

At the turning point of C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, several key characters encourage each other with reports that Aslan, the great lion and ruler of Narnia (the God figure in the series), has reappeared to fight the evil witch. Their words of encouragement to each other are as potent as they are succinct: "**Aslan is on the move.**"

Something similar is happening in our gospel reading—it marks the beginning of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. Having preached and taught and worked miracles throughout Galilee, Jesus now changes his focus; he "*set his face to go to Jerusalem*"... and the next 10 chapters chronicle, for us, his steadfast but long, drawn-out journey there. From this point forward, Jerusalem is the goal... and **Jesus is on the move.**

To "*set his face*" speaks of unwavering determination / focus / resolve, especially in the face of opposition. It implies a fixedness of purpose, even in the prospect of danger / difficulty. Think of it as "a clenched jaw" ... a "quiet persistence" that will not be deterred from its chosen path, no matter what. **Jesus is on the move.** He is determined to do what he has come to do—to bring salvation to all people. And he will not let anyone or anything get in his way or deter him from the path he must travel – to Jerusalem... and to the cross.

With such determination / resolve, we would expect to find Jesus taking the most direct route to Jerusalem... that from this point on in his journey, there will be no relaxing, no detours, no interruptions; but that isn't exactly true. This journey that Jesus is now embarking on is more of an odyssey of sorts. Along the way, Jesus will stop to visit friends... and be a frequent guest in different homes... and he will do a lot of teaching while sitting with others at the dinner table. So, if time is not of the essence, then what is?

Up to this point, Luke's primary focus has been on Jesus' identity. After Jesus raises the widow's son in Nain, the people ask: "*Is this man a prophet sent from God?*" When he forgives a sinful woman, the people ask: "*Who is this man who even forgives sins?*" When Jesus calms the storm at sea, his disciples ask: "*Who is this, who commands the winds and the waves, and they obey him?*" When he heals the Gerasene demoniac, the people ask: "*Who is this, who has power to cast out a legion of demons?*" Following these various encounters, Jesus turned directly to his disciples (in 9:20) and asked them, "*Who do YOU say that I am?*" to which Peter replied: "*You are the Messiah of God.*"

Now, *if* the life of faith were as easy as figuring out *who* Jesus is, the gospel story could have ended with Peter's confession. But discipleship is more than simply answering the question of "*Who is Jesus?*" correctly. Jesus calls disciples to follow him... to become like him... to live like him. So, from this point forward, Jesus will focus his ministry on teaching his followers (which includes us!) what it means to be people who bear his name...

Jesus' journey to Jerusalem begins with opposition / rejection—the Samaritans would not receive his disciples (and in so doing, they also refused him). If you remember, as Jesus began his ministry in Galilee, his own people rejected him, too. It's clear that Jesus will not be received with open arms by the world that he is determined to save.

These rejections—first, among his own people... now, among "outsiders"—foreshadow the rejection that we all know lies ahead for Jesus in Jerusalem—for Jerusalem will not receive Jesus either.

- In what ways (big or small) do we also reject / turn away from Jesus?

I guess a piece of us might appreciate the righteous anger of James and John over the Samaritans refusal of hospitality to them. They're being protective... standing up for Jesus and his ministry, right?! Or is their anger more about them?

To their credit, they remember a scriptural precedent for calling down heaven's fire to consume those with obstinate hearts—that *is* what the prophet Elijah did against the priests of Baal (2 Kings 1:9-10). The trouble is, they don't seem to remember Jesus' recent words to "*accept the hospitality offered to you... if none is extended, shake the dust off your feet and move on*" (9:1-6).

**Isn't it interesting how we so easily remember and hold onto those scriptures which seem to excuse and even bless our worst behaviors... and yet we cannot (or choose not to) remember / hold on to those verses that call us to the kingdom way—of love, and forgiveness, and mercy toward others—that Jesus proclaimed?

Jesus rebukes John and James for their attitude of revenge and retribution—these attitudes, Jesus tells them, have NO PLACE in his ministry... or theirs. Jesus' journey to Jerusalem is not a triumphant march, sweeping all resistance aside. It is the slow and steady movement of the good news of God's kingdom and way—the message of love... and of a grace so strong, so expansive, and so surprising, that many find it shocking.

With the next series of verses, the emphasis turns to *following* / to discipleship. Jesus has already set the stage for this call *to follow*, using words like: "*Deny yourself*," "*Take up your cross daily*," "*Lose your life in order to find life*."

