

# No Looking Back

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## Luke 9:51-62

When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. When 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?" But he turned and rebuked them. Then they went on to another village. As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "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." To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

One of my favorite literary genres is travel narrative. I've always enjoyed accounts of people on a journey from one place to another. *The Canterbury Tales*, for instance, this eclectic, ragtag collection of characters on their pilgrimage to Canterbury, England. John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* provides the classic metaphor for the Christian life, at least from a

Protestant perspective. Closer to home, John Steinbeck's *Travels with Charley* was one of my favorites when I first read it thirty or so years ago. *Into the Wild*, Jon Krakauer's remarkable book, which inspired an even more remarkable motion picture. William Least Heat Moon's book *Blue Highways: A Journey into America* provided the inspiration for my own travel narrative, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America*.

There is something about travel that takes us out of our ordinary context and prompts us to see the world through different eyes. We're forced to pay more careful attention to our surroundings, precisely because they are unfamiliar, out of the ordinary. That's the value of a vacation, of course. We intentionally alter our surroundings and see things differently.

The Gospel of Luke provides a marvelous travel narrative. It begins in chapter 9, when Luke tells us that Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem," and it concludes ten chapters later when Jesus makes his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. In addition to physical movement from one place to the next, Luke's Gospel is an extraordinary literary journey, one that has given us such staples of the faith as the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Lost Sheep and the Prodigal Son.

I preached last week about the man possessed by demons. Jesus healed him in the course of his travels, and some of the townspeople didn't like it. The raving, naked man whose presence had become all too familiar to them suddenly was clothed and respectable, sitting attentively at Jesus' feet. The man recognized that he would be in for a rough time if he stayed around, so he asked to join Jesus on his travels. Jesus considered the matter and told the man to return to his home to "declare how much God" had done for him.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 8:39.

**I**n today's Gospel, Jesus offers similarly harsh words to those who aspire to follow him. By this time in his ministry, Jesus had attracted notice – and something of an entourage. Word had spread about this remarkable man from Galilee, and people wanted to be part of the scene. The first-century equivalent of celebrity hounds, I suppose, clamoring for his autograph. Imagine Jesus on the cover of *People* magazine or one of those Hollywood gossip programs.

As Jesus and his disciples were walking from one town to the next, someone showed up and said, “I will follow you wherever you go.” Jesus asked, in effect, have you considered the accommodations?: “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.”

Farther along, Jesus beckoned another man to follow him. But the man, suddenly, remembered that his father had just died. “Lord, first let me go and bury my father,” he pleaded. Jesus replied evenly: “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” Still another petitioner said to Jesus, “I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.”

At this point, Jesus calls on an agricultural metaphor. As any farmer knows, the way to plow a straight furrow is to fix your eyes on a distant fencepost and not look back. So it is with the kingdom of heaven, Jesus says: “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

**S**o what are we to make of these stern words from Jesus in the midst of his travels to Jerusalem? Perhaps he was tired from his travels and even a bit cranky from all of those autograph-seekers. Can we allow Jesus, the son of God, to be tired and cranky? That's one possibility, I suppose.

I think a more likely reading is that Jesus wanted to know who was truly serious about following him. He wanted to separate the disciples from the celebrity hounds because he knew the latter would be unreliable. He knew that at the first sign of trouble or resistance or a shift in public-opinion polls,

many of those who loudly proclaimed their allegiance to him and to the good news he was preaching would disappear. As soon as his polling numbers went down or some new celebrity burst on the scene, these hangers-on would no longer be hanging on. They'd suddenly be enamored of some new face, some fresh messiah.

The gospel that Jesus preached is not some passing fad or fancy. It's not like taking up Tai Chi or dabbling in Yoga or trying the latest diet. Following Jesus demands discipline and dedication, and Jesus is looking for those who are willing to walk with him over the long haul and not be distracted by lesser and transitory concerns.

Consider the cost, he says. Becoming a true follower, taking seriously the demands of the gospel, may mean that you're not always popular. It may mean that you may not live in comfort or that you will be ostracized from your own family. Consider the cost. Consider carefully, Jesus says.

And after you've considered, put your hand to the plow, and don't look back. That is what Jesus asks of us. Forge ahead in your understanding and in your preaching of the faith. Recognize that faith itself is a journey, not unlike the road to Jerusalem, that you will encounter difficulties and challenges and temptations along the way.

But any journey has its own rewards. When we walk with Jesus, we see the world through different eyes. The ability to acknowledge Jesus as Lord and not be enticed or distracted by lesser pursuits is the greatest of all gifts.

Follow me, Jesus says. Put your hand to the plow, and don't look back. Eyes on the fencepost. The life of faith is the greatest of all journeys, the adventure of a lifetime.

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost  
Christ Church  
Middle Haddam, Connecticut  
June 27, 2010