

Sunday, July 18, 2010  
Calvin Presbyterian Church, Abbotsford, BC

Psalm 75:1-10  
Galatians 5:1, 13-26  
Luke 9:51-62

### The Road Less Traveled: the Journey of Discipleship

Good morning. It is a privilege for me to worship with you today.

It's summer...finally! And many of us will take a road trip. That's one reason I chose texts from Luke for the next four weeks. It's the story of a journey.

Luke 9:51 begins Jesus' very intentional journey to Jerusalem. Luke uses the framework of a travel narrative...a road trip...to highlight what it means, and costs, to follow Jesus.

We see Jesus heading for Jerusalem. He is heading for the cross and he is preparing his disciples for the challenges ahead. Jesus leads his disciples from one village to another, helping them learn how to be witnesses to the kingdom of God. He helps them learn about priorities and about prayer. He helps them learn that discipleship is often the road less traveled. But he also introduces them to the joy of being a part of what God is doing in the world.

I invite you to dive into this journey over the next four weeks. It fills ten chapters: Luke 9:51 through chapter 19.

They are chapters full of motion—"going, entering, arriving, heading out." Luke pictures discipleship as a rigorous journey, on the move, following Jesus. But it's also a journey punctuated with rich times shared with friends around a meal. Traveling with Jesus is life-giving.

It's not a geographical journey. The maps at the back of your Bible won't help much. Luke is not interested in giving us Google directions to Jerusalem. It's not a straight line journey. It is more a quest.<sup>1</sup> Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem to take back what is rightfully his and his Father's. Jerusalem was supposed to be a holy city, a source of blessing for all nations; spiritually speaking, it had become a den of thieves.<sup>2</sup> He is a

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Gore, First Presbyterian Church, Spokane. September 20, 2009.  
<http://www.spokanefpc.org/Education/SundayMornings/Classes/tabid/4239/Default.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> Luke 19:46

king on the march reclaiming territory that has fallen into enemy hands. Not surprisingly, he encounters resistance along the way.

The journey leads to but does not end at the cross. Luke sets this journey in a larger frame. Jesus is preparing his disciples to proclaim the news of the kingdom of God not only in Jerusalem, but in Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Luke wrote both this gospel and the Book of Acts, his account of the early church. The journey begins on the dusty roads of Galilee and Samaria; ultimately it encompasses the world.

We learn it's not a tour in which we get to choose our traveling companions, our accommodations, or our activities. "We don't get the privilege of custom-designing the terms" of Christian faith.<sup>3</sup> The journey of discipleship leads to life, but it is rigorous and demanding.

That demand challenges us today every bit as much as it challenged Jesus' original followers.

Let's look at the text, beginning in Luke 9:51.

"When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem." "To be taken up" refers to Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension. "The days drew near..." Time is getting short. The intensity increases. Nothing is happening by accident. Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem." Luke echoes Isaiah 50:7 where God's Servant says, "I have set my face like a flint and I know I shall not be put to shame." The Servant in Isaiah mysteriously bears the suffering of his people. To "set one's face" signaled resolve to fulfill one's calling in the face of opposition.

"He sent messengers ahead of him." This is a kingly reference. The messengers aren't scouting out a place to stay that night. They're announcing that Jesus is on the move. They go to prepare people to receive him.

Some messengers are rebuffed by a Samaritan town "because Jesus was journeying to Jerusalem." Jews and Samaritans had a long, tense history. Jews regarded Samaritans as an inferior race with a distorted religion. Most Jews traveling from Galilee to Jerusalem would not go straight south through Samaria, a three day journey. They would instead cross over east of the Jordan River, avoiding Samaria altogether. So it is noteworthy that Jesus led his followers into Samaria. He led them there to demonstrate that the grace and mercy of God are as available to Samaritans as to pure Israelites, to outsiders as to insiders.

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<sup>3</sup> Peter W. Marty, *The Lectionary Commentary*, ed. Roger van Harn, 2001, p. 364.

As Christians, we are led into places and situations that we might not choose. Jesus leads us straight into Samaritan country. We are his messengers, sent to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God.

James and John are upset at the rejection of Jesus. They ask, “Lord, do you want us to call down fire from heaven and annihilate them?” We’re appalled, but they knew their Bible. Elijah called down fire from heaven to show God’s power (2 Kings 1:10-11). They believe Jesus is greater than Elijah. And they’re right. He rebukes their misplaced zeal.

The kingdom of God is not about shock and awe, but about God’s redeeming grace reconciling the world.

How tempting it is to want to be right, to be vindicated, to call down fire on those who oppose what we believe God is calling us to do. Jesus shows us another way.

He journeys on. He doesn’t quit when rejected. He tells disciples to expect resistance and how to respond. Jesus wants them and us to notice opportunities for God’s grace to bring life and reconciliation, and not to dwell on opposition. We are called to follow in that way.

