

The First Reading is from Psalm 77:1-2, 11-20:

- ¹ I cry aloud to God,
aloud to God, that he may hear me.
- ² In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord;
in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying;
my soul refuses to be comforted.
- ¹¹ I will call to mind the deeds of the LORD;
I will remember your wonders of old.
- ¹² I will meditate on all your work,
and muse on your mighty deeds.
- ¹³ Your way, O God, is holy.
What god is so great as our God?
- ¹⁴ You are the God who works wonders;
you have displayed your might among the peoples.
- ¹⁵ With your strong arm you redeemed your people,
the descendants of Jacob and Joseph.
- ¹⁶ When the waters saw you, O God,
when the waters saw you, they were afraid;
the very deep trembled.
- ¹⁷ The clouds poured out water;
the skies thundered;
your arrows flashed on every side.
- ¹⁸ The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind;
your lightnings lit up the world;
the earth trembled and shook.
- ¹⁹ Your way was through the sea,
your path, through the mighty waters;
yet your footprints were unseen.
- ²⁰ You led your people like a flock
by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

One: The Word of the Lord

All: **Thanks be to God.**

The Second Reading is from the Gospel of Luke 9:51-62, which I will share first from the *New Revised Standard Version* and then I will read the latter verses Luke 9:57-62 from *The Message*.

⁵¹ When the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. ⁵² And Jesus sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; ⁵³ but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. ⁵⁴ When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" ⁵⁵ But Jesus turned and rebuked them.

⁵⁶ Then they went on to another village. ⁵⁷ As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." ⁵⁸ And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." ⁵⁹ To another Jesus said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." ⁶⁰ But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." ⁶¹ Another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." ⁶² Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

The Message Paraphrase

⁵⁷ On the road someone asked [Jesus] if he could go along. “I’ll go with you, wherever,” he said. ⁵⁸ Jesus was curt: “Are you ready to rough it? We’re not staying in the best inns, you know.” Jesus said to another, “Follow me.” ⁵⁹ He said, “Certainly, but first excuse me for a couple of days, please. I have to make arrangements for my father’s funeral.” ⁶⁰ Jesus refused. “First things first. Your business is life, not death. And life is urgent: Announce God’s kingdom!” ⁶¹ Then another said, “I’m ready to follow you, Master, but first excuse me while I get things straightened out at home.” ⁶² Jesus said, “No procrastination. No backward looks. You can’t put God’s kingdom off till tomorrow. Seize the day.”

One: The Living Word of the God.

All: Thanks be to God.

The Message is entitled *Risky and Costly*

I have been known to say, “If you have haven’t run into something you don’t like in the bible, then you haven’t read the bible cover to cover.” I know I can think of more than just a few stories and passages that I wish didn’t make it into the sacred text. I would also not be the first person to suggest that we should extricate some of these passages from the bible, especially the ones that make God look bad or Jesus insensitive and calloused as this passage does. But, alas texts like ours today and many others made it into the sacred text and therefore, we have to wrestle with them just as they are. We can’t ignore them. We can’t write them off. We have to wrestle with

them given their original context and intent in order to figure out what the text might mean for us today.

So, what is the context of our passage this morning? In Luke's gospel this exchange between Jesus and his disciples happens after Jesus has warned them of his impending suffering not once, but twice (9:21-27, 44-45). Although, the disciples have confessed their faith in Jesus as the Messiah (9:18-20) and seen Jesus transfigured with Moses and Elijah (9:28-36), the disciples still cannot begin to imagine what the road ahead looks like for them.

We also know from our text that the days were drawing near when Jesus was going to be taken up. Jesus, as Peterson translates, "gathered up his courage and steeled himself for the journey to Jerusalem." Jesus knew what lay ahead. Yet, Jesus was resolute in his convictions. He was going to stay the course, even though he knew that it would cost him his life and cause chaos among his disciples.

