

Luke 9:51-62
Third Sunday after Pentecost
June 29, 2025

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Yet another said, "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Last week, our epistle reading from Galatians 4 included that wonderful Scriptural verse which highlights the time of salvation being at hand: "In the fullness of time, God sent forth His Son." It may remind us of those beloved words that begin Luke's narrative of the birth of our Lord, "And it came to pass in those days..." This morning, we hear something similar in the first verse of our Reading in this same gospel of Luke. Though the English *translation* says simply, "When the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up," the Greek more woodenly says, "And it came to pass in the completing of the days of his being taken up,"...

In other words, the first verse of our text is a pivotal point in Luke's gospel, a pivotal point that highlights Jesus' purpose and mission. In fact, it's the first of four main appeals in Luke's gospel to Jesus journeying toward Jerusalem (Just, 420). This verse sets the stage for everything to come – Jesus has his attention squarely on the cross; he *is* going to finish his course, for this is the whole purpose of His coming... this is the fullness of time; as Jesus journeys

to the cross, his sacrifice for our salvation is coming into plain view on the horizon.

And the whole theme of this journey is rooted in words of Jesus we know well, words from verses just before our text – “The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men.” We know those words well... said various times throughout the gospels. But, on this particular occasion, he introduces those words with this breath-taking admonishment: “**Let these words sink into your ears:** The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men.”

Let those words sink into your ears, and recognize how determined Jesus was to face the cross for your salvation... “in the fullness of time”, to journey to the cross, complete that journey of going to the cross and through the cross to his resurrection and ascension, that He might bring you with him to all the benefits and glory of His accomplishment.

And thus, he “sets his face to Jerusalem”, our text says, and sets the tone and tenor not only for *what* is to unfold, but also for *whoever* would follow him. Does he not call out: “Follow me.” On the one hand, that doesn’t mean you follow him to co-occupy his cross to help achieve your salvation. On the other hand, it doesn’t mean you follow in theory and mind only, assuming your body will always be safe as you follow in the shadow’s safety. Instead, follow him and therefore understand that you who are known by His Name will be received much like He is received.

And how is Christ received by our world? With delight, or with disdain? Our text begins by pointing out that – as Jesus sets his face to Jerusalem – the first who would receive him don't receive him at all! The Samaritans reject him, why? – the text specifically says, *“because his face was set toward Jerusalem.”* They want nothing to do with such a journey or such a Christ.

Of course, the disciples are indignant on his behalf – “Lord, shall we call down fire from heaven to consume them?” And why does Jesus rebuke them? Simply because they're not loving enough? Or, is it because they have the wrong expectation of how the Christ and his followers are going to be received?

He *knows* he is going to be rejected (he's getting the first taste of it in Samaria!)... And yet, he does not condemn the Samaritans, for he is headed to the cross to die for them, too. His mission now is not one of judgment but of salvation... of faithfully carrying out the Father's will, even as prophesied by Isaiah, wherein the Suffering Servant remains perfectly obedient, saying, “I have set My face like flint, and I know that I will not be put to shame.”

Christ knows he will be vindicated over all who reject Him. He need not have his followers become his vengeance-seekers. The day of judgment will come, but now it's the cross that is his finish line... and (St Paul says) Christ “despises the shame” that man assigns to the cross and instead glories in sprinting though that finish line of the atonement unto the joy of the resurrection and being taken up in the

ascension. And, all who are to follow him ought know that to set their face to glory can only be done rightly if they are willing to glory in the cross of Christ, that cross to which he sets his face.

But the disciples have the wrong expectation of how the Christ is going to be received. And, therefore, they implicitly have the wrong expectation of how *they* are going to be received. And Christ needs to rebuke them for such a theology of glory.

That's the whole theme of what follows. If his *own* disciples misconstrue how the Christ will be received, isn't the same true for *would-be* disciples? Would-be disciples are willing to follow when the path of the Christ seems glorious, when it fits their expectations, timelines, desires; but he sets his face to the cross, to suffering, to death in this world for His Church's life in the world to come.

Would-be disciples ought cherish Christ setting his face to their salvation and glory... But that salvation and glory is hidden behind the cross, and his followers must therefore follow by faith, not by sight. By sight, we only relish those things we see – temporal glories... but to follow Christ is to trust that He will unveil that which is hidden behind the cross, hidden in the life of the Church, hidden in Word and Sacrament... one day, it will all be revealed. But, for now, it is hidden in the cross and suffering.

But that means Jesus' would-be followers ought set their own faces to that promised eternal inheritance and not look back. Perhaps that reference – “He set his face toward Jerusalem” –

perhaps that is why Luke alone records Jesus' response to the third would-be follower: "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back" (in other words, 'whoever does not set his face to the path of Christ') "is not fit for the kingdom."

It's that "setting one's face" and being totally committed that the Old Testament reading shows through its focus on Elisha. We can get confused by the similar terminology of him plowing the oxen and even saying to Elijah, "Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you." And we say, "Wait, that sounds more like the would-be followers Jesus *corrects*, than it does a proper follower!" But, what did Elisha go and do: he didn't 'look back' and have a Plan B, saying, "Hold on to my oxen for me, just in case this prophet thing doesn't work out." No, he sacrificed the oxen, boiled the flesh, and ate the sacrifice with the people... and, in full joy, went after Elijah.

That scene in our Old Testament reading continues an image all throughout the Scriptures regarding those would-be followers of God, would-be trusters of Christ, either looking back or pressing onward with faith in God's promises. Already in Genesis, Lot's wife "looked back" (the Scriptures say) to Sodom and was turned into a pillar of salt.

