

The Places You Will Go in Discipleship
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Chapel of St. James the Fisherman, Wellfleet, MA
The Third Sunday after Pentecost
2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14 ~ Luke 9:51-62



Photo by Tracey Lind, Cleveland, June 2013

In this morning's gospel reading, we encounter Jesus and his disciples as they enter an inhospitable village on the road to Jerusalem. Our patron James and his brother John, affectionately known as the Sons of Thunder, asked Jesus: "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" Jesus answered: "No, you idiots – Just kick off the dust and keep walking."

How many times did Jesus have to explain to his disciples that violence and retribution were not his way? Jesus' approach was both counter-cultural and demanding, especially for his disciples. That's why Dietrich Bonhoeffer spoke of the Christian faith as "costly grace."

Think about his response to three people whom he met on the road that day. To the one who said, "I will follow you wherever you go," Jesus reminded him that he would face a life of homelessness and insecurity. To the two who wanted to follow him but first had to take care of family obligations, Jesus expressed the urgency of *carpe diem*, insisting that there was no time for looking back.

To all who wanted to follow Jesus on his earthly mission, he demanded total commitment. This was not the sort of "family values" we often hear proclaimed in the name of Jesus. He was creating a different configuration of family, community and society. Scripture tells us that some followed and others declined his invitation; some fell away and others were left behind

As our friend and chapel member Peter Olsen wrote in this past week's post on his blog entitled [Peter's Outer Cape Portico](#), Jesus' words to these "would be followers" wasn't intended to be a rejection or a reflection on their character; nor was he suggesting that they would be excluded from God's commonwealth of love. Jesus was just telling them that they were not ready to be his disciples; they weren't prepared to make the sacrifices required to proclaim in word and action the good news of God's reign on earth, or in Peter's words, "to begin living into that reign in the midst of a world hostile to it."

Radical discipleship and costly grace didn't begin with Jesus. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the prophets Elijah and Elisha demonstrated the kind of discipleship loyalty of which Jesus spoke. Last Sunday, we read how Elijah was willing to die for the cause, and this week we read about how his disciple Elisha burned his plow, slaughtered his oxen, fed his family, and then followed Elijah a nonsensical journey of danger and sacrifice. When Elijah was on his deathbed, his disciple Elisha asked for a "double portion" of his teacher's spirit.

But then, after performing his first miracle (purifying water for a thirsty community), Elisha blew it. A group of little boys called him baldie, and he commanded fire to come down from heaven and consume them. Obviously, this new prophet had a lot to learn - just like James and John. But in the end, Elijah, Elisha, Jesus and the Sons of Thunder set their faces toward Jerusalem.

As I reflected on this morning's lectionary, I am reminded of the book, *Oh, The Places You'll Go*. Despite the cultural controversy over Dr. Seuss' outdated and sometimes insensitive caricatures and stereotypes of racial, ethnic, cultural and gender differences, and despite current opinion that there are far better books to give highschool graduates, I still think Dr. Seuss has some value on the shelves of our lexicon. For, with the wisdom of the ages, in his last book, Dr. Seuss talks about what happens when we turn our faces towards Jerusalem. He writes:

We'll come to places where the road is not marked
to places where the road becomes very dark
And when we do,
we'll get confused
and we might get stuck
And then we'll wait
until we can make our great escape
Sometimes we'll find ourselves leading the band
as the drum major
and other times,
We'll be a lone drummer
Some places we go will be very scary
and problems very big
But eventually,
we'll get where we're supposed to.

One of the things upon which Holy Scripture and Dr. Seuss agree is that it's never a straight line from point A to point B. The road to Jerusalem is full of dangerous curves and sharp turns.



Photo by Tracey Lind, The Camino de Santiago, 2009

As I learned walking the Camino de Santiago, when we're in the middle of a tough part of the road - when we seem like we've lost our way and we're roaming about in the wilderness of a detour - we tend to forget that this is still part of the journey.

For better or worse, the Bible is compressed and succinct. We don't get a lot of descriptive details about the lives and experiences of our biblical ancestors. We don't hear much about the detours on the road. We don't read a lot about Moses' time living in exile with Jethro, or David's youth as a shepherd boy; and we are not told much about the first thirty years of Jesus' life, James and John's work as commercial fisherman, or Paul's vocation as a tentmaker.

I always wonder what those hidden years were like. What were their struggles, questions, and failures? What were their curves and obstacles on the road? What were their detours and stuck places?

Paulo Coelho, one of Latin America's most popular writers, imagines the struggles of Elijah's untold journey in his book *The Fifth Mountain*. It is the story of the prophet's time with the widow of Zarephath.

According to *The Fifth Mountain*, a lot happens in three years. Elijah took up carpentry. He fell in love with the widow and helped to raise her son. The leaders of the city tried to kill him. The Assyrians sacked the city. Elijah helped to rebuild the city and its people. And then, setting his face toward Jerusalem, he returned to Israel.