Jesus’ response, though, should not be misinterpreted. Rejecting God’s grace has consequences. A time will come when those who reject God’s grace face judgment. His response is not rooted in misguided tolerance of all sincerely held beliefs. His response is rooted in eschatological hope. He sees the bigger picture. Psalm 78:38 says, “God, in compassion, did not destroy them, but held back anger, restrained fury, [and] forgave their sin.”<sup>4</sup> Jesus knows that God’s plan is to redeem all who will lay aside their pride and accept God’s offer of grace. He knows that some in that town will hear and respond to the good news. Grace intentionally leaves that door propped open.

Luke then lets us glimpse three people who consider following Jesus. The first bubbles with enthusiasm. “I will follow you wherever you go.” Disciples of rabbis lived in their teachers’ households, studying Torah. Jesus cautions the would-be student. Discipleship comes with no guaranteed security or comfort.

I identify with this eager person. I’m a life-long student. Sometimes, though, I audit a course instead of taking it for credit. When you audit, you get to enjoy the lectures and discussions, but you don’t have to take the exams or write the papers. I think we sometimes ask, “Can I follow Jesus but not sign up for the whole course? Can I just audit?” I think you know the answer.

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<sup>4</sup> *The Psalter: A Faithful and Inclusive Rendering from the Hebrew into Contemporary English*. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1998.

Jesus recruits the second person, saying, “Follow me.” What promise did Jesus see in that person? What gifts for ministry? The man’s reply seems reasonable. He asks Jesus to let him first go and bury his father. Honouring one’s parents is a sacred duty. Likely, his father was elderly; the man wanted to do the right thing and then, later, catch up with Jesus.

It’s a bargain we have all tried to make at one time or another. “Lord, my family is important...caring for them is a priority. I will give you my full attention when I can.” Jesus’ answer sounds harsh. “Let the dead bury the dead.” He means, “Let those who have not heard the call of the kingdom bury the dead. God’s life-giving mission is urgent. Go and spread the news of the kingdom of God.” Discipleship trumps even our noblest and most sacred human commitments.

The third person also offers to follow Jesus, but wants to tidy up affairs at home first. It’s not as simple as saying good-bye. There would be farewell feasts and receiving counsel from elders in his family: time consuming activities. Jesus answers him with a proverb: “No one who puts his hand to the plow while constantly looking back over his shoulder is suited for the work of the kingdom.” A person of divided attention can’t plow a straight line. Discipleship demands focus and looks straight ahead.

Most assume these three, having heard Jesus, choose not to follow him. Luke does not say that. We only know what Jesus told them—that life as a disciple is demanding; it relativizes all other priorities. We don’t know what they decided. By leaving it open, Luke invites us to put ourselves in their place.

What would you do?

We need to notice that Jesus does not invite people simply to hang out with him. He prepares and sends disciples to proclaim “the news of the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:60). We need to grasp what that means. It’s huge.

The kingdom Jesus is inaugurating is the fulfillment of the promise that God would redeem people and restore creation. From the beginning, this is God’s world. It’s a fallen and broken place. People get hurt and get lost. Some people abuse power and others suffer as a result. But it’s still God’s world, and Jesus came to get it back, to restore what is lost, to heal what is broken.

The message of the kingdom necessarily involves authority. Jesus makes claims. He asserts God’s rightful authority over all creation. There is no middle way whereby we can preserve our priorities and at the same time call Jesus Lord.

Jesus is central to God's reign and rule; therefore, discipleship is a priority. To preach the kingdom and live in terms of the kingdom is to announce and to embody all that God has made available because Jesus...has come.<sup>5</sup>

What has God made available in Jesus? First, new life, so radically new Paul exclaims it is "new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17). Second, a new community, people of the new creation, made up of all who lay down their self-sufficiency and welcome God's grace and authority. Third, the presence and gifts of the Spirit of God equipping the Church to participate in God's mission to the world.

And fourth, freedom to be a part of all that. Paul wrote to the Galatians—a troubled, fractious bunch of Christians—"For freedom Christ has set us free! Stand fast therefore, and stop allowing yourselves to be ensnared again by a yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5:1, my translation). He goes on, "You've been called out to freedom; don't waste your freedom by indulging yourselves; rather, use your freedom to continually invest in serving one another" (Gal. 5:13). He concludes by listing the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, endurance, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness and self-control (Gal. 5:22). They are the marks of the new creation community, the kingdom of God becoming a reality in our midst for the world to see. They are the fruits of freedom; they are the fruits of discipleship.

Jesus is a realist. He makes it clear that being his disciple entails conflict with the world's distorted values. Being his disciple also creates tension with our commitments to good things. But discipleship is the way to life. Jesus wants nothing less for those he loves. Our highest priority is obeying his call to live as citizens of the kingdom of God.

Prayer: Almighty God, you sent Jesus into the world that we might have life. Help us to hear him and give us courage to follow. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series, 1994, p. 185.

