

1 Kings 19:15-16,19-21

Psalm 16

Galatians 5:1,13-25

Luke 9:51-62

Many of you know that on Thursday mornings, I usually head over to the Atlantis Restaurant in Bradlee Shopping Center about 7:00am to have breakfast with a group of clergy colleagues. Over fried eggs, bacon, hash browns and all kinds of other things that we shouldn't eat, the conversation roams around between personal business and parish business and sometimes discussions of current events. This past Thursday morning, one brave soul threw out the question we always expect to come up: who's preaching this week? This week, there was a sort of universal shrinking away and then one person said, "I'm preaching on Galatians" and another said "I decided to switch out the readings and celebrate the Feast of St. Peter and St. Paul which is this week" and then another one said "I gave my preaching spot to our seminarian." You kinda' get the drift. NOBODY wanted to preach on today's gospel.....but you know what they say, "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread!" So here we go!

It's small wonder that no one wanted to tackle this gospel. These words from Jesus this morning sound pretty harsh and unfeeling. We aren't accustomed to hearing Jesus talk like this to anyone. "Let the dead bury the dead!" and when a young man wants to tell his family 'good-bye', Jesus says to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." My, my, my. That sounds just plain mean.

So let's see if we can figure out what's going on here. Jesus and his disciples have been traveling exclusively in Galilee and Jesus has been preaching and teaching and healing. During this time, Jesus authorizes his 12 disciples to go out in the world and cast out demons and heal in his name and to tell everybody about the kingdom of God. He's given them the power to do that.....and off they go. We don't know how long they were gone or how far they went, but when they came back, Jesus took the whole lot of them to Bethsaida for a de-briefing. The crowds followed them.....big crowds.....a huge crowd as a matter of fact and Jesus preaches and teaches and heals and eventually feeds all 5000 of them with 2 fishes and 5 loaves of bread. People start asking who he is.....and for good reason. They've never experienced anything like what this man Jesus can do. There is no plausible explanation for the things that he can do. While all of this speculation is going on.....not only in the crowd, but also among the disciples, Jesus quietly tells them for the first time that he is going to suffer and he is going to be killed and on the third day he's going to be alive again. Do you suppose these disciples really 'heard' him when he said that? Or did this information just float right by them without recognition? My guess would be that it just floated right by them.....because the whole thing was inconceivable!! And our brains tend to block out what we can't understand.

Not too long after that, Jesus took Peter and James and John with him up to the top of Mt. Tabor where he had that incredible 'mountaintop experience.' Remember? Right in front of Peter and James and

John, Jesus' face changed in appearance and his clothes were dazzling white and Peter and James and John saw him conferring with Elijah and Moses. They must have been just blown away by what they saw. And just in case their brains weren't already overloaded trying to process all of this, a cloud descended on all of them and they heard a voice coming out of the cloud saying, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him."

WOW!!!

There was probably no problem with Peter and James and John keeping this experience a secret. I'm sure they figured nobody would believe them anyway!!

The four of them come down the mountain, and for the second time, Jesus tells them that he is going to be betrayed into human hands. Jesus must have realized that the first time he'd told them this, the information just floated right by them because he even says, "Let these words sink into your ears!" But even with that 'heads up,' they had no idea what Jesus was talking about.

All of this information is to lay the groundwork for understanding the gospel lesson for today. Jesus has just had a transformational experience. He has been to the mountaintop. He has conferred with Elijah. He has conferred with Moses. His countenance has been changed. He is at a pivotal moment in his ministry. He has had his mission confirmed by both Elijah and Moses. He will never be the same again. He told his disciples before he left them to go up onto the mountain, that he was going to suffer and he was going to be killed and that three days later God would be glorified when he was alive again. When he comes down from the mountain, he comes down with all of that confirmed by Elijah and Moses. He knows what's coming and he knows why and he knows it's time to get on with it.

Jesus has just shifted into overdrive.

The gospel lesson this morning begins with the phrase, "he set his face to Jerusalem." This journey to Jerusalem that Luke writes about is a metaphor for Jesus' approach to the cross. The road to Jerusalem becomes symbolic of discipleship. On this journey, Jesus continues to preach and teach and heal and to model for his disciples and followers what it means to be a disciple. The way to Jerusalem is also the way to follow Jesus.....and indeed, the early name for the Christian movement was "the Way." Whenever we hear Luke say, "He set his face to Jerusalem" we know that Luke is referring to Jesus' determination to complete his mission, his singleness of purpose, his awareness that death waited for him in Jerusalem, but also glorification. He's not going to be distracted. He's not going to be drawn away from this mission. Nothing is going to stop him from accomplishing this mission. And there isn't a moment to waste.