Just before departing, Elijah - who had, after the siege of Zarephath claimed a new name, Liberation - took the widow's son alone into the wilderness. And, on the top of what was known as the Fifth Mountain, he spoke these words:

I cannot forget my name [Liberation]. I must continue with my task. That was why [our city] was rebuilt, to teach us that it is necessary to go onward, however difficult it may appear... Tomorrow, when I depart for Jerusalem, my sadness [in leaving] will not have the strength it had before, and little by little it will disappear. Sadness does not last forever when we walk in the direction of that which we always desired.

"Is it always necessary to leave?" asked the boy.

It's always necessary to know when a stage of one's life has ended. If you stubbornly cling to it after the need has passed, you lose the joy and meaning of the rest. And you risk being shaken to your senses by God.

The Lord is stern, said the boy.

Only with those God has chosen, replied the prophet.



Photo by Tracey Lind, Wellfleet, August 2017

Jesus said, “Many are called; few are chosen.” Accepting the call to discipleship isn’t easy. When we hear the inner voice and answer the call of our heart, we often leave behind the comforts of home, bid farewell to family and friends, forfeit one’s own freedom for what Paul calls “Christ-freedom.”

Think for a moment about how you’ve followed such a call in your life. Who and what have you left behind? What comfortable habits have you forfeited? What familiar roads have you turned off? What detours have you taken? How have you traded your freedom for a higher calling?

For most of my active ministry, I was a witness for peace, justice and inclusion, and at times, it was painful and costly. After visiting Nicaragua and El Salvador during the 1980's Contra War, I preached about the gospel at work in that revolution, and I was called naive. During the Episcopal Church's 1995 heresy trial, I spoke up as an openly gay priest, and I received a lot of push back and hate, including a couple of death threats. I even got kicked out of the local clergy association and was condemned by "colleagues" with whom I had worked side-by-side for many years. After 9/11, I invited a local imam to read from the Koran during Sunday worship, and some parishioners got upset and withdrew their pledges. As a nominee during more than one bishop's election, I spoke up for open communion, and it didn't go over very well. And a few years before retiring, I joined with other ecumenical leaders in blessing an abortion clinic and was publicly reprimanded by my bishop. In all of those instances, I was disheartened. I once shared my frustration and loneliness with a colleague who responded: "What do you expect? You follow and serve in the name of a guy who was crucified." In a strange way, that remark gave me some comfort and reassurance.

Walking the way of Jesus in what is an increasingly polarized society is complicated. And it's at the heart of so many political debates. For instance,

Should local school boards arm teachers and fund complex and expensive security systems to "harden" our schools, or should our government enact legislation that will actually reduce gun violence?

Should state legislatures seek to reverse gay marriage or deny the right of LGBTQ+ youth to be themselves, or should they affirm loving relationships and protect all of God's children, even at the discomfort of those who don't understand sexual identity and gender difference?

Should our country build bigger and better walls at our borders, or should Congress hammer out an immigration policy that welcomes the stranger at our gates and receives their gifts and talents?

Should our nation abolish women's reproductive choice, or should we honor a woman's stewardship of her own body and figure out how to live with the ambiguity about when human life begins?

How is a follower of Jesus called to respond to these provocative and divisive issues at the forefront of our national debate? Do we keep silent in order to maintain the status quo; do we trust that it will all work out; do we give in to the myth that we can't affect change; or do we speak up at the risk of anger, rejection, and possibly harm? In short, will we be bystanders or upstanders?

In the last few days, the public tension over the social issues of our day has increased ten-fold and the stakes have gotten more serious. Within hours of the Supreme Court decision on Roe v. Wade, my home state of Ohio enacted the heartbeat bill, which outlaws abortion (with no exceptions) at six weeks - often before a woman even knows she is pregnant. Two weeks ago, our state legislature passed a bill to allow open carry without a permit or background check. Legislation has been introduced that would ban teaching about sexual orientation, gender identity and critical race theory in public schools. And, as we speak, there is now a bill in the state legislature that in an effort to block transgender girls from playing on female sports teams, says if a participant's sex is disputed, she must verify her sex with a physician by an examination of her reproductive anatomy, a test of her testosterone levels, and an analysis of her genetic makeup. Ohio was once a moderate, bell-weather state that is now turning well to the right, and it's not alone.

The public debate is very heated on a number of different fronts, and it's frightening for many of us as we fear the reversal of civil liberties, environmental rights and economic justice. But, what if this dark place is a detour in our country's journey as a land of welcome, freedom and liberty for all? What if you and I are being called by God to help get us back on the path towards justice, inclusion and equity?

As you ponder your response to my questions, I encourage you to recall your baptismal vow to "strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being." In doing so, you might just have to be an upstander.

Just remember, Jesus never promised his followers that discipleship would be without cost. After all, we follow a leader who was rejected, arrested and executed. But he did rise again!



Photo by Tracey Lind, February 22, 2020