At the other end of Scripture, the epistles highlight this theme repeatedly. Perhaps most famously, Paul says, "Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ

Jesus.” To the Galatians, Paul warns, “You *were* running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?” Peter reiterates the same warning to his hearers, saying of those who followed, then did not: “It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness than to have known it and then to turn away from the holy commandment passed on to them.” And, finally, the letter to the Hebrews quotes the Lord through his prophets, “The righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him.” And then, the writer to the Hebrews steels their spine: “But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.”

Yes, the entirety of the Scriptures speak of this reality – that the Christ came from God and set his face to the cross to complete his mission... and he calls his would-be followers to set their face on the same ‘theology of the cross.’ Do not be conformed to this world and its theology of glory, constantly looking back to make sure there’s no better hope for you back there, a more ‘profitable Plan B’... but to simply trust Christ, and live!

So, how do the three would-be followers of our Gospel Reading respond to Christ? Interestingly, the text never says – St Luke doesn’t record their responses. Perhaps more important than how *they* received Jesus’ theology of the cross is how you do!

That’s a more weighty consideration than it might at first sound. Because, as our text shows, to follow Jesus is not done merely

with the mind or with the heart, but with the body and life. We live daily life either according to the theology of glory and seek after and idolize all the vain pleasures and promises of this world, or we set our face to the promises of Jesus' cross... those promises of eternal salvation which carry with them promises of the world's rejection.

The famous Lutheran theologian of the mid-20th century, Hermann Sasse, said it this way:

[And] here lies the reason why the theology of the cross has such a terribly practical side – [a true daily-life side]. To believe in the cross always means also to carry [a] cross. A yes to the cross of Christ is also a yes to my [own] cross. If this is not so, we are only playing games.

It is not by chance that whenever Jesus spoke of His cross to His disciples He also thought of the cross which they would have to bear in following him.” (Sasse, We Confess, 52).

Hear that last line again: “It is not by chance that whenever Jesus spoke of His cross to His disciples He also thought of the cross which they would have to bear in following him.”

Isn't that exactly what we hear in the gospels? – as we began this sermon: “Let this sink into your ears: The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men.” Did he say that with such heaviness simply so that they could say, “Oh, great! Thanks for doing that. Hope it goes well for you!” No, but rather, consider – let it sink into your ears! – what that means for all who follow him. How many times do we hear the gospels record – including later in this gospel of

Luke – Jesus exhorting his would-be followers to count the cost of discipleship!

And yet, how often in world history is the true faith turned into a theology of glory, by which false prophets promise worldly power, reputation, success, wealth, your best life now – “It can all be yours if you just follow Jesus!”

No, if you follow Jesus, Jesus himself says, there’s a strong likelihood it won’t be yours. And you say, “Gee, Pastor, my life is pretty good: fairly well-off financially; good health; spouse, family.” But, what if (Job!) Christ calls you to follow Him into poverty, poor health, loneliness, the grave? After all, you were baptized into his death! Will you follow Him? Or, will you grow resentful and bitter? For if our Lord knew suffering and rejection in this world, why should the world treat his followers any differently.

But the focus of our text is not so much the world’s (or the Samaritan’s) *rejection*, as much as the would-be followers’ *preparedness* to know what they’re getting into.

- “I will follow you wherever you go” – then be prepared to not be welcomed even for a place to lay your head.
- “Lord, let me first go and bury my father.” “Leave the dead to bury their own dead... you confess to the dying the kingdom of God and the life it brings *over* death.”
- “Lord, let me first wrap up loose ends with family or finances”... “You cannot look back and plow in a straight line... you will ‘go

crooked'... to be fit for the kingdom of God is to set one's face only to the cross of Christ, the *key* to the kingdom of God."

How can Christ say such things and expect we can follow them? After all, he had to come and set his face to Jerusalem precisely because we could not. We could not save ourselves, and so the Christ is sent to come in perfect obedience, perfect resolve, and die the atoning death in our place and make us one with God.

So, it's tempting to rationalize, "Since he had to do it *for* me, he can't honestly expect me to now set my face 'with him'!"

And yet, as we've already heard, his apostles are constantly exhorting the church! But, they do so precisely because the Christ who died for us and thereby redeemed us has also – in the 'same breath,' if you will – promised and poured out His Holy Spirit to sustain, strengthen, and sanctify us.

Consider how Luther's Catechism explains it: "I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him." You might even paraphrase, "I cannot by my own reason or strength set my face in the theology of the cross and follow Jesus Christ my Lord."

"BUT" the Catechism continues, "the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith." Yes, there is why Jesus can exhort us followers to 'set our face' to the cross. For he knows He will give His followers the Helper, the Holy Spirit, to sustain us in this theology of the cross.

Could the epistle writers ever exhort the Church as they do if they thought the Church was dependent on its own strength? To the same Galatians, did we not just hear last week that “in the fullness of time, God sent forth His Son” to redeem us that we might be baptized into Christ’s saving death; and thereby God adopted us as sons and sent the Spirit into our hearts, crying “Abba! Father!”?

By the sustenance of the Holy Spirit at work in Word and Sacrament, we live by faith in the Son of God who loved us and set his face to the cross for us and gave up himself for us. In that theology of the cross, we know that “if the world hates [us], it hated [Christ] first.” So, we can expect a life of affliction, hardship, suffering, rejection – all that the devil and the world will throw at us – and we can expect Old Adam to grumble and shake his fists at God and need to be constantly reprimanded and silenced... and we can pray to God that He would temporally bless us with a quiet and peaceable life... and we can, in every situation, learn to be content... for ours is the joy of following Christ, ours is the joy of setting our face to his cross and desiring to know nothing but Christ and Him crucified... ours is the joy of the Church’s life in Christ... *veiled* in suffering here below, but *unveiled* in eternal life there above.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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