Then on the way to Jerusalem, Jesus and the disciples pass through Samaria. He sends messengers ahead, but hospitality is not extended to his traveling party. Remembering that context matters, Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "Now there is long, complicated, and mutually antagonistic relationship between the Judeans and the Samaritans in Jesus' day." The Samaritans worshipped at Mount Gerazim, where they had maintained a temple for some four hundred years. The Judeans worshipped in Jerusalem, where Jesus had set his face.

Scholars disagree about exactly why the Samaritan village refused to provide hospitality, but Jesus' response to James and John's offer to call down fire gives us a clue

about how not to deal with rejection! Rejection, something Jesus experienced in his home town of Nazareth at the beginning of his ministry as well as now from this Samaritan village, should remind us that rejection needs to be disarmed, rather than returned. Jesus came to save, not destroy. Jesus took these rejections in stride and continued his resolute path towards fulfilling his purpose.

Again, context of this Samaritan rejection is important, we shouldn't assume this means Samaritans are bad. Of the four gospels, the Gospel of Luke is clearly the biggest champion of outsiders. In the chapters following our text this morning, Luke includes stories where Samaritans are the heroes – the Good Samaritan and the one of ten lepers who returned to give Jesus thanks. Yes, Jesus experienced rejection, but he obviously doesn't hold it against all Samaritans and this is a lesson critical to our day, for lines are being drawn and deep divides are fracturing the very fabric of our nation. Rejection by a group of people or disagreement with a particular individual from a people group does not translate into all. Jesus doesn't translate his experience of rejection to all and neither should we.

On the heel of Jesus' response to the disciples who offer to obliterate the Samaritan village, Jesus shares three brief scenarios about what it really means to follow Jesus. Following Jesus is not about wielding power and having things your way – destroying those who reject you. Following Jesus is not about human shaped power either – the power to control others, the power of more and more possessions, or the power of fame or prestige to get it

your way always. Following Jesus looks categorically different according to Jesus' responses.

The three brief scenarios unfold like this: "I will follow you," "Follow me," and "I will follow you." We have two strangers along the way saying, "I will follow you, Jesus," and then one scenario where Jesus does the asking. Remember the context of these three scenarios, Jesus is walking with his disciples to Jerusalem. He is focused on what they need to know given the pending chaos of his death. Through these scenarios Jesus is illuminating just how risky and costly it will be to commit to follow him in the days to come.

"I will follow you wherever you go." "Really?" says Jesus. Let me be clear what this will mean for you. No first-rate accommodations. No certainty about tomorrow's agenda. Don't expect comfort and security. Following me is like being a nomad, moving from place to place, for even foxes and birds have it better than you and me, if you follow me. We don't know how this individual responded. Did he say, "Well, I have had second thoughts and maybe following you is not for me?" Or did he say, "I have already weighed the risks and costs. I am resolute in my conviction. I will follow you, period." We don't know for certain, but I imagine this initial scenario got the disciples thinking.

The next scenario is prompted by Jesus, who says to someone along the way, "Follow me." Now being someone who has buried her father, Jesus' response is downright rude or as Peterson puts it, "Curt." Imagine grieving the loss of a beloved parent and being told, "Let

the dead, bury the dead.” This just doesn’t sit well with any of us I imagine, so what exactly was Jesus’ point?

We can’t miss the final phrase of this scenario, “Go and proclaim the kingdom of God,” or as Peterson translates, “Life is urgent: announce God’s kingdom!” I don’t believe Jesus is saying that it is a bad thing to bury your parent. Jesus is just saying keep your priorities straight. “First things, first.” Living the kingdom of God and proclaiming the kingdom of God is to permeate every fiber of your being. Living and proclaiming the kingdom would therefore inform how you bury the dead. It would also guide your daily steps regardless of what befalls you. The kingdom of God is first and foremost, and a commitment to follow Jesus reprioritizes everything else we do. When the kingdom of God is first, then everything else falls into place, even burying the dead.

The third scenario is unique to Luke’s gospel, as the first two are also found in Matthew’s Gospel. But focusing on context, it is important to note that the context of the first two scenarios in Matthew is very different and therefore may have another purpose in Matthew.

