

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

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“The Nature of this Journey”

Luke 9: 51-62

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“As the time approached for him to ascend, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.” That’s the way our gospel reading began and it’s a very important verse in Luke’s telling of the Jesus story. It’s a place where the story pivots.

Jesus “**resolves**” something.

He’s moving with clear purpose...

He “**set his face**” some translations say.

Meaning... “**He braced himself.**” “**I’m headed this way and expecting opposition along the way.**”

So, here in the middle of chapter 9, in the middle of the story, he’s clear about how the story must end and where it must end.

But... this clarity is not primarily about geography. Because he doesn’t actually arrive in Jerusalem until the end of chapter 19 and he’s literally “all over the map” between this page and that one.

So... it’s not like Luke is saying, “**Jesus made a bee-line to the Holy city,**” but rather that he’s giving us a way of understanding what Jesus’ journey is all about... What it means to be Jesus... How to interpret all that happens in the next 10 chapters and how to hear his teachings.

What happens in Jerusalem is the interpretive key.

And notice the little paradoxical play on words... When it was time for his ascension... he headed towards Jerusalem. And “ascension” for the gospel writers is a word with multiple meanings. They’re saying more than one thing... Yes, he’s to be ascended into the eternal... just like Elijah (which was the old testament text for this week)... He is lifted up into heaven... but not before he is lifted up in death on a cross.

So, it’s sort of this painful playing with the word. One glorious ascent is preceded by another, which to everyone watching and reading, then and now... pretty much looks like a descent. Right??? What goes up must go down, first.

The way home goes through Jerusalem, and he knows and we all know what is waiting there. So can you hear the verse this way? “**When it was time for his ascent into Life... he resolutely descended into death.**”

And Luke, writing to the Church, isn’t just telling us about Jesus’ story... He’s teaching us about what it means for us to be apart of it. Got that? Jesus is going to die. He came to die... but he also came to call us to a way of being and that’s what today’s text is all about.

First, with the Samaritans... Did you notice why he’s turned away? Jesus does the Billy Graham thing and sends an advance team to get everything ready... you know, figure out lodging and all. Which football stadium was big enough to house the multitude, etc.

And the impression is, that the Samaritans were just fine with this intenerate preacher and healer holding a crusade there until... until they found out he was “**going to Jerusalem.**” Then, they canceled the Jesus engagement. He got a memo...

“Dear Jesus, heard you are headed on to Jerusalem from here... so... never mind, don’t bother coming.”

And certainly, we can understand that culturally and politically and it’s just so sad. Does this sound familiar? **“If you aren’t going to hate whom I hate, then I don’t want anything to do with you?” “If you aren’t against them, then you’re against us.”** There’s a lot of that kind of thinking going on around the world.

Jesus, in the passage just before, is so different. The disciples are upset because some unofficial disciples are doing good things in Jesus’ name and they want to put a stop to it... Jesus just kind of laughs at them. (‘ Least that’s the way I picture it) and says, **“Guys... if they aren’t against us, they’re for us.”**

The disciples are still a long way from God’s heart on the way to Jerusalem. When they get word that they’re rejected in Samaria they basically say, **“Can we kill them Jesus, please, huh? Can we nuke ‘em?”** Immature people will do just about anything when they believe their cause is righteous. Lots of that going on in our world too, huh!

But, I digress, back to Samaria and to their rejection... You can hear it ethnically but given what Luke is up to, we’d better also hear it spiritually. **“If Jerusalem, and its way of descent, is what you’re all about... we’d rather not have you come preach here. If that’s what the path is all about... we aren’t interested.”**

And that is what it’s all about...

No place to lay your head,

No respect for protocols and honorable funeral etiquette.

No time to say goodbye... even to your own kids.

Luke gives us this little teaching in triplicate, which was a common way of presenting a teaching... sort of a one-two-three reinforcement so you can’t miss it. **“I’m headed to Jerusalem and if you’re following it’s going to mean letting go of pretty much everything.”**

Not exactly what you might call a seeker-friendly approach, huh?

I promise you, in churches all over America this last week, there were outreach committees that met to ask how they could reach out to people and grow their membership. And they thought of everything... ways to market themselves to families and to singles and to folks with this need and that need.

They talked... maybe even fought... about what music would be most appealing so that they could be... most appealing. What they could do to the building to make it more attractive. It’s basically, church growth by self-fulfillment and self-care and maybe even... selfishness.

Not one committee member said, **“Hey, let’s just put the two words, “come die” on our billboard.”**

“There’s a motion on the floor by sister Sarah that we just advertise this as a place to come and die... do I hear a second?”

Jesus doesn’t get all that many seconds... does he?

... Because he doesn’t soft sell anything... and yet... he has such a soft heart, so it’s a bit of a paradox. Apparently, it’s so easy to receive the love of Jesus... just say yes. But it’s really hard being a follower of Jesus... because you have to start saying “no” to everything else.

You see that in the gospel stories.... After he puts... **“Come and die”** on his billboard.

Some folks go away sad...

The multitudes start to shrink...

Hosannas so easily become “crucify him.”

The Samaritans are pretty clear about it... **“If Jerusalem is where this path leads, we’d rather not.”** Because there are just too many things here and they’re good things like homes and customs and families.

That's what so challenging about this text isn't it. There's nothing sinful about wanting a little nest... a little comfort and security... not much really, just a little place to call our own. ... a picket fence around our lives. It's not a sin to have a picket fence is it? Or a little picket insurance policy?

