



Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. AMEN

As reported in the Gospel of Luke, the drama of our salvation, the final act opens with eight simple words, "He set his face to go to Jerusalem."

Jesus has spent his whole life in the region known as lower Galilee. Except for his birth in Bethlehem and his family's brief sojourn into Egypt, Jesus grew up and lived and worked near the Sea of Galilee. His ministry began in Capernaum and from there went out to preach, teach, heal, and proclaim the Kingdom of God to all who would listen. But he never ventured too far or too long from Capernaum. And here we are today in the 9th chapter of Luke seeing a pivotal point in Jesus' ministry. He is now on the way to Jerusalem where the Temple and the center of the Jewish faith is found. This is the place where He must go despite the consequences. It is where God, the Father is calling him too. Jesus is our example of determination to obey God, regardless of the costs.

Jesus knew exactly what he was doing as he set his face to go to Jerusalem. He had nothing to gain but everything to lose. A suicide mission if you will. We all know what happens when he gets there. And here lies the essence of this reading. Jesus' sheer determination to obey God regardless of the cost. He has his eyes set on the cross and gives us this example, that we should have our eyes fixed on Christ. It may not always be easy to follow Jesus and be his disciple, but our eyes should be fixed on following Jesus in His kingdom forsaking all else for the sake of the Gospel, the Good News.

Jesus gives us three examples of how not to follow Him. Rather hard words for us to hear from our loving God, but He wants only the best for us, and that happens when we follow Him. The first man says, "I will follow you wherever you go." And remember Jesus rebuke, "Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

I hope you can see that to follow Jesus was very countercultural to all three of these men. They continue to put their own lives first. Our world today is so obsessed with wealth, image, and comfort, that the road Jesus takes is nothing like that. Jesus urges this man and us to be prepared to be

uncomfortable. There is no money, no mansion, no throne, only a cross at the end of the journey. Wouldn't it be much easier to follow Jesus if it did not cost us popularity, career, status, or creature comforts? "Jesus humbled himself, taking the form of a slave", it says in Philippians 2:7. From the beginning at his birth, born in a stable to the end of his life dying on a cross, Jesus was humble and focused on ministry rather than personal comfort. He expects all of his disciples to do the same.

Our second man responds to Jesus' call to follow with "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." Not having details about his father, we assume that the father is either dead, dying or possibly needing assistance in his later years. Jesus tells the man to let the dead bury the dead. He called this man to follow and there is urgency in discipleship according to Jesus. Discipleship isn't something we schedule around our plans. Our world needs our help now! We are all called to be the light of the world as our neighbors suffer, injustice persists, and corruption grows. Not sometime in the future when it is convenient for us, but now. Again, Jesus challenges those who follow him to give the kingdom proclamation top priority.

Our third man said, "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Verse 61. And Jesus has a seemingly odd reply, "No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." I know that most of us have not had the opportunity to plow a field behind a draft animal, but I think that we all have turned to look at something or someone in our backseat of the car while driving. You twist sideways, lose sight of the highway, and tend to pull the wheel in the direction that you have turned. Dangerous for sure.

So, what does this have to do with following Jesus? Well, we are tempted to look back. Not only might you zig-zag off the road or plow crooked furloughs but you might get called back to your old ways and lessen your faith to follow. Jesus wants us to keep our eyes on Him. My favorite Bible story about keeping our eyes focused on Jesus is when Peter steps out of the boat to walk on the water to Jesus. The minute he looks around and sees the waves, taking his eyes off of Jesus, what happens? Yup. Peter starts to sink. So always look forward to Jesus is a great lesson.

What else can we learn about these three men and how Jesus responds to them after calling them to follow? And how do we use this knowledge in 2025. First of all, I think we need to be slow to condemn those who offer excuses about following Jesus. Who among us has not done the same? Even the giants of the faith have had excuses for God when they were asked to do something for the kingdom.

Moses protested, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out off Egypt?" Exodus 3:11.

Gideon pleaded, "But sir, how can I deliver Israel?" Judges 6:15

Jeremiah protested, "Ah Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." Jeremiah 1:6

Isaiah said, "Woe is me! I am lost for I am a man of unclean lips." Isaiah 6:5

All of these men, even though they protested and made excuses, did what God asked them to do. God blessed their reluctant discipleship. And folks this is Good News for us, because it means that God does not grade us with an indelible "F" when we sin or protest or offer excuses. Failure is an opportunity or invitation to repent and be blessed for doing so. Did you ever wonder if any of these three men in our reading today dropped the excuse and immediately followed Jesus?

As for today, I think it is especially difficult to follow Jesus every minute of every day. We are human after all. But things in our world seem so divisive. There is so much misinformation, division, and distraction each and every day. We are pressed to overlook injustice, to just be silent and try to fit in. And we resort to our own creature comforts. Today our world seems noisier than ever. Even though people don't seem to sit and talk to each other person to person, face to face, we get bombarded with emails, text messages, TV commercials, billboards, and the like. Each carrying a special message just for us, wanting us to respond in a positive way. We have more clutter in our lives than any generation that came before us. We need to drown out the din and set our face toward Jerusalem. We need to look forward and set our eyes on Jesus Christ.

That is what a life of faith is all about, setting your sights on Christ and his kingdom and moving ever toward it, one step at a time. We cannot let the chaos of the world distract us or the temptations of the world entice us, but always strive by the grace of God in us to live following Jesus' example.

In 1918 Helen Lemmel wrote a song after reading Hebrews 12:1-2. It reads, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God." And she wrote a beautiful song, you can find it on Utube sung by many different artists. Here is what it says, "Turn your eyes upon Jesus. Look full in his wonderful face. And the things of earth will grow strangely dim. In the light of his glory and grace."

Turn your eyes upon Jesus. Great song and great advice. And in thinking more about this message for today, I also realized that this scripture text spoke exactly what I wish for Lauren, who will be confirmed in the faith this morning.

She has spent two years learning the tenants of our faith. From the Old Testament to the New, as well as studying the Lutheran confessions and learning what lies ahead of her in her living out of her Lutheran faith. Truly, the most important thing she can do is to set her eyes on Jesus. Following Jesus will not always be easy, but it will be the best way for her to live her life. As we read a few minutes ago in Psalm 16, "You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; and in your right hand are pleasures forevermore." And I wish that joy for Lauren today and always!

Jesus set his face to Jerusalem. He was bound and determined to not let anyone stand in his way. On the cross he fulfilled the plan set in place by God for our salvation. He gave his life for the sake of the world, forgiving our sins, giving us an abundant life here on earth and the promise of life everlasting in heaven with him some day.

And so, in great gratitude we set our eyes on Jesus. We seek His kingdom of love. Regretting our sins and we ask for forgiveness. And above all we don't look back as we follow Jesus without excuses.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, in this noisy world we choose you. Give us the strength to not look back. Remind us of how you call us when times get rough. Give us courage and conviction to keep our eyes on you and follow you always. Amen