
He Set His Face to Go to Jerusalem

A sermon by Canon Todd Smelser
Proper 8 – Year B

When the days drew near to be taken up, he set his face to Jerusalem. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Last weekend, I set my face not on Jerusalem, but on Liberty, Indiana, where the class of 1966 was remembering and celebrating our fiftieth high school graduation. I had gone to the twenty-fifth reunion, driving down from my new position as dean of the Cathedral of Chicago. This year, it would involve a plane trip, and although I was a bit ambivalent about returning to my roots, I made the travel plans and returned. It was first trip back to Indiana since my mother moved here over seven years ago so it had been a long time since I'd seen anyone from my class. My initial thought was, my goodness these people look older, with lots of grey hair and body shapes that were far more ample than fifty years earlier. But then I looked in the mirror, and realized that I was one of them.

Since I had known many of these folks since kindergarten days, there were lots of nostalgic memories passed around. While there I made my own pilgrimage of sorts—visiting the house I was born in, the farm where my parents lived when I was in school, the cemetery where my dad is buried, and sites in Richmond, where I went to college, and was baptized and confirmed in the Episcopal Church. Although I was happy to leave that world when I was 18, it was very important to return, to remember, and to be thankful.

At the turning point of C. S. Lewis's beloved *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*, there are reports that Aslan, the great lion and true ruler of oppressed Narnia, has reappeared to fight the evil witch. The characters of the book encourage each other with these potent words: "Aslan is on the move." In today's reading from Luke's Gospel, something similar seems to be happening. Having preached, taught and worked miracles, Jesus suddenly hears the call to turn toward Jerusalem, and the rest of the Gospel depicts his steadfast journey there. In short, Jesus is on the move.

While Jesus' face may be set to Jerusalem, he does not take the most direct path. In fact, there is almost no logic to the stories and incidents that Luke relates. For Luke's concern is not geographical, but theological: the stories Luke shares reveal the character of Jesus, and in turn, the Father who sent him and the mission Jesus has been sent to accomplish.

The two scenes grouped together in today's reading offer insight into Jesus' call, and they occur almost immediately after his transfiguration on the mountaintop attended by Moses and Elijah in the sight of his most trusted disciples. The first scene depicts Jesus' rejection by a Samaritan village and the righteous anger of James and John, expressed by their request to call down fire from heaven to consume the villages, reminiscent of Elijah twice calling down fire to consume his opponents. Maybe that's something that Donald and Hillary haven't thought of yet!

We are not told why the Samaritans would not receive Jesus. What is central to the story is not the Samaritan's rejection, but rather Jesus' single-mindedness of purpose. This story leads to the next vignette, where Jesus is uncharacteristically harsh. After Jesus says, "Follow me," one disciple asks if he can first bury his father—a perfectly reasonable request. But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." The contrast with Elijah, who allowed Elisha to mark the ending of his life with his family, before joining the prophet—is likely

intentional. The point, however is not that Jesus demands more than Elijah, but rather that Jesus' road is more compelling. Jesus recognizes that the journey to Jerusalem and the cross that waits there cannot be compromised. But Jesus' commitment to embrace the cross is not about his own well-being. Rather it is for the sake of the whole world. Jesus' single-mindedness of purpose is prompted by God's profound love for humanity and for the salvation of all.

I think there are two ways to see Jesus: as someone to worship or someone to follow. Both are part of the Christian tradition and are perfectly orthodox. But in the context of today's reading, let's consider the possibility that Jesus is asking us not just to worship him in this beautiful Cathedral, but actually to follow him.

The theologian Richard Rohr tells us that this shift, from following Jesus to worshipping him—made us into a religion of “belonging and believing” instead of a religion of transformation. A religion of belonging and believing is concerned about who's in and who's out, and what specific doctrine people subscribe to, and about how they support the institution called the church. A religion of following Jesus, of our own transformation, on the other hand, focuses on change. Changing ourselves into becoming more of whom God is calling each of us to be, and changing the world around us into a more hospitable place for all of God's creatures.

St. Paul, writing to the Galatians, reminds us that for freedom Christ has set us free. He then goes on to talk about the qualities of behavior that Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life can produce: to share love, to spread joy, to wage peace, to foster patience, to nurture kindness, to exhibit generosity, to seek faithfulness, to cultivate gentleness, to strive for better self-control.

This is what it means to follow Jesus, not just to worship him. To seek, by word and example, to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God. This path may lead us into the whirlwinds or even through the valley of death, but it will also lead us from sin and captivity to the kingdom of everlasting life. This path can help us make the world a little better, a little kinder, and a little safer. This path can leave us stronger, more spiritually fit and better able to cope with whatever lies ahead.

I'm glad that I went back to Indiana last weekend—to renew not only relationships but the very stuff that helped to shape who I am and the path that I have traveled. Now it's time to join Jesus on his way—as he sets his face toward Jerusalem and toward the cross of Good Friday, which always leads us to Easter.