And it's a good thing to honor your father and mother... it's even commanded. And not to bury your father would just be so very dishonorable. And even today, if you did something like that, didn't go to your own father's funeral, folks would think, **"what a selfish, ungrateful jerk."** Is there anything wrong with protecting your reputation? Doing what's right and respectable?

And what about saying goodbye? **"I mean, I'm willing to go with you Jesus, for crying out loud... what do you mean I'm not fit for service in the kingdom just because what's in my past matters to me."**

See it's a no-brainer if Jesus says, **"Okay, give up all your nasty habits... No more chewing tobacco... And get rid of all your hidden sins and your meanness and your envy... no more wild parties or cheating on your taxes... and absolutely, no more reality TV."**

We'd all say **"Amen, Jesus, preach it."**

But Jesus knows something deeper about us... that good things can be stumbling blocks too. That normal human needs have to be transcended too. See, this path isn't just about being moral it's about, well, BEING (in all caps)... It's about LIFE... and it's about being free. It's about being like Jesus, this one who empties everything and lets go of it all.

And we haven't... we don't... and whatever is not surrendered will, at some point then, be in control of us. It's really that simple... It's either let go of it or serve it. What isn't released will become an idol, some god before God. The gift is now in between the Giver and us.

This is a very hard teaching. It is not an easy path. That's why, even Jesus, had to set his face... he had to be resolute. It's not easy, there are so many things we need... at some level, we just do. It's self-fulfillment... not a bad thing.

"A place to lay our heads." We have, at one level, such needs for security, don't we. How many commercials did you watch last night that appealed to your need to get everything nailed down about your future? And it's so understandable and real... and so responsible and reasonable... but we're being asked to let go of that and not live our lives in such fear.

"Let the dead bury their dead?" What would people think? It's so normal to want to care about that... To want to guard your reputation. ... So human to want to be esteemed. And yet, we're being asked to surrender and let go of our need for that.

And not to look back, even? Just let go of it... the past? Just like that? **But it defines me so. I know who I am that way? Who to love and who to fear... who owes me? My resume is my past. My memories... I'm just supposed to forget that... be present only to this moment like a farmer trying to plough a straight row?**

All of what Jesus is teaching about here involves transcending the self. Or as he would say, **"dying to it."** And it really is advanced Jesus, advanced spiritual stuff... we may start with turning from our sin but in time we're invited to something even deeper. Relinquishing all that we're attached to... and it is, of course, so we can receive something else and live from something else.

We live too much from fear and Jesus has come to save us from that.

And too much from the flesh, that lower self, little I.

And way too much from yesterday.

Remember the parable of the Good Samaritan. It happens on Luke's next page. Remember, guy beat up on the side of the road... hurt bad... and a priest and a Levite, both religious professionals, pass by... but the Samaritan stops and loves his neighbor.

What's the difference? The two were attached... to security, to protocol, to custom and community, to opinion and prejudice and everything that was right. Everything was in the way of their being.

Our attachments cost us... and so does our discipleship. You're going to pay somebody something. Surrender isn't easy but it's what the soul wants to do. Hear this carefully... your soul is designed for surrender. And everyday in a million ways, we are offered opportunities to let go. More often than not, we say no. **"No thanks, Jesus, not if you're headed for Jerusalem."**

Some of us will leave here today without reaching out to anyone, in protection of your self, you'll hurry away. Some of us will only speak to those we know, with whom we're comfortable. Today, some of us will say no to loving someone sacrificially. It'll be easier not to and we'll say no to that surrender.

Some of us, in some charged place of conflict this week, will take a critical shot at someone and we'll justify it because we're defending our honor. We'll call down a little fire because, well, they're so wrong. There'll be a moment to risk something... and we won't.

We'll miss moments to care because we're so busy... too attached.

We'll hold on when we ought to let go.

We'll hide when we should say hello.

We'll speak when we should be silent.

We'll choose feathering our own nest rather than denying ourselves for the sake of the world. **"No thanks, Jesus... Jerusalem is not for me."** A decent into love is not for us.

And we'll miss, Jesus... the Christ moment... Life... because he's pretty much moving on. And we'll miss it. And it is our LIFE. See... It's not just that, you know, the world's hurting and we should sacrifice because Jesus did and we all know good Christians should do that sort of thing.

When we surrender... something happens. When we let go, we are connected again to the wellspring of our lives. This is our connection to love eternal. We can't hang on and receive... we only get it as we empty ourselves in love.

I don't often read long quotes but this one is too good.... It's from a spiritual teacher, Cynthia Bourgeault. She's describing this truth of surrender metaphysically.

The most daring gamble of Jesus' trajectory of pure love may just be to show us that self-emptying is not the means to something else; the act is itself the full expression of it's meaning and can bring into being "a new creation," the wholeness of love manifested in the particularity of a human heart. (Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening, 87)

Something happens as we trust ourselves wholly to God. The "wholeness of love... manifested in a human heart"... yours. All of what love is... in you as you yourself, give yourself away in love...

This is your life... It is literally the very lifeblood of the Church. And I invite you to come here again today, to this table as a way of saying yes to that. To receiving it and to living it and allowing it to live itself through you.

While they were eating Jesus took the bread, blessed it, broke it and said... **"This is my body broken for you."** And he took the cup and after he gave thanks he gave it to them... and they all drank from it and he told them... **"This... this is the blood of my new covenant poured out for many."**

Come... and take all of it.