

Setting Your Face Luke 9: 51 -62

Setting your face – it is an expression of destination and determination, purposefulness; it is an expression of direction and it gives shape to work. It is an old fashioned expression – one from the ancient world – think: “and Odysseus set his face on sea and the quest was begun” or as it appears in the words of the prophet Isaiah – “I have set my face like flint.”

“And Jesus set his face on Jerusalem” – he was determined to go there – he is headed toward the cross. No one is going to be able to talk him out of it. No one will alter this destination. He has set his face.

There has always, for me, been a twinge of stubbornness surrounding this expression. “Setting your face” has always reminded me of that distant relative or church member, usually a far off great aunt somewhere, who makes up her mind and will not be moved. “I said it, I’m going to do it, that settles it.” Like the captain who goes down with the ship, she holds her course. This is background music for most family tragedies I am afraid – the inability to adapt, the resolve to remain immutable. Colleen and I know of a family where a mother has not spoken to her daughter, and the daughter not spoken to the mother, in four decades. Such pain can come when a face is set too stubbornly.

Of course, some of our most enduring moments happen because someone refuses to give up or give in. “Setting your face” in this regard carries a twinge of faithfulness of heroic resolve. “I’ve said what I said, and I meant what I meant and an elephant’s faithful 100 percent,” repeats the elephant Horton. In both the children’s book and the movie Horton’s face is set, he not only hears the Who’s in Dr. Seuss’ classic, he resolves to save them and protect them at the expense of his own reputation. He doesn’t quit taking care of them even though everyone thinks he has lost his mind. His face is set – he will protect his friends – no matter the giggles or the barbs of insanity.

Jogging yesterday I heard about a woman named Ann Bancroft who has made many, many expeditions to both the North and South poles. Indeed, the native Minnesotan was the first woman to ever make both Poles and holds more records and more fame than most anyone else in the field of polar exploration. She was asked about her first trip to the North Pole – a trip she took alone, one woman, with 7 men and 49 sled dogs. A trip with 7 men and 49 sled dogs? That is determination – that is setting the face.

Indeed, determination like this has always been a back story of the Christian life – missionaries venturing into the centers of far off continents, people taking refugees into their homes in the face of sure prosecution, protesters standing outside embassies and women’s clinics with Bible verses blazing. The old hymn is one of “face setting” determination – “How firm a foundation ye saints of the Lord is laid for your faith in God’s excellent Word – that soul that all Hell should endeavor to shake, I’ll never, no never, no never forsake.”

Our past is full of face setting moments and people, is it not?

I wonder: what do we, in our lives, set our face towards? So often our goals are limited by expectations and obligations, so I am curious do we emulate Jesus and strike out with determination into actions of courage and faithfulness?

Well to begin with, I do think we have a hard time in following Jesus this way because there is nothing direct about how Jesus goes about getting to Jerusalem, and getting to the cross. Jesus takes a circuitous route to Jerusalem, it is anything but direct here in Luke's gospel.

To give some shape to what I am trying to say, you'll note that we are here in Luke 9 – where Jesus sets his face for Jerusalem – and Jesus will not arrive in Jerusalem until Luke 19.

Scholars, preachers, teachers have for years tried to put some shape around Jesus' journey but it defies simple mapping¹ – not even map quest or google earth can make much sense of it! Jesus goes over the river and through the woods, hither and yon, to and fro between Luke 9 and Luke 19 – repeatedly predicting the crucifixion, repeatedly stopping to teach and heal, repeatedly getting sidetracked from his destination. Personally I thank God that Jesus doesn't race to cross here in Luke 9 – I am so thankful for the 10 Chapters (basically half of Luke's gospel) that happen between Luke 9 and 19. Why? Because of what happens, because of what is taught – the parable of Good Samaritan, the Sermon on the Plain, the Parables of the Lost including the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the healing of a woman referred to as a “daughter of Abraham” the calling of Zacchaeus. So much happens!

No, we don't travel this way. We don't plan this way. We modern people are all consumed with the destination and the direct and expeditious way of arriving at it. We like interstates and drive through, we prefer the microwave to the crock pot. One might say that the value the journey for the fact that we arrive at our destinations and that we have a very hard time valuing the journey for the sake of the journey itself.

No, we don't travel this way very often, at least by choice. But take heart in this much: Jesus is not concern with the physical distance, I do not believe. His journey is not so much a physical journey as it a spiritual journey. It is not so much a mission as it is a pilgrimage.²

I once met this interesting lady, Lynn, an Anglican Priest from Canada. She was down in Atlanta doing a Doctoral project on Pilgrimages she was convinced that the recovery of the Christian church was related to the recovery of pilgrimage.

Really? I thought.

¹ Craddock, *Luke* page 142 - 144

² Craddock consistently describes it as mission – “the mission moved on” – but I like the idea of pilgrimage better. I believe this is faithful exegesis and homiletical approach.

When we think of pilgrims we tend to think of stern, black shirted fellows with muskets and odd-looking hats. Pilgrims say Thee and Thou and wear square shoes. They are stern people with drawn-up faces.

As a child the only pilgrimages I took were to Popeye's fried chicken, when it was only in New Orleans and it was the only place to get spicy chicken, and it was a special place.

Suffice to say that Popeye's has lost much of its charm and it is somewhat less than a religious experience. Louisiana fast is not nearly as good as Louisiana slow.

Kidding aside, Lynn believed that the religious discipline of travel, travel not only towards a destination, but travel rooted in prayer, teaching, and worship would be renewal for the church and renewal for the soul.

Classically speaking when we think of pilgrims, one thinks of *Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan, or of the *Canterbury Tales* by Chaucer, or Boccaccio's *Decameron*. All of them stories about pilgrims on pilgrimages, journeys of self-discovery and journeys of religious devotion to God.

