[Title Slide] On Setting One's Face

LUKE 9:51-62 (NRSVUE) ***When 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 prepare for his arrival,*** ***53but they did not receive him because his face was set toward Jerusalem.*** ***54When his disciples James and John saw this, 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."*** ***60And 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."*** ***62And Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."*** **[L: The word of God for the people…**

Anybody who has traveled much knows there two ways to do it. One way is to get in the car flip a coin, and head out. If something attracts your attention and interest, you turn aside and go see it. Jo Lynn and I love to do that, and we've discovered some wonderful things we otherwise would not have seen.

We also have found some dead-ends and have ended up on some wild goose chases! Unfortunately, we don't often get to travel that way. Most of the time we travel the other way: a daily destination and itinerary, schedules, deadlines…

Leaving deadlines behind is part of the reason I travel—I need a break from them. Tight itineraries, meal reservations, and lodging reservations, 500 miles a day… I'm worn out just talking about it.

I understand that's some people's preferred way of travel: get to the destination as quickly as possible. Stay on the Interstate, set your cruise ten mph over the posted speed limit, grab a burger at a fast-food drive thru and keep driving…

In life, as in travel, some are Interstate Hwy/destination oriented, and others focus on the journey: backroads, mountain vistas, a running stream beside the road, lots of photo stops. And in life, as well as travel, both are valid approaches. It's a matter of personal preference. And we all like to keep our options open.

Today's lectionary reading is the beginning of a long section—9:51 through 19:47—exclusive to Luke. Matthew and Mark include very little of this material, and not in the same context or sequence. It's called Luke's "Travel Narrative:" it reads somewhat like a travelogue, events along a journey. The events, themselves, are not out of character for Jesus or the gospels: short vignettes, a mission sermon, commandments to love God and neighbor, parables, teaching on prayer, instructions related to the end times, healings… But they are connected by phrases like, "along the way," or "as they were traveling…" or "He entered Jericho and was passing through…" And, for those who like to keep all your options open, it may not start off well. In the first verse, Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem."

He "set his face." It's a phrase found in Jeremiah and Ezekiel and indicates a particularly strong kind of resolve. Sometimes it's used in the negative sense, "to set one's face against something." But here, Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem and, more specifically in Luke's intention, to the completion of the purpose for which he came. He has a destination and will not be distracted from it.

Immediately he and the disciples come upon a village that rejects him because his face is set for Jerusalem. The disciples want to call down fire upon them, but Jesus' face is set. He has a destination and will not be distracted from it.

A man approaches and says, ***"I will follow you wherever you go." And 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."*** He has a destination and will not be distracted from it.

Another says, ***"I will follow you as soon as I bury my father,"*** and Jesus says, ***"Let the dead bury their own dead; but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God!"***

Another says, "I'll follow you. Let me go say goodbye to my family." And Jesus says, ***"No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."***

Wow! Can you spell "resolute?" He has a destination and will not be distracted from it. And for those who like to keep their options open it's hard; but in my observation that's the image and expectation a lot of people have about being a Christian: rigid rules, judgment on those who break the rules...

What happened to ***"Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."*** **(MATTHEW 11:28)**

And yet, focused and determined as he was, Jesus stops along the way to teach, to heal, to pray (in fact, a major theme in Luke is the prayer life of Jesus). He has a destination, and will not be distracted from it, and yet he stops to bless the children; he takes time to train and commission 72 disciples to go ahead and minister in the villages where he intends to go.

Despite his single-minded intention to go to Jerusalem, he takes time to visit in the home of Mary and Martha, and he accepts an invitation to dinner in the home of a Pharisee—and invites himself to stay with Zacchaeus, the tax collector.

At one point he urges the people, "Don't worry about what you will eat or wear. God will take care of you;" and in the next paragraph he begins with "Be dressed for action and keep your lamp lit."

Here's the thing: the journey doesn't look a lot different from the rest of Luke, or the other synoptic gospels. The difference—maybe the only difference—is that once Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem, the journey takes on a different meaning. At that point, Jesus understands and accepts that the journey can end with only one destination and with only one outcome.

But the rest of his life and his relationships didn't stop when he "set his face to go to Jerusalem." He continued to teach and heal and spend time with friends and to speak truth to power and challenge a status quo that was supported and rationalized by the religious establishment. And along the way he was training and equipping those who would carry the torch when he was gone.

William Wordsworth wrote, "The world is too much with us…" Distractions are everywhere on the journey to Jerusalem: a Supreme Court ruling highlights the division within our community, as does a new gun safety law. Poverty, hunger, racism, and white supremacy just won't go away. Gas prices soar, as does the price of groceries, even as record profits are recorded by the petroleum and food industries. And we're even divided about that, with some blaming the president and others blaming corporate greed.

