

## PROPER 8, June 30, 2019, Year C

- Here are eight words from our Gospel reading that tell us *something profound* about Jesus: "...he set his face to go to Jerusalem." And *this is why*: when Jesus called people to follow him, it had everything to do with *the path he was already walking*. As he knew it would, the path turned out to be a *difficult* one. This helps us understand why *Jesus challenges us to walk with him, on his more demanding path*. He invites us to go *with him* through the *narrow* gate and follow his humble way.
- **Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem.** If you had to summarize the Gospels in a short sentence, this could do it. Especially for Luke. Luke *begins* his Gospel where it also *ends* ~ *in the Temple at Jerusalem*.<sup>1</sup> Following Jesus' Presentation there, just after his birth, Luke describes Jesus' return journey to the Temple when he is twelve.<sup>2</sup> From that time forward, as Luke reminds us, *Jesus is ever-headed toward the holy city of Jerusalem*.<sup>3</sup> All four Gospels convey a common story of his *mission*. *The Messiah goes to Jerusalem so God can redeem the world in a new way*. This is a big clue that *we should also direct ourselves 'toward Jerusalem.'*
- **Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem.** For him, it represents both *unconscious momentum* and *conscious decision*. Intuitively aware of *the probable cost, he goes anyway*. *The disciples* only discover this *along the way*. They *never quite* understand 'counting the cost' of following Jesus *until* payment is demanded. *It is at Jerusalem* ~ called *the city of God*, where the divine glory dwells *in the Temple*.<sup>4</sup> It is also a place of looming *adversity* and *conflict*. *Why?* Because *Jesus is not* a threat to *spiritual religion if it is truth-seeking*. *Yet, Jesus is* a threat to *worldly power*. Because, confronted by his genuine *spiritual authority*, *worldly* power appears as what it is ~ *empty*, yet *falsely alluring*.
- **On his journey, Jesus knows what lies ahead.** For him, Jerusalem means *one* thing, *challenge ending in death*. For others, a journey to Jerusalem need

not be anything like what it will bring for him. But for him, *it is his vocation*, his calling. He must walk *the Messiah path* toward the holy city, to fulfill the prophet's words that God will come suddenly to his Temple.<sup>5</sup> Walking this path will expose him to conflict – conflict brought by those who attach themselves to the periphery of holiness... to the accessories of religion.

- *Like an immense rock*, Jesus is so grounded in himself, and in his calling, that he cannot be shaken, or lured from following it. Centered in his godly identity, his presence and words have the power to shake everything else. He is *like the brilliant summer sun*, splaying its dazzling rays upon wax candles and dark chocolate, causing them to melt.<sup>6</sup> Jesus has this effect on some people, who shy away from him... at least until they gather enough courage with like-minded others, to try to *do away with him*.
- *The Spirit-of-God-power working through him has been for the good*: healing infirmity; casting out demons; bringing sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf; releasing lepers burdened by pain and isolation. These are *signs of the Kingdom breaking into the world with new power*. The message about these things comes to be called *Good News*. And yet, this Spirit-of-God-power in him will soon challenge *more than outward* symptoms of fallen humanity. *Soon he will challenge the foundations of another kingdom, the kingdom of darkness*. This is why the demons cry out at him, "*what have you got to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?*"<sup>7</sup> *Indeed, what have you to do with us, Jesus?*
- *So Jesus sets his face to Jerusalem. Luke wants us to notice how his vocation becomes the template for our vocation*. Jesus shares with us, and with everyone, *his calling*. This is *his vocation* to walk through this world as someone beloved by God, *as God's holy one*. The Father's words to him at his Baptism signaled this. And our heavenly Father says the same thing to everyone who accepts the gift of Jesus' vocation at Baptism – *you...you...*

*you are my chosen, my beloved*, upon whom my favor rests.<sup>8</sup> As we follow him, Jesus shares the purpose and power of his vocation *with us*.