In the 3 vignettes of "would-be followers" that come next, these words of Jesus get translated into specific circumstances... where the potential follower's sincerity / depth of commitment is put to the test. On the surface, each response seems reasonable, even appropriate; but in each case, the would-be follower has a condition attached... they say "*Yes... but...*" – putting off the call to follow Jesus.

Remember, **Jesus is on the move...** and he cannot / will not be drawn away or kept from his purpose—for any reason. He speaks in hyperboles / exaggeration here for emphasis... to make his point. Jesus has set his face like stone... he has no bargains to offer... his expectations are high!

The first would-be follower makes the grandiose promise to follow wherever Jesus goes. Jesus' response makes it clear he has no idea what he has just promised. "*I have no place to lay my head at the end of the day*," he says.

**Most of us would agree that following Jesus is primary to our faith. The big question is: What does that mean?

- How are our lives different as followers of Jesus that they might have been otherwise? Does our relationship with Jesus make a noticeable difference in how we live each day?
- Does the grace, love, and mercy of God shape our lives? or do we shape our faith to fit the lives we've already planned?

Jesus lets us know that following him will not be easy. "*If you follow me, your life won't be filled with creature comforts... you may even find that you have no place to call home*" Jesus says. Discipleship means

never truly feeling “at home” in the world / culture around us. It means “going against the grain”—because Jesus’s way is very often counter-cultural.

To the second would-be disciple, Jesus says, *“Following me takes priority over everything else – even your family and the obligations that go with that.”* It seems like a reasonable request, for this one to first go and bury his father—was this a way of “putting off” following until later? *“Let the dead bury their own dead...”* Jesus says.

To the third would-be follower, Jesus says, *“I expect more from you than the prophet Elijah asked of Elisha.”* What seems on the surface to be a reasonable request is actually another obstacle to following. *“You can’t keep putting this off. The time is NOW!”* Jesus says. *“No procrastination. No backward looks.”*

Few of us have worked the land with plow (as they did in Jesus’ day); so we may not appreciate what happens if you’re trying to plow a straight furrow and then look back to see how you did. Looking back always means veering off course... making a mess of the rows.

Jesus’ call to discipleship has never been (nor will it ever be) an easy / casual call. The life of discipleship cannot be a part-time or momentary commitment. We cannot follow Jesus in only one corner of our lives. It is a life-changing shift – in both direction... and in priorities—every hour of every day in every part of our lives.

These scenarios invite us, I think, to consider the ways that we, too, make excuses... and put off... and try to “negotiate” / bargain over the terms of our discipleship. *“Yes, Lord. But can it wait? Can I slot you in later once I get some other important matters off my plate?”*

- How much are we struggling to look forward to where Jesus is leading because we are looking backward to a reality long gone?
- Where is Jesus asking us to travel—not yesterday but tomorrow?
- Are we ready to follow Jesus where he leads... without looking back?

Let’s be honest, as humans we are distracted... and we need to unravel ourselves from the things / priorities of this world... in order to truly follow Jesus.

Our desire for comfort and control... for fulfilling our obligations / responsibilities ... for doing things “our way” and in “our time” ... are often higher priorities than following Jesus. We might be willing to give up some “evils” in our lives in order to follow Jesus, BUT to give up good things... to relinquish our control... to put them as a lower priority than Jesus? That’s hard. But maybe that’s just the point. When he *“set his face to go to Jerusalem”* ... he didn’t let anything get in his way... he completed this journey that led to his death. He did it FOR US!

Dear friends, we are invited to follow this One who showed us how to live... and who gave his life FOR US! It is the power of his love that draws us to him. It is his Spirit that empowers us for lives of discipleship... who turns our faces back toward Jesus when we get distracted / veer off course... who frees us from the ways of this world (and from our own self-centered natures)... to be who God created us to be / to live as God wants us to live.

Over the course of this summer and into the fall, Jesus will be teaching us about God's kingdom... and a new way of being in the world. As we encounter these stories / parables, keep in mind the urgency and "fixedness of purpose" that Jesus embodies here. Through his teaching... through his ministry... he will be introducing us, once again, to **the God who** seeks the lost and cares for the broken and bruised... **the God who** puts mercy ahead of the law, compassion before custom... **the God who** forgives sinners and welcomes ALL PEOPLE to the table.

This God is never what we expect... yet is exactly the God this world needs.

Amen.