

“Setting the Course”

“When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.”

As a youth, I was not a very good Boy Scout, mostly because I wasn't a big fan of camping; but I got a second chance at Scouting during the summer between my second and third years of seminary when I was hired as camp chaplain at the Sabattis Scout Reservation in the Adirondack Mountains in northern New York State. This is a wilderness camp for advanced scouts, who set up their campsites, prepare their own meals, and engage in many of the outdoor activities that are central to Scouting. Many of the scouts who came to Sabattis were focused on earning merit badges, which is one of the requirements for attaining the rank of Eagle Scout, the highest honor in the Boy Scouts of America. When I wasn't leading worship or organizing other religious activities at the camp, I would observe scouts working on merit badges in a wide variety of areas, including one that particularly intrigued me called Orienting. As a lover of maps and directions, I was drawn to this course in which scouts were taught how to use a compass, how to read a topographic map, how to orient a map using a compass, and how to identify international control description symbols. Earning an Orienting Merit Badge would help a scout find their way and lead others across unfamiliar terrain to their intended destination, as well as giving them the skills to teach others in their troop and be a trusted leader in guiding others to where they desired to go.

Even if you've never been a scout or needed to use a compass or a topographic map, orienting is one of the central tasks in our lives. It may involve mapping out a trip, or setting an agenda for a meeting, or making a list of chores and tasks to accomplish, or setting educational or career goals; in many aspects of life, we may find that we need to orient ourselves to an intended destination or goal that we desire to meet or accomplish.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus appears to be involved in the task of orienting: *“When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.”* (Luke 9:51). This marks the beginning of a major section of Luke's Gospel in which Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, traveling to his “exodus,” as Luke had described in his account of Jesus' Transfiguration:

- “Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.” – 9:30-31.

Elsewhere in Luke's writings, “the time was drawing near” suggests a fulfillment of prophecy, setting the journey within the divine plan. Jesus is firmly resolved to go to Jerusalem where he will be “taken up,” fulfilling his prediction that *“the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”* (9:22). Luke's report that Jesus *“set his face to go to Jerusalem”* suggests a fixedness of purpose, echoing the song of the suffering servant in the prophecy of Isaiah: *“The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame”* (Isaiah 50:7). Jesus knows that his ministry is moving swiftly to its fulfillment; and *“the unswerving intensity, the destiny-oriented sense of Jesus' move toward Jerusalem, is essential for the reader to grasp the uncompromising demands that Jesus places on would-be followers.”* (Fred Craddock).

As is true with many journeys in which we encounter problems almost immediately, Jesus' journey to Jerusalem has a less than auspicious beginning. Jesus sent messengers ahead of him to prepare for his stopover in a village in Samaria, *“but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem.”* (9:53). Given the historic animosity between Jews and Samaritans (*“Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.”* – John 4:9), it is not surprising that the Samaritans would refuse to share hospitality with a Jewish traveler, especially one who is journeying to the Jewish holy city of Jerusalem. But this is not the first time that

Jesus experiences rejection in Luke's Gospel; his rejection in Samaria corresponds to the rejection of Jesus in his hometown of Nazareth, where his own people *"drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff."* (4:29). The rejection of Jesus in both Nazareth and Samaria foreshadow the rejection that lies ahead in Jerusalem, where Jesus *"came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him."* (John 1:11).

When his disciples James and John saw how the Samaritans had rejected Jesus, they become enraged and ask him *"Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?"* (9:54), recalling an episode from 2 Kings in which Elijah commands fire to come down and consume the soldiers of Amaziah:

- *"But Elijah answered the captain of fifty, 'If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty.' Then fire came down from heaven, and consumed him and his fifty."* – 2 Kings 1:10.

But the disciples have apparently forgotten Jesus' teaching on how his followers are to respond to rejection: *"Wherever they do not welcome you, as you are leaving the town shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them."* (9:5). Jesus rebukes James and John for an attitude of revenge and retribution, an attitude totally foreign to Jesus' ministry and to theirs:

- *"Misunderstanding the identity of the one they followed, the disciples mistakenly thought they could achieve his ends by violence ... They had yet to learn that violence begets violence, and that Jesus had come to break the cycle of violence by dying and forgiving rather than by killing and exacting revenge."* – Alan Culpepper.

The judgment of this disciples' prejudice against these Samaritans will come into sharper focus when Jesus tells a parable about a "good Samaritan," one who is held up as a model of what it means to be a good neighbor: *"Which one of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"* (10:36).

The journey to Jerusalem continues with a warning on the radical demands of discipleship; the call to discipleship is set above every other duty – whether care for self, care for the dead, or care for family. Jesus encounters three would-be disciples who appear eager to follow him. The first sounds like an ideal candidate, declaring that *"I will follow you wherever you go."* (9:57). But Jesus seems to be aware that this prospective disciple doesn't fully understand what "wherever you go" means. Jesus contrasts the security of the Son of Man with the condition of animals at the mercy of nature: *"Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."* (9:58). If the Son of Man has no place to lay his head, then neither will those who follow him: *"It would appear that he had some kind of expectation of a payoff for following Jesus, and Jesus rather bluntly confronts him with the truth that his expectation is unrealistic at best."* (Alan Brehm).

The second would-be follower is one whom Jesus invited to follow him. He responds by asking Jesus for permission to bury his father, which seems to be a reasonable request as well as a duty that was binding on all devout Jews (*"I would give my food to the hungry and my clothing to the naked; and if I saw a dead body of any of my people thrown out behind the wall of Nineveh, I would bury it."* – Tobit 1:17). But Jesus responds in a way that seems quite harsh: *"Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."* (9:60). There is a great deal of debate among biblical scholars over what Jesus meant; he may be referring literally to those who deal with corpses such as grave diggers, or he may be speaking metaphorically of those who are "spiritually dead," who have not come alive to the sovereign rule of God. Those who have responded to the call to discipleship are no longer dead but have been made alive in Christ:

- “And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your heart, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross.” – Colossians 2:13-14.