- But then comes *the part we don't expect: sharing Jesus' vocation brings difficulty!* Like his, *our path may involve challenge and adversity*; even pain and death, like he experienced. We diminish the spiritual reality of his vocation if we say his death *spared us* from these things. For then, *when* we find ourselves in hardship, *we wonder how it could be*. This is why we are *attentive* to *our Gospel today*. For it *signals our calling to walk the way of Christ... which is the way of the cross*. Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem. And then, he translates his holy teaching, and his prior holy signs, into *a holy summons* to those who follow him. He *challenges* our complacent self-satisfaction, and *confronts* everything in us that forms an obstacle to God's Kingdom.
- As Luke tells it, "*when the time drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.*" By saying he will be 'taken up' Luke refers to Jesus' resurrection and ascension. This means he will move *from the world's incompleteness* to its intended *fullness*; from the realm of *shadow's* to the kingdom of uninterrupted *light*. *Just before this, Luke describes Jesus' transfiguration* into this same mystical light. In a moment of glory, Moses and Elijah speak with him about *his 'departure,' his exodus* that he *will accomplish in Jerusalem*. A voice from heaven again says, "*This is my Son, my Beloved!*"<sup>9</sup>
- Something powerful and saving is just around the corner, for him and for us. God will lift him up and, with him, all God's people who wish to join him. *Together, we are promised an ascension like Elijah* into God's nearer presence, *and an Exodus* of the Lord's beloved community into a new experience of *grace and favor*. But it will also be the way of the cross. Our journey into glory may be *like Israel's journey into the Promised Land*. And

so, it can involve suffering and death. *As before*, suffering and death will be *redemptive*. And just as before, *the suffering and death will be shared*. *The disciples are not prepared for this*. But then... come to think of it, *we are not much prepared for it*, either.

- *Setting his face toward Jerusalem*, along the way someone asks if it is possible to join him.

*"I'll go with you wherever,"* he said. Jesus was curt: *'Are you ready to rough it?...*

Jesus [then] said to another, *'Follow me.'* He said, *'Certainly, but first excuse me... I have to [arrange] my father's funeral.'* Jesus refused[!] *'First things first,'* he said to him. *'Your business is life, not death. And life is urgent: Announce God's Kingdom!'*

Then another said, *'I'm ready to follow you, Master, but first excuse me while I get things straightened out at home.'* Jesus said, *'No procrastination...You can't put God's kingdom off till tomorrow. Seize the day!'*<sup>10</sup>

- These brief interactions beg the questions that Luke wants us to ask ourselves: *Do we really want to follow Jesus?...* Are we prepared for *"the cost of discipleship"*? *How ready are we*, to set *our* faces toward Jerusalem?



James Tissot, *He Went Through the Villages on the Way to Jerusalem*

**Luke 9:51-62**

When the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up, *he set his face to go to Jerusalem*. And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" But he turned and rebuked them. Then they went on to another village.

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." *To another he said, "Follow me."* But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." *But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."* 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 a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

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Notes:

<sup>1</sup> See Luke 1:5ff, and 24:52-53.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 2:22ff, and 2:41ff.

<sup>3</sup> For Jesus' journey toward Jerusalem, see Luke 9:51ff, in today's Gospel reading, set in the context of the long section in Luke often referred to as "the journey to Jerusalem," Luke 9:51–19:27. Note how Luke reinforces the theme in 13:22; 17:11; 18:31; and in 19:11, and :28.

<sup>4</sup> For the theme of Jerusalem as the dwelling place of God, see for example Psalms 46, 48, 87 and 122, a theme echoed in Revelation 21:1-4, 9-14. It is not a coincidence that two of these Psalms and this Revelation reading are appointed for the Daily Office on the Eve of St. Peter and St. Paul, Apostles, which roughly coincides annually with the readings for this Sunday.

<sup>5</sup> See Malachi 3:1ff, which becomes a significant reference point for the New Testament, and which is cited or quoted in Matthew 11:10, Mark 1:2, and Luke 7:27.

<sup>6</sup> See Malachi 3:2-3, and its echoes in the Gospel Transfiguration stories.

<sup>7</sup> See Luke 4:34 and its Gospel parallels.

<sup>8</sup> Luke 3:22.

<sup>9</sup> See Luke 9:35 in context.

<sup>10</sup> Portions of our Gospel reading as rendered in *The Message* translation.