Distractions are everywhere on the journey to Jerusalem, and people who like to keep all their options open may have a difficult time staying on the path.

Distractions are everywhere on the journey to Jerusalem, and Jesus took time to tend to the needs indicated by those distractions. But his face was set. His destination was Jerusalem, and he chose which options to keep open, and which options to close.

For us it's the difference between "churchwork" and "the work of the church." Churchwork is all those "busy" things we do because we've always done it that way: committees that meet because it's the second Tuesday of the month, even though there is no business to discuss. Sometimes those things become the distractions along the way to Jerusalem. They become ends in themselves, rather than a means to a greater end.

So, if churchwork defines the distractions, the work of the church is our Jerusalem: clearly stated and accepted core values, bedrock beliefs, motivating vision, and missional purpose. If it doesn't get us closer to Jerusalem, maybe we need to bypass it. If a committee meeting doesn't move us closer to Jerusalem, is it worth putting our shoes back on after an already busy day at work?

I have a friend in Tulsa who told a story about having dinner with a friend who was a Canine Police Officer. As they were … ("An Arm to Chew On.")

Setting one's face doesn't have to mean giving up everything that brings joy and satisfaction, putting the proverbial ring through our nose to be dragged along doing "busy work" and watching burned out friends fall along the way.

To set one's face is not to be tunnel-visioned; it's not to travel with blinders strapped to your temples. To set one's face is to have an arm to chew on—to have a clear destination and purpose that keeps you focused. It's OK to take a few side trips. Just don't get lost.

Pastoral Prayer

The Supreme Court's ruling on Friday sent a lot of us into a tailspin of anxiety, fear, anger, and feelings of betrayal. As pastor, I felt called to lead our congregation—both gathered and online—in a prayerful response. But words failed me. For hours I sat in front of my computer; but

> *I just didn't have anything left to say. I felt like I'd used up all my words. I've spoken and written practical, rational arguments, emotional arguments, I've shown anger in addressing one issue after another. I've shown sorrow, and nothing seems to have any impact. I'm just out of words.*[1]

So I consulted a Facebook group of Disciple Ministers, and we had some wonderful exchanges. I want to share some of the comments:

One colleague wrote, "A Palestinian Christian has written about complicated and difficult prayer times, 'Don't pray for Palestinians or Jews. Instead, pray for yourself - that you might not divide us in your prayers.' We have to stand up to injustice and speak our truth. We also have to keep from dehumanizing others so that we can retain enough relationship to grow."[2]

Another wrote: "We've spent the past several years making hatred a national past time. We will never totally agree with one another. Yet, somehow, we still must work to educate and enlighten people and strive for a better future, even when there is disagreement as to how to do it. But we can still all agree that we are all God's children, that we are a part of God's wondrous creation, and that we're all just doing the best we can to make this world a better place for every living being on this planet. Even when our deepest beliefs lead us to very disparate conclusions."[3]

I'm grateful for these Spirit-filled expressions of encouragement; and I found that I could pray again. And so, beginning with words from a favorite hymn, let us pray:

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God of rainbow, fiery pillar, leading where the eagles soar, we your people, ours the journey now and evermore: God of many names and God beyond all names, we come today with many questions, but few answers. Remind us that you created us in your image and called us into your service, and that you gift us with abilities and equip us for the task.

Remind us of those gifts when we face obstacles to faithfulness.

Grant us a vision of where Jesus leads when he calls, "Follow me." Humble us, O God, so that we can follow Him instead of the loud voices around us—the Cable News, and the people—sometimes even people with whom we agree—who seek their agenda through violence and loudness.

Help us to hear your still, small voice, calling us to build up your kingdom instead of tearing each other down. Remind us that our relationships with each other are more important than any issue that divides us. Give us reconciling words with which to share our hearts with each other so that we might better understand the competing needs and

[1] Adapted from comments from President Barak Obama in response to a mass shooting June 26, 2015, when Pastor/State Senator Clementa Pinkney and eight of his parishioners at Emmanuel AME church in Charleston were gunned down during a Bible study class. Source: *Renegade: Born in the USA* (New York: Crown, 2021) p. 110.

[2] Lee Yates

[3] Tamalyn Kralman

visions, even within the Body of Christ.[4]

For our daughters and our granddaughters, our wives and significant others, and even casual sexual partners, many of whom, individually or within a supportive family, soon will face untenable health concerns and choices because of Friday's ruling, grant discernment for the decision, and strength and peace of mind and healing in whatever follows.

God, you created the wonderful, seemingly inexhaustible human brain. Open the minds of your servants that we may discern some path to consensus, some resolution based upon love and compassion, rather than upon ideology or dogma.

Remind us that you sent one called "Prince of Peace," and draw us into the path on which he leads, we pray in his name. Amen.

[4] Adapted from a prayer by Kate Penney Howard