Those who are alive in Christ should concern themselves with life and the living, and therefore to focus on Christ’s call to *“go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”*

The third would-be follower also volunteers to follow Jesus but asks permission to *“first say farewell to those at my home.”* (9:61), another seemingly reasonable request and one that Elijah allows Elisha to do when he calls the young man to be his servant (*“He left his oxen, ran after Elijah, and said, ‘Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you.’ Then Elijah said to him, ‘Go back again; for what have I done to you?’”* – 1 Kings 19:20). But unlike Elijah, Jesus will not let his would-be disciple turn aside from the call to follow him even to bid farewell to his family: *“No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”* (9:62). Jesus’ saying would have been well known in the Mediterranean world; Hesiod’s *Works and Days* describes a plowman as one *“who attends to his work and drives a straight furrow and no longer gazes after his comrades, but keeps his mind on his work.”* Looking back from the plow (whether to family living or dead) was to risk cutting a crooked or shallow furrow and thus ruining the work altogether. *“There is no place for looking back or even trying to look in two directions at once (being “two-faced”); rather, would-be disciples must be single-minded in purpose, setting their faces like Jesus on the task at hand.”* (Mikeal C. Parsons).

Jesus’ harsh warnings to those who would be his followers serve as a warning that as his journey is oriented toward one single goal – the Cross and Resurrection at Jerusalem – their lives must share this same orientation. There can be no other focus, or orientation, or agenda for those who will accompany Jesus on his journey; if they are not willing to turn aside from all other commitments and priorities, then there is no place for them among the disciples of Christ. To be a disciple of Jesus means that one must be willing to pay the cost of discipleship, turning aside from everything else so that one might fully follow the one turned aside from all he possessed so that he might accomplish God’s will for all humanity:

- “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.” – Philippians 2:5-8.

When we orient our lives in a specific direction, we are at the same time rejecting other alternatives, other destinations or goals. If I decide to take a vacation in Grand Bend, I am rejecting the alternative of Niagara Falls or Muskoka. If I decide that I am going to spend my day off cleaning the house, I am rejecting going to the movies or taking a nap on my deck. If I make the decision to focus my studies on becoming a doctor, I have decided against the path that would lead me on another career path. Setting a course in one direction implies rejecting alternate courses – and this is also true if we decide to accept Jesus’ invitation to discipleship. One who decides to follow Jesus must count the costs of such discipleship, because discipleship implies obedience to Christ’s teachings and following the path that our Lord sets before us – not the paths or desires of our own choosing, that would accomplish or goals or fulfill our expectations. If *“I have decided to follow Jesus [there is] no turning back, no turning back.”*

- “The message of this unusual story is that following Jesus means the Kingdom of God takes priority over everything else in your life. Following Jesus means giving yourself away without thought of reward or recognition. It means serving the purposes of compassion, justice, peace, and freedom simply because it’s the right thing to do, not for any payoff. And to all who approach the task looking for a reward, or a payoff, or recognition, it would seem that Jesus warns them to do themselves a favor and not start something that is going to result in ... disillusionment and even bitterness” – Brehm.

As I watched scouts learning orienting skills, I thought back to my own failed attempts during my short and unremarkable career in scouting. We were given instructions on using a compass and topographic map, but as I was walking along the trail I got distracted by the beautiful scenery and took my eyes off the compass and ended up far from my intended destination. It is easy to become distracted along any path; one must focus where one is going and not allow anything to disrupt or deter the accomplishment of this goal. Those of us who are called to follow Jesus on the path of discipleship must also “set our faces” in the same way that Jesus set his face toward the goal of fulfilling God’s Will and accomplish God’s purposes so that our prayer that *“thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”* might come to fruition. Because Christ has made us his own through Holy Baptism and called us into the Church which is the Body of Christ, we are called to set our faces toward the goal toward which Christ set his face for the sake of all God’s people. Like Paul, we know that discipleship means *“forgetting what lies behinds and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”* (Philippians 3:13-14).

- “When we are called to follow Christ, we are summoned to an exclusive attachment to his person ... Discipleship means adherence to Christ, and, because Christ is the object of that adherence, it must take the form of discipleship. An abstract Christology, a doctrinal system, a general religious knowledge on the subject of grace or on the forgiveness of sins, render discipleship superfluous, and in face they positively exclude any idea of discipleship whatever, and are essentially inimical to the whole conception of following Christ ... Christianity without the living Christ is inevitably Christianity without discipleship, and Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ.” – Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

Boy Scouts who successfully complete the requirements for an Orienting Merit Badge are awarded their badges at a Court of Honor, in which their accomplishments are celebrated with the entire troop and their families. But the skills these scouts have gained in their orienting studies are not meant for merely this moment but are meant to be used throughout their scouting careers and throughout their lives as they set their courses for whatever goals they wish to accomplish. As disciples, Jesus’ followers sat at their Lord’s feet to hear his teachings on what it meant to be children of God; but these teachings were meant for the sake of discipleship, of following Jesus in serving all people and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. Our Lord continues to call us together to learn what it means to be God’s people in this place; but we witness to others the authenticity of our identity as the Church of Jesus Christ when our goals are Christ’s goals, when our course is set according to our Lord’s instructions, when our faces are set to where Jesus’ face is set – when we set our course to *“serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth.”* Amen.