When you study pilgrimages you discover that they do not go on direct paths. Instead of driving 64 into Raleigh they take you to Elm City, and then Lizard Lick, North to Bunn, and West to Wake Forrest. They get you there, but not quickly.

The pilgrim understands this. She knows that the value of the journey is partly the journey itself. Whether they are to a religious site, a battlefield, or monument – they are mainly about the journey to discovery that accompanies the experience at the end. The longest pilgrimages in the world take months and months. Some of them in Buddhist practice journey to the roof tops of the world in India and Nepal. Some of them, like the Haaj in the practice of Islam, are required acts of religious devotion and obligation.

What about us? Typically speaking Presbyterians are not pilgrimage folk. That is probably why I first scoffed at Lynn's suggestion. Our thinking has always been "just get to the point." It is one of the reasons why Presbyterian weddings are traditionally much shorter. She is saying yes. He is saying yes. Let's pray and get on with the day.

But that is not the example that Jesus gives. No, not at all. His pilgrimage is to Jerusalem, his holy site. His pilgrimage is to the cross, his holy obligation. And each and every moment for him in this journey is a moment of teaching and discovery.

Take for example the first moments after he "sets his face" – he journeys into Samaria. Here he finds no welcome – the Samaritans see only another Jew, a Jewish teacher. Just so you'll know, the indemnity between the Samaritans and the Jews was so terrible that Josephus the Roman Historian noted it in his writings.³ Here Jesus is rejected and in verse 54 (one of my favorite verses in Luke) James and John say, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down and obliterate them? Can't we just wipe them out?"

³ James Thompson – *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 3 page 193.

Amazing verse. Reminds me of *Apocalypse Now*, “I love the smell of Napalm in the morning.” Or of the scene in *Forrest Gump* where Forrest is running through the jungle trying to save Bubba – raining down fire is a terrible punishment for the rejection of Jesus. James and John just want to be like Elijah, who rained fire down upon messengers from the King once when they did not do the bidding of God (II Kings 1: 9 – 10).

What does Jesus do? He rebukes them. He rejects business as usual.

What does the king do when he is wronged, what will the Messiah do? Will he force his will by violence? No. He will not. He knocks the dust off his feet and he moves on. Consider the first pilgrimage lesson learned – this Lord will be different than Elijah, different than the Kings of the earth who exact a mighty revenge.

Next Jesus is walking – “I will follow you wherever you go” – oh, this promise. How many times has it been made and broken?

Really – Jesus asks – and then he teaches pilgrimage lesson two – “foxes and birds have homes, but I have none – I am homeless” – are you willing to be homeless too? That is what Jesus is asking the person, that is the response Jesus makes to the empty promise that is offered to him.

Then Jesus takes on stumbling blocks to discipleship – commitments from the past, and the necessity of the present.

The past: “Lord I will follow but first I need to bury my father.”

The present: “Lord I need to say goodbye to those at home.”

Make no mistake about it. The response of Jesus here is Jesus at his toughest. His pilgrimage teaching here is harsh at first glance – “let the past take care of the past, let the dead bury their own” -- and, “No one who is worried about their crops today and not worried about the kingdom right now is going to be fitted for God”. Following me will not be easy – the road to Jerusalem is hard, hard, hard. Pilgrimage lessons three and four have been making folk cringe for two thousand years, and understandably so.

Jesus is a demanding pilgrim. Nothing can draw him away from his destiny – his destination. His face is set. He is asking that their faces be set too. Jesus’ requirements to join him on the pilgrimage are awfully high.

Wow. Wow.

I wonder: what do we, in our lives, set our face towards?

Would we go on this pilgrimage with God?

Today our congregation faces a decision. A decision which will begin a church-wide pilgrimage of a sort. We will decide to throw our support behind the Session and the soon to be formed Board of Trustees for the Old Town Cemetery. What will happen out there in the cemetery, in our accompanying block will not be linear, it will not be “straight.” It will wonder and meander, like a pilgrim yearning for God but with a face set for inspiration. There will be set backs and redos and it will be a journey with a very far off destination.

If we approach it as project managers, if we approach it as contractors, then it stands to chance that we will be frustrated stewards and keepers of the cemetery. But if we approach it like pilgrims, understanding that the call of God has us on the journey, and that the journey will be full of lessons, learnings, and discoveries – and if we soak richly in those lessons, then this day has the potential to be the beginning of a pilgrimage that will shape and flavor the life of this congregation for years and years to come.

If you’ll allow the parallel, I think this is what Jesus is offering at the beginning of his pilgrimage journey to Jerusalem. I think he is offering us in this long section of travel and teaching from Luke 9 to Luke 19 the shaping and the making of true life if we’ll follow and listen and learn even when it is tough.

Of course, the difficulty is relative. Relative to the cross. As one preacher says, “Everything looks different when viewed through the eyes of God’s sacrificial love.”⁴

God’s sacrificial love. That is the end of Jesus’ pilgrimage. Not to receive from God, but to give for the world.

Are we on the pilgrimages we are on to give or to receive? What have we set our faces on, or perhaps set our faces against?

I am not saying that being a pilgrim is all fun and laughs – the inspiration that comes sometimes arrives at the end of some arduous roads. Ease is not the story. But our pilgrimage with Christ is not a place of poverty either – spiritual or otherwise. Maybe what is missing from our lives is commitment to the Christian journey – after all, down here in the Bible belt we do tend to focus on the Christian destination (often at the expense of the journey).

May God give us grace abundant for the pilgrimage, and may we follow and journey where Jesus leads, no matter how many times we are diverted, along the way to the cross.

Amen.

⁴ David Lose – *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 3 page 195.

Foreshadowing