



**"Set Toward Jerusalem"**  
**Sermon by Rev. David D. Colby**  
**Luke 9:51-62**

MARCH 6, 2019 [ ASH WEDNESDAY ]

The turning point in the Gospels come in a simple phrase. "Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51).

We like to say that we are in the city for good. The capitol city. St. Paul. I read something this weekend that horrified me. I should be clear: worse things than what I am about to mention happened over the weekend, but still. I was reading promotional materials for my alma mater, Macalester College, which is also here in St. Paul and is hosting a Nike youth volleyball camp this summer. And there on the website it said, "Located near Minneapolis, our summer camp at Macalester College provides kids with top notch instruction . . ." Macalester College is in St. Paul, this city. Not located near Minneapolis. The name of the city matters. Especially in our passage from the Gospel of Luke tonight.

Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem, and he was not thinking about the cultural opportunities that capitol city afforded. Maybe a meal at a fine French Roman restaurant, a performance by the symphony,

and then staying at the finest Jerusalem Hotel. He wasn't thinking about the culture of the city. But the way that the city was where the temple was located as well as the headquarters of the occupying Roman troops and all the tension that their presence created.

A little later in the Gospel of Luke, which we have been reading this year, and a quick preview of the passage for March 17, Jesus says, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it" (Luke 13:34).

Jerusalem, Jesus knows, is where he needs to go. Where it will all happen. Where faith and danger will intersect. Where his message and where his ministry will be tested and put on trial. He set his face to go to Jerusalem.

And the rest of this passage is about his progress toward that focus. It is a challenging passage that might make us wonder about the responses Jesus offers unless we see how single-minded his focus has become.

Jesus is on his way. The Gospel says that they stopped in a village of the Samaritans, but they did not receive Jesus (and the narrator kind of hits us over the head with this saying that the reason that they did not receive Jesus was because his face was set toward Jerusalem.) Maybe the disciples didn't know this, or get it yet, because they get angry at this perceived rejection and ask Jesus if he wants them to command fire to come down from heaven and consume the villagers. As if they had that power! He turned and rebuked the disciples. His face is set toward Jerusalem.

Bystanders will shout out partial promises. I will follow you – which is kind of the point, right. That was our opening hymn tonight “Jesus Calls Us” and wants us to follow. But here – Jesus responds with his “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” Jesus is making clear that now that his face is set toward Jerusalem, following him will be difficult. Another calls out, I will follow you . . . but first let me go and bury my father. Another, I will follow you . . . but first let me say farewell to those at my home. They seem sincere and their requests, preliminary tasks seem so reasonable that we might have trouble understanding why Jesus cuts them off. Jesus is rather curt, focused. For he knows now that time is short, and he knows where his focus lies. Get on board now, for the train is leaving the station.

Ash Wednesday is often considered an opportunity to reflect upon our mortality. With the words of “remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” I know that some of you have had the recent occasion to reflect on your mortality. I have

had plenty of reminders of mortality recently. Chief among these reminders happened two months ago: the death of my youngest sister's husband, at age 41, after living with a brain tumor for the last eleven years.

Within this passage from Luke are similar reminders of mortality, but more importantly is a reminder to live with purpose with the time that we do have. Of setting a focal point, and sticking to it. I hear this passage of Jesus setting his face toward Jerusalem as one of determination. Like the church member who hears the diagnosis, has some difficult conversations with the doctor and loved ones, and then sets her face toward a chemotherapy regimen. The 49 and 3/4 year-old who has heard all the gross stories, but sets his face toward the first colonoscopy.

The determination and courage of which I speak may be related to recognizing our mortality, but not necessarily. The person who knows that a difficult conversation awaits at work, and yet, on Sunday night sets her face toward the office. I think about faithful and frustrated Methodists, who after such a discouraging General Conference that frankly took short-sighted and punitive measures, who heard the debates and saw the vote results as a judgment on their value and worth, I think about those of such deep faith who can set their face toward a future in the church and come out (literally or figuratively) on Ash Wednesday.

Tonight, on this Ash Wednesday, we begin the season of Lent. Perhaps a fulcrum in the church year, even one that occurs so early as this. Those heady days “of miracles and wonders”,<sup>1</sup> the mountaintop moments

are behind us and with Jesus we set our faces toward Jerusalem. It will not be easy. To watch fellow humans reject the prophet whose message was so needed. To see the betrayal play out in front of us. To see love crucified. Lent is a difficult season, and yet without it our faith would be fake. Overly optimistic about humans. Unaware of the dimensions of human sin and the reality of evil.

So many of us are facing difficult battles and soul-searing moments. And in this the Lenten journey may provide support and help us to focus. To march with determination into the future that we know will not be easy. To live with courage for as long as we have breath. To not bury our heads in the sand but be alert to the painful realities of this world and offer our very best to what matters most.

We begin this season of Lent tonight by marking our foreheads with the sign of ashes, and the reminder that we are dust, and to dust we shall return. Occasionally we need a reminder like that. But this season is not just a grim reminder of our mortality. The most important aspect of the season of Lent, I would argue, is to think about how we want to live our lives and make necessary adjustments.

Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem. And tonight we start to wonder about what is big enough, important enough, a worthy object on which to set our face. May this season of Lent, give us opportunities to think about what we are going to live for, and how we will invest our time and our talents. And may we give honor and glory to the God who created us, Christ who called and redeemed us, and the Spirit that continues to sustain us with the breath of life. May it be so. Amen.

---

<sup>1</sup> Paul Simon, *The Boy in the Bubble* (1986)