

In the name of God, who created us, redeemed us, and sustains us. *Amen.*

“And Mary gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.”

These words from Luke’s birth narrative are so familiar to us, but not on a hot June Sunday! We’re accustomed to hearing them every year on Christmas Eve, and in the context of the birth narrative we’re touched by this reminder that our messiah was born in a stable because the inn was full and there was no other place for his parents to stay the night. “Away in a manger, no crib for his bed, the little Lord Jesus laid down his sweet head.” Some thirty years later Jesus set his face for Jerusalem, focused on what was ahead of him.

Luke tells us that the Samaritans didn’t receive Jesus for that reason: because he set his face for Jerusalem. Luke assumes that his readers know about the theological differences between Jews and Samaritans; that we know of the long conflict between these people. The religion of the Samaritans was similar to Judaism. Similar. But one of the significant differences was the Samaritans’ belief that Mt. Gerizim was the center of true worship. Not Jerusalem, as the Jews believed. When Jewish pilgrims pass through Samaria on their way to Jerusalem, they are not welcomed—even if the pilgrims are Jesus and his disciples. These men mean nothing to the Samaritans, except that they are Jews.

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, are by this time loyal disciples of Jesus and they are deeply offended by this rejection of their Lord and friend. But if Jesus is offended, he doesn’t show it. Maybe by this time he has grown accustomed to rejection. Maybe he is choosing his battles and chooses not to fight this one. We can’t know his reasoning, other than knowing that Jesus was not vengeful and he didn’t want his disciples to pursue revenge on his behalf.

So they head to another village, and along the way meet someone whose response to Jesus is directly opposite of the Samaritans’ response. “I will follow you wherever you go.” Luke doesn’t give us any backstory for this encounter and maybe that’s intentional on his part. My twenty-first century skepticism makes me think those words are heartfelt and well-intentioned but not well-thought-out. I can think of times words like those have escaped from my mouth. Can you? Kind of like “let’s have lunch” or “I’ll call you soon;” words we might say when we’re sincerely happy to see an old friend, but later realize the last thirty years without contact have left an insurmountable gap in our relationship. Or words like “I’ll chair that committee,” or “I’ll take charge of this project;” words that come back to haunt us later when we realize what’s involved.

Perhaps they seemed ungrounded to Jesus, too, because Jesus discourages the man. “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” Those words draw me back to the Christmas story. Thirty plus years after Jesus was born, he’s saying that he has nowhere to lay his head. But there’s a difference. Jesus knows that the easy comfort and security of “home,” are not a part of his life. He is *focused on what is ahead of him*, and his words to this man are like a question. “Are you willing to give up everything, including the comfort and security of home, to follow me? Are you ready to take on the hard stuff, even the things you really don’t want to do?”

In the next encounter, Jesus is the one making advances. “Follow me,” he says. The man doesn’t say “no.” He simply says, “first, let me go and bury my father.” That’s an honorable request, don’t you think? The Torah taught Jews to “Honor thy father and mother.” Jesus’ response is harsh. “Let the dead bury their dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” You know and

I know that the time to honor our parents is while they are living, while they can experience our relationship with them and know that we care for them. But when they're gone, we need time to grieve, to put their affairs in order, to get ourselves together again. And what would people think if that Beebe woman watched her father die and then just up and left. Did you know she didn't even wait for the arrangements to be made? What would people think if we did that!?

This is not about burying the dead, not really. It's about making a commitment and keeping it. We can understand the difficulty, because we have commitments that fill our lives, many of them bearing deep emotional implications. And we live in a time when people seem to shy away from commitments, particularly those that are voluntary, like civic commitments and church work. Is it because we're waiting to see if something better might come along? Or because we want to put our energy somewhere else? Or because our priorities are in different places?

That's not the case with Jesus. Thankfully for us, Jesus *is focused on what is ahead of him*, and he is not willing to allow anything to stand in the way—not family responsibilities, not job obligations, not social commitments, not even rest and relaxation—nothing. There is nothing more important, nothing more urgent than what awaits him in Jerusalem. What he is asking from this would-be follower is whole-hearted commitment, a commitment that receives top priority over everything else: an acknowledgment that if push comes to shove, if choices have to be made, Jesus can count on the follower to be with him.

The third man Jesus encounters in today's Gospel lesson is ready to commit, but first he wants to say goodbye to the life he'll be leaving behind. Gosh, I can understand that. Who knows when or if he'll see those folks again. He wants them to know he cares for them, that the life he has shared with them has meaning to him.

Some of you know what it's like to "leave it all behind." It requires adjustment; it can be lonely and unsettling to walk away from deep friendships. When we do, we can't be sure what our new lives will be like. The question to be answered is which has more meaning? The life left behind and all that is known through it? Or the life ahead that promises hope but is still unknown? Memories of what has been or hope for what may be? Unless we've been on the pushing side of a plow, we may not understand what Jesus means when he says, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." Here it is: if a person pushing a plow looks anywhere but straight forward, even while his feet are still following behind the plow, his furrow goes crooked. Jesus *is focused on what is ahead of him*, and he wants his followers to be also.

Author Jessamyn West said "The past is really almost as much a work of the imagination as the future." Our hearts and minds cannot be in two places without dividing us. If we become stuck in the past, real or imagined, we cannot live in the present; nor can we focus on the future. If our hearts and minds cannot let go of the past, it becomes an anchor that keeps us stuck, unable to move forward. That makes this Gospel lesson hard for some of us to hear. We don't really want to hear Jesus declare that to follow him, we must give up the things that matter most to us: family and home, security, all that we know, all that comforts us. It feels like we're being forced to make a choice, right here and now, and that giving up what is important to us can only cause us pain and unhappiness. But Jesus is calling us to follow him in joy and truth, promising us a life of abundant, unconditional love! Why do we fear it so much? What holds us back from giving our savior a place to lay his head—in our hearts, and on our minds!

Setting his face to go to Jerusalem, Jesus was focused on what was ahead of him. Following his example, that is where we should be focused also: not on what was; not even on what is; but on what will be when we wholeheartedly share his journey.

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*Amen.*