

Luke 9: 51-62 Road Trip

Our opening verse from Luke tells us that Jesus is changing something about his ministry. As we read it today the phrase is very meaningful to us—we live in a post Easter world. We know what happens when Jesus gets to Jerusalem in the gospels. The disciples and those who have been following Jesus as he has wandered the Galilean countryside did not have this perspective. Luke, also post-Easter did. And Luke is letting us know that the following portion of his narrative has a more clearly defined goal and shape—“When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” Up until this point, although Jesus has crossed the Sea of Galilee and ventured into areas inhabited by Gentiles and Samaritans, he has not left the region of Galilee. He has been teaching and healing, bringing God’s kingdom near to those he encounters. He has also gathered those who have been chosen to continue his work. Now he is heading off to Jerusalem. The decision to go to Jerusalem is a pivotal point in the Gospel accounts, usually occurring near the end of an account. But in Luke we are only at the end of Chapter 9 and there are 10 more chapters before Jesus even arrives in Jerusalem. This journey of about 85 miles will take over 400 verses for Luke to describe. This journey is set apart from the time before it begins and the time when Jesus arrives in Jerusalem. For Luke what happens on this journey—this road trip—forms a unit and what happens within it is important to understand as a whole as well as what we learn from the individual passages about what Jesus is teaching those who follow—including us. Luke’s presentation emphasizes the itinerant nature of Jesus’ ministry while the gospel of Mark accomplishes traveling the same distance in one chapter—an express route. As Jesus goes on this road trip, the sites he visits are hard to place on a map—few places are named and the route makes no logical sense if the journey is simply about the destination. If Jesus has determined that the time is drawing near, if he has turned toward completing this purpose, why is Luke taking so much time and effort to describe the trip itself? Could it be that for this part of the journey unlike the very end, Jesus is not alone, but is accompanied by those who have been or want to be, followers. Perhaps it is about the lessons they need to truly learn. The disciples have been called and their training has begun as he has taught and healed. They have witnessed the power revealed to them; they have declared his identity as the Messiah; they have seen the transfiguration and been told by the voice from heaven to Listen to him. He has also twice told him that he must suffer and die. The disciple’s reaction to that news is not exactly an endorsement of the program, but this is the context in which this road trip begins. And the first stop we are told about does not seem auspicious for at least two reasons. Jesus has sent some messengers from those among the ones following him ahead to a Samaritan village. The village is not given a name and we are not told what in particular the messengers were sent to say or do in order to prepare for Jesus’ visit, but the result is that they did not welcome him. What Luke tells us is that the Samaritans would not receive him because his face was set to Jerusalem. This lack of hospitality may have been simply because of the hostility between those of the Jewish tradition who worshiped in Jerusalem while the Samaritans’ did not accept Jerusalem but worshiped at Bethel or Dan. Jesus makes no comment here about this refusal. But James and John, two of his disciples seem to be greatly offended. Their response is, “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” Once again we are reminded about how far from understanding the teaching of Jesus these followers are. We don’t know if the disciples

are channeling their inner Elijah feeling that they can call down God's wrath or not. What we do know is that they have forgotten what the voice from heaven had commanded them: Listen to him. Jesus has told them that they must love their enemies and do good to those who hate them. Now, sensing rejection by traditional enemies, they want to destroy the whole village. Not what they have been told. So we are told that Jesus turned and rebuked them and went on to another village. Luke does not name that village either. In fact, the next verses happen as they are going along the road. In these next few verses are three separate short responses spoken to three different people who make statements about wanting to follow Jesus. These are usually lumped together under a heading which Luke did not write describing them as being made by three would be followers of Jesus. The first someone says to Jesus, "I will follow you wherever you go." This sounds like someone who is committing to leaving everything, but what Jesus says to them is rather discouraging. Jesus responds with, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." In other words, following Jesus is not going to be easy; even without telling them that he is headed to Jerusalem to suffer and die. Following Jesus may lead to giving up possessions—even to the point of having no home. Luke does not tell us if this person then left or became a follower. The next exchange is begun by Jesus, who asks someone in the group walking with him to come and follow him. The response to this invitation seems to be agreement, but later. This individual replies, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." This often puzzles us, especially when Jesus then replies, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." That seems extremely harsh. This request was not as it appears to us to be one to go and conduct a funeral. Instead, this individual is saying he wants to go and fulfill the obligation of taking care of his father/family until their deaths before he becomes a follower. Jesus' response if taken literally makes no sense. The dead are not going to be doing any burying. However, those who are spiritually dead—are to be left to take care of those around them who are spiritually dead. This individual is to go and proclaim the kingdom of God. Again, we are not told the choice this individual made. The third set of verses represents another individual like the first who volunteers to follow Jesus, calling him Lord. But like the one invited to follow, he has some other things to do first—things involving saying farewell and ensuring that all is well back home. This person wants to follow, but later. Jesus' response is that "no one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." Again that seems harsh. But again, it reflects the call to commitment. Remember the first disciples called just left their nets. Practically speaking the reference to looking back while moving forward is pointing out that the path forward—or the row plowed—will not be straight if you aren't focused on where you are headed instead of where you have been. In all these cases, the heading title "would-be" seems to lead us to believe that these individuals did not become followers. But we are not told that. We have no idea whether or not they went back or continued on with Jesus. What they did was not important to Luke. Instead Luke is presenting the options for followers to consider. We are also presented with choices which following Jesus entails: listening to what he has taught, accepting that the choices may not be easy or convenient, and that the central choice is to place Jesus and his commandments at the center of all that we do. These choices are the ones given to us. Jesus was the perfect example of one who put his hand to the plow and did not waver. No followers of Christ—even the first twelve—have ever been perfect at practicing that flawless non-attachment or abundant love and forgiveness which Christ embodied. God

always calls people who are imperfect, who always seem to be making mistakes. We have things in common with all these situations. When James and John responded to the rejection by that Samaritan village in a manner so contrary to Jesus' teachings—Jesus did not throw them out of the group. He corrected them and righted their way. They had taken their hand and eyes off of the plowshare so to speak and responded with hostility from the past instead of the Jesus' way—the way of peace, love and reconciliation. It seems that the point made in these stories are not so much about those unnamed individuals as about us—about all of us that are would be followers of Christ. This is about the choices which we make daily. We are called to set our faces toward the kingdom of God; to embody the teachings of God's Son and be obedient to God's Will. While we try to do the will of God we will inevitably stumble. There are times in our lives when our road trip has obstacles which get in our way and we forget to face forward and move toward the goals and purposes that God has for us. But God is and always will be there for us. The point we need to take away isn't that we must be able to meet or achieve these criteria, but that scandalously redemptive, amazing living grace of God will enable us to complete the road trip in the company of Jesus. Thanks be to God.