When Jesus set his face to Jerusalem, he wanted to go the most direct route, which was through Samaria, so he sent James and John as advance men to make preparations for his stay there, but the little village they approached didn't want to have anything to do with this Jewish prophet named Jesus, so they sent James and John back. The Samaritans and the Jews have a bitter feud going on that has been raging for a several hundred years and even though Jesus has some kind portrayals of Samaritans as his ministry unfolds, this first encounter is anything but cordial. And James and John are incensed on

Jesus' behalf. They feel insulted by the rebuff of this little village. They are in a retaliatory mood when they get back to report to Jesus. This scene almost makes you think of the Godfather movies.....can't you just hear James and John saying to Jesus, "You want we should rub them out, Boss?" when they ask Jesus if he wanted them to command fire to come down and consume the whole village.

Jesus says 'No' and sets off for another village. Jesus has already explained to his disciples when he commissioned them and empowered them and sent them out into the world. He told them then that if anyone didn't want to welcome them, they should just dust the dirt of that town off and move on to the next one. Jesus is not about retaliation. He's not going to waste his time and energy with that. And he was not into belaboring a point once the hearer had made it clear that he wasn't buying. In other words, Jesus was not about to be distracted by the temptation to try to turn rejection into acceptance. Jesus was all about staying focused. He was not going to get sidetracked from his mission or waste time with people who clearly did not want to hear. And on this mission, every moment counts. There is an urgency now in Jesus' ministry that wasn't there before his Transfiguration. He has, indeed, shifted gears. He has changed.

Perhaps that's what we see in this gospel lesson this morning.....not necessarily a heartless or a mean Jesus, but simply a Jesus who knows that every minute counts. A Jesus that will not be distracted or drawn away from his mission. A Jesus that doesn't have time to wait for someone to go back home and tell their family 'good-bye.' It's not that a proper 'good-bye' is not important. It is. Jesus models the proper 'good-bye' for us when he has to leave his disciples in the end. He shows us how we are to do it and yet, here, in these circumstances, he says to his would-be follower, I don't have time to wait for you! If you've made up your mind to follow me, don't look back. The way is hard. The Son of Man has no where to lay his head and if you come along, you won't either. If you put your hand to the plow and then look back, the row won't be straight and your work will be for nothing. If you look back, you will lose what you've set your mind to. Pursuing the kingdom of God means you can't long for what was. You have to be resolute. You have to be determined. You have to keep your eyes on the prize. You can't let yourself be distracted. Every minute counts.

And really, it's not that different now. Every minute still counts. None of us know how many minutes we have. We've all been in circumstances that require our undivided attention, that demand our full commitment, that won't allow for any distractions. Following Jesus now is the same as following Jesus then. It's hard. It requires our full and undivided attention. It is all-consuming. It is forward-looking, not looking back. Our parish right here at St. Paul's is right now going through something like a shifting of gears. We are looking forward.....where do we go from here....we can't see the path.....we don't know the way.....we have no idea where we are going or how we will get there.....but we do know WHO we are following. We do know that Jesus knows the way. We do know that we will not be distracted. We do know that we won't be longing for what was but will be dreaming of what will be.....and only God knows what that will be.

Thomas Merton said it best and I'm going to paraphrase his prayer this morning to apply to us, all of us who are the body of Christ that is St. Paul's Bailey's Crossroads. It is a prayer that the Vestry says together before each Vestry meeting:

“My Lord God, **we** have no idea where **we are** going. **We** do not see the road ahead of **us**. **We** cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do **we** really know **ourselves**, and the fact that **we** think that **we are** following your will does not mean that **we are** actually doing so. But **we** believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And **we** hope **we** have that desire in all that **we are** doing. **We** hope that **we** will never do anything apart from that desire. And **we** know that if **we** do this you will lead **us** by the right road though **we** may know nothing about it. Therefore, will **we** trust you always though **we** may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. **We** will not fear, for you are ever with **us**, and you will never leave **us** to face **our** perils alone.”

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.