

Following Jesus On the Long Road to Jerusalem

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

With these words, St. Luke begins Jesus’s long journey from his home region of Galilee to his arrest, suffering, death, and resurrection in Jerusalem. Luke’s travel narrative is an epic tale, spanning eleven chapters, more than four hundred verses and many months of Jesus’s ministry. Jesus and the disciples don’t make the trip in a straight shot. If you try to track their journey on a map, the route is convoluted enough to lead some theologians to conclude that St. Luke, a well-educated Greek and, perhaps, a Gentile, was a brilliant writer who knew a lot about our Lord but had no clue about the geography of Israel and Palestine. And as so often happens in the Gospels, Luke’s story begins with the disciples piping up with a well-meaning comment that gets Jesus’s teachings exactly wrong.

At the beginning of this chapter, Jesus infused the disciples with his own divine power, then sent them out in pairs to proclaim the Kingdom, heal the sick and cast out demons. Everything went swimmingly, and the disciples came back thrilled with all they had been able to accomplish in Jesus’s name. That may be why, when a Samaritan village refuses to welcome Jesus, James and John offer to blast the inhospitable community with celestial fire. These two are, after all, the disciples who are nicknamed “the Sons of Thunder.” They may be thinking back to the prophet Elijah, who called celestial fire down to destroy the altar of the pagan god Baal in 1 Kings. I suspect, however, that the boys just want to blow things up. Having so recently wielded divine power, they may be keen to further explore its explosive potential. Fortunately, Jesus rebukes them – in some versions of this text, he tells his overeager students that he came to save people, not destroy them – and they continue on their journey, leaving the Samaritan village intact and its inhabitants unaware of how close they came to annihilation.

The Samaritans' refusal to welcome Jesus is nothing personal. They may not even know who he is. They deny him hospitality because he's an observant Jew. The Samaritans are acting on bad feelings that have existed between their community and the Hebrews for a very long time. Those same bad feelings are probably the reason that James and John think Jesus might want them to smite the Samaritan villagers on his behalf. He doesn't, of course – in fact, he responds to his enthusiastic young students in the next chapter with the Parable of the Good Samaritan. There's a message in this passage for James and John, however, and for us if we're willing to listen. Whatever talents, strengths, or gifts God gives us – and he gives each of us something, though not usually the power to call fire down from the sky – we're not to use them destructively. As Paul reminds the Galatians, God frees us so that we can become slaves to each other in love. His gifts are to be used to promote the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control that are the fruits of the Holy Spirit, even when we'd much prefer to bring his holy wrath down on someone who seems to deserve it.

The second half of our Gospel passage may not seem related at first. Three people approach Jesus about following him. We don't know much about any of them, but Jesus presumably does. He warns the person who offers to follow wherever he goes that the journey won't be safe or comfortable. When the second person responds to Jesus's invitation to follow with "Lord, first let me go and bury my father," Jesus says, "let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." When the third person agrees to follow but asks to say farewell to his family first, Jesus retorts, "no one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." While not outright rejections, these comments are surprisingly harsh, coming from our compassionate Lord. What are we to make of them?

The answer may lie in Luke's statement that Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem." Luke's choice of words tells us that Jesus isn't going for a pleasant little stroll. He knows perfectly well what will happen when he gets to Jerusalem, and he has to know how much it's going to hurt. We moderns might say that Jesus "squared his shoulders" rather than "set his face," but the idea is the same. Jesus sets out for Jerusalem determined not only to reach his destination, but to endure whatever he must to fulfill his saving mission once he gets there.

Some of my fellow clergy get almost giddy when preaching on this passage. They interpret Jesus's words to mean that his followers had better be ready to suffer just like he did if we really want to prove our faith. If we aren't eager to march into hell for a heavenly cause, we're not worthy to follow Jesus at all. That's one way to look at this passage, and no student of history can honestly deny that Christians have suffered various kinds of martyrdom over the centuries. Today, however, we live in a time and place where Christianity is mainstream, even dominant. Not only do we not have to suffer for our faith, but it's also hard to know how we could. There aren't a lot of evil emperors out there feeding Christians to their pet lions anymore. Yes, there are cynics who mock our faith, but their words carry no power unless we let them. We might get excluded from the odd party or laughed at by late night comedians, but nobody here is going to be martyred for our faith. Should we, then, try to court suffering so we can endure it as Jesus did? Based on how Jesus responded to James and John, I don't think so.

It's hard to imagine anything more drastic than setting an entire village ablaze with fire called down from the sky. Had James and John followed their instincts, the Samaritans would have lost their homes, and they would have suffered even more if they had been killed or injured in the flames. If Jesus hadn't stopped them, the Sons of Thunder could have inflicted massive,

harm on people who had been unwelcoming but hadn't actually injured anyone. That he stopped them confirms for me that God's power is *not* supposed to be used that way.

As for the three potential followers whom Jesus addressed next, they weren't exactly gung-ho. We know from The Book of Revelation that Jesus doesn't much care for lukewarm Christians, which may be why he's so stern with them. Notice, though, that he doesn't warn them that the path he's about to take will subject them to unbearable pain if they follow. There won't be a lot of four-star hotels, and his deadlines are too tight to permit much lollygagging, but that's about it. By definition, the crosses that we take up in his name are always smaller than his, because he's the only begotten Son of God who can carry far more than we can. Jesus endures agony that we never could, and he does it to make sure that we never have to.

So, to the extent that Christians go looking for pain, either to punish someone else or to signal our own virtue, we're on the wrong track. Jesus doesn't inflict pain or want us to suffer. Pain is simply part of life, and people get hurt whether they follow Jesus or not. Speaking for myself, though, when I'm determined to follow Jesus anyway, setting my face on him as he set his face toward Jerusalem, something miraculous happens. Painful things still occur but, by the Spirit's grace, I hurt less and recover faster. Soon, I'm ready to take the next step, following Jesus down the long, tangled road that leads back and forth across the world. Now as then, Jesus doesn't take a straight shot. He moves from injured soul to injured soul, gathering in those who willingly answer his invitation to follow. When we accept his invitation, our healing begins.

The road to Jerusalem is long and sometimes bumpy, Not everyone we meet will welcome us, and sometimes it may seem smarter to step away from the journey and focus on something else. Ultimately, though, wherever life takes us, we always live it better when we keep our faces set on Jesus. So, lead on, Lord. We'll follow. Amen.