But, back to Luke. We have another individual who says he will follow Jesus, but first he asked to wrap things up at home with family and friends before he takes off to follow Jesus. Once again, the response to the simple request to say good-bye seems harsh, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

Not fit for the kingdom, just because I want to say good-bye? This seems extreme. Yet, Jesus says, “No one who puts a hand to the plow.” Has anyone ever done this?

What would happen if you focused on what was behind you when you were plowing a field? I imagine that the furrows wouldn't be all that straight. Or using a different analogy, imagine trying to drive a car forward by only looking in the rearview mirror? Can you see, how from Jesus' perspective looking back or procrastinating is a recipe for disaster in the kingdom of God?

Once again, this is another very pertinent lesson for us in the church, as looking back is sometimes what we do best. Yet, Peterson makes it clear what the disciples need to focus on, "You can't put God's kingdom off till tomorrow. Seize the day." "Seize this day," Jesus says. Seize this moment, for this is where the kingdom of God is. Now is the time to proclaim the kingdom is at hand, not tomorrow. Don't make excuses. Don't make other priorities. First things first and then everything else will fall into place.

In the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, these verses are subtitled, "Would be Followers of Jesus." It reminds me of the lukewarm church in Laodicea mentioned in The Revelation of John, where the Cosmic Christ says, "I am about to spit you out of my mouth." Jesus doesn't need lukewarm followers at this point in his journey and he doesn't need them today either. Lukewarm or would be followers are those who say all the right words, but there isn't enough evidence in their lives to convict them, for their Jesus talk doesn't translate into their walk, into their actions, into the way they live their life.

So, what does this all mean for us today given our 21st century context? I suggest that these verses should jar us into asking ourselves, "Does following Jesus make a difference in how we live?" Does following Jesus impact

our priorities and how we spend our “one precious life,” as Mary Oliver writes. Does following Jesus impact the way we live individually as well as communally as the church?

I want to first suggest that our answer should not be as a badge of honor. Look at me, what a great disciple I am given all that I do for Jesus, or look at what a fantastic church we are because of what we do for our community.

I want to suggest that whether or not our commitment to follow Jesus has impacted our lives, will be evident by our willingness to be in solidarity with the kingdom values of self-sacrifice, self-giving, and self-forgetfulness. In the chapter preceding our text today, Luke records that Jesus said this to his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.” These upside-down, inside-out kingdom values were not the values espoused in first century Palestine nor are they espoused today in 21st century America.

We are taught to accumulate as much as you can, with a symbol of the American Dream being home ownership. We live in a culture of scarcity, which declares that if you share with others, you will just have less, for there is not enough for everyone. We are taught to seek recognition and rewards for any effort or accomplishments, with being the first or the best being the ultimate goal. Does your life mirror the values of our culture or is there evidence of kingdom-of-God values in your life?

The words of Jesus we read in Luke’s Gospel today are not meant to comfort us. They are meant to **confront**

us. Jesus wants to make it clear that following him will be risky as well as costly. Jesus wants us to know that our lives will be something other than what we had planned, if we commit to following Jesus wherever he goes.

Friends, Jesus is with the children and adults who are fleeing their countries of origin by foot or rubberized raft. Jesus is with those imprisoned behind bars. Jesus is in our hospitals accompanying those who have no idea how they will pay for services rendered. Jesus is with the children who are hungry in our own neighborhoods. Jesus is with those who have no place to call home. Jesus is in places where bombs and guns are more prevalent than food and water. Jesus goes wherever and whenever there is someone who is suffering.

The psalmist cried out, "In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord." The mystery we call God, whom we know most fully in Jesus responds to these cries, for Jesus goes to where suffering is found.

Are we willing to follow Jesus wherever he will go, knowing that there will be risks? Are we willing to stay the course even if it costs us? If we can respond saying, "Yes," then I believe, my friends, there will be enough evidence to convict us of being Christians. May it be so. Amen.