

1Kings 19:15-16,19-21

Galatians 5:1,13-25

Luke 9:51-62

Year C, Proper 8 2025

With Faces Set Forward

Today's gospel lesson is one that can be fairly easily pictured in our minds. Jesus has planned to go into Samaria to teach but he decides to go straight to Jerusalem. **(Paint a verbal picture/icon of what is happening)** The disciples are with him and Luke tells us that *“the days are near for Jesus' ascension and that his face is set towards Jerusalem”*. In our picture Jesus' face looks gaunt and flint like as he looks toward the city with the domed Temple. Jesus does not see himself as a victim to the evil and violence he will encounter in Jerusalem. Jesus is ready to engage both Rome and the religious authorities, not with a sword in his hand but with strength that comes from a Source greater than all the armies of the world. Howard Thurman, the great prophet of the civil rights movement said, “Of all the weapons, love is the most deadly and devastating...” (Howard Thurman, Deep is the Hunge.) Jesus is not alone as he faces Jerusalem, he takes the Source of Love with him.

The disciples seem unaware of Jesus' focus. They have been on a mission to a Samaritan village They find that the people do not want to receive a visit from Jesus. There is an ancestral hatred between Jews and Samaritans. And now this

lack of hospitality triggers the disciple's anger toward the Samaritans. They are not like us. They believe differently. James and John, the sons of thunder ask Jesus, ***“Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume themⁱ?”*** But Jesus rebukes themⁱⁱ and they continue to journey to the next village. On the way they encounter a series of people who express a desire to follow Jesus. The first one seems committed: ***“I will follow you wherever you go.” “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.”*** Jesus tells him. Was this a lament on Jesus' part? Or maybe it is a sobering recognition that the world as it exists will never be a proper resting place for Jesus, and those who follow him. There will always be dissonance between the world and those who follow Jesus. If this scares you, I don't think you're wrong to feel that way. If you feel some anger or discouragement about this, I don't think you're wrong to feel that way. But the message of the Gospel is neither one of despair. nor escapism. Jesus who knew our weakness once knows our weakness still. And the admonition, that following Jesus, and pursuing the justice, the morality, the mercy, and the love that he requires of us would be a difficult road, is necessary for us to hear. Perhaps even more so as we face the world around us now. History, however, has shown us that difficulty is

not where the Church has withered or been defeated. It is in times of struggle and persecution that the Church has thrived, been the most alive, been most the Church. The key is to remember that Jesus has not abandoned us in this struggle with the world. Martin Luther's great hymn, *A Mighty Fortress is our God* gives witness to this in the words of the third verse: " *And though this world with devils filled should threaten to undo us; we will not fear for God has willed, his truth to triumph through us...* " Though this would be follower of Jesus backed away, we take heart and move forward with Jesus.

Another person comes along, with the intention of following Jesus, but he has a funeral to go to and family obligations to carry out. And yet another wishes to have a farewell party before leaving.

What does all this mean and how do we interpret it for our lives? Surely Jesus doesn't want us to become homeless and leave our families to follow him. One theologian puts it this way, The relations of father and mother, daughter and son, are not made irrelevant by our faith. "*The very fact that we speak of God as Father or as a Mother Hen shows that family relations give the very basis for understanding how we think about relationships as disciples.* " We seek to regard all human beings as brothers and sisters, as children of God, not because family is

disrupted by becoming a disciple but because family is disclosed through it. I love my biological family, but in following Jesus, I have found family in so many places and through so many people. You are my family, and I feel it each time I come here. The wonderful thing about following Jesus is that he gives us the whole world as our family. We have a huge system of siblings and just like family, some we like more than others! This is the richness of the KOG. You will be sharing this familial relationship with your new priest in charge soon and she will widen your world by introducing you to her family, and her world of associations. Every person who comes through those red doors to join us here, widens our world and our extended family.

Lastly Jesus says to the one who wants to go home to have a farewell party, ***“No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God.”*** In its context this is a saying about being focused and serious about something. A plowman is described as one “who attends to his work and drives a straight furrow. To look back from the plow was to risk cutting a crooked or shallow furrow and thus ruining the work altogether. Sometimes as Soren Kierkegaard has said, life needs the understanding of our history. But even though we look back for understanding, life must always be lived facing forward.

Sometimes the looking back at the past can hold us back. We look at the mistakes we have made, and those things plague us, make us weary and we can't move forward. When I give the blessing, I will often add these words: "*And be assured, God is infinitely more concerned with your future than with the sins of your past.*" This is the reason that Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem. He went there to offer his life so that we don't have to look back all the time and be held back by our sin. Jesus set his face to Jerusalem so that we can live with our lives radically and joyfully forward. Amen.

Sermon preached by the Rev. Martha Honaker on June 29, 2025 at Christ Episcopal Church in Sparta, NC

ⁱⁱⁱ Some ancient transcripts add: "*as **Elijah** did...*"

ⁱⁱ[Other ancient authorities read *rebuked them, and said, 'You do not know what spirit you are of, ⁵⁶for the Son of Man has not come to destroy the lives of human beings but to save them.*