualifications on our response to Christ but we are called to more.

The 2nd man to encounter Jesus is invited to follow him but his response is to ask to first bury his father. Commentators have debated whether this means his father was mortally ill and that the man intended to care for him until he died or whether the man was asking to go and make funeral arrangements for a recent loss. But it doesn't really matter which is the case because either way, when Jesus says, "Let the dead bury their own dead," it's a hard word to hear. The hitch in this man's discipleship is that he is saying I will follow you *as soon as*...

As soon as: once certain conditions are met or realized; once we arrive at some place or achieve some goal – *as soon as* feigns discipleship but puts it on hold until other goals are met. *As soon as*: Isn't that the great illusion and delusion of our lives? That we're willing to do the right thing but not just quite yet; that we just have to fix or finagle one or 2 little things and then...

AS SOON AS —

the kids get a little older

I finish this project

As soon as I get the money (like we're going to suddenly win the lottery)

the kids get out of college

Summer is here – or the fall begins – or the new year starts

I get through this crisis
we retire
I get married
the grandchildren get older-and it starts all over again!

As soon as what?? What is it that we think, that once we do that thing or get through that time that we will finally be able to give ourselves to what really matters? But if Jesus Christ is important to us in our lives it *has* to affect how we live in the now. Not as soon as... but now. Not someday, but now; from today forward - now, is the time!

The 3rd person, like the first, willingly volunteers to follow Christ but his commitment is qualified by another priority. And so he promises to follow Jesus... *but first*... This is his hitch in discipleship, the words *but first*. I will follow you... *but first* let me say farewell to those of my home. Jesus responds with a word that calls us to a higher commitment than Elijah allowed Elisha; he says, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

But first: we want to commit ourselves to Christ; we want to grow in our faith; we want to join in the spiritual journey; we want to be a serious disciple... *but first*... Something stands in the way, something needs to be done, something else calls for our time and our money and our lives and our commitment. *But first* ... Whatever comes first in our life is first in our hearts and discipleship means having no one but Christ as first in our lives.

The journey of faith and the call to discipleship is a demanding one – not one for qualifications where we respond *as long as*... we get what we want. The call to discipleship is an urgent one – not one that could be put off with the words *as soon as*... I take care of other business. The call to discipleship is a priority one – not one that could be delayed with words like, I will follow you *but first*...

What is it that calls to you and causes you to hesitate and hold back in your faith? What is it that you don't want to give up that Christ is calling you to leave behind? As we journey on in this season of Lent, let us ask God to renew our faith and help us to keep both hands on the plow, both ears on the call and both eyes on the path of discipleship. Amen.