

August 14, 2022

The Gospel of Luke
XXXIII. Following Jesus
Luke 9:46-62

Dr. William P. Seel
Easley Presbyterian Church
Easley, South Carolina

We begin this morning by needing to go back, once again, to the Transfiguration of Jesus¹ – which we first looked at a couple of weeks ago. There is so much revealed in the Transfiguration, not only about Jesus’ identity, but also about His mission. And this morning our concern is with something the Transfiguration reveals about Jesus’ mission which is critical for our understanding of our Scripture reading this morning.

Here it is: when Jesus was Transfigured on that mountain, radiant light streaming from His holy face, two other figures were there on the mountain with Him – Moses and Elijah. And the Transfiguration story states that the three of them – Jesus, Moses, and Elijah – “*spoke of His departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.*”² In other words, they were discussing, confirming, the most critical fact about Jesus’ mission as the Messiah: namely, that He would be crucified, dead, and buried in obedience to the Father, in fulfillment of God’s great plan of salvation.

But here’s the really neat thing. When Jesus and Moses and Elijah spoke of Jesus’ upcoming “departure” – “departure” is not actually the word that they used. And I have no idea why so many English translations continue to read it that way. Because what they were discussing – literally this is the word in the original Greek – is Jesus’ “exodus.” They were talking about the “exodus” Jesus was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. And to speak of Jesus’ upcoming crucifixion as an “exodus” sets the whole of Jesus’ mission on earth in a different light. First of all, it ties what Jesus is doing to what Moses did. As Moses, in the first Exodus, led the people of God out of their slavery in Egypt and into the Promised Land, so Jesus will now, in this second and greater Exodus, lead the people of God out of their slavery to sin and death, and into the Promised Land of the Kingdom of God!

And second, what it tells us is that what Jesus will accomplish in Jerusalem through His death and resurrection should not be understood as the culmination, the grand finale of the Jesus story – but rather as just its beginning! Through the sacrifice of the Passover Lamb and the beating down of Pharaoh and his army, God’s people then began their long journey to the Promised Land – the greater goal of their liberation from slavery in Egypt. And now, through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross – that greater Passover Lamb of God sacrificed for us – and through Jesus’ beating down of sin and death once and for all on our behalf, God’s people have begun a new and greater journey. The journey which will lead us into the Kingdom of God – eternal life, all things

made new, we dwelling with God and God dwelling with us and all of us dwelling with one another in perfect love and joy and peace forevermore.

And to say all of that, to understand what Jesus does for us in Jerusalem in terms of the Exodus story – the journey beginning as opposed to the journey’s end – has profound meaning for how we are to understand the Christian life, how we are to understand what it means for us to be Christians. If the salvation story we encounter in Jesus is an exodus story, a journey story – this means that we are to see our life in Christ, not as a one-time salvation transaction – He died, I accept Him, we’re done. But rather that our life in Christ is best understood as a long journey we undertake with Him and for Him and because of Him – and, perhaps most of all, following after Him. That’s the Christian life: not a one and done transaction – I accept Jesus as my Lord and Savior and we’re done. But accepting Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior – and then setting out to follow Jesus further along each and every day of the rest of our days.

We can think of it this way: belief in Jesus matters – trusting that what He teaches us is true. But it is putting those beliefs into practice, actually trusting Jesus enough to act upon what He teaches – following Jesus every day as the One who really is our Way and our Truth and our Life – which is the true essence of the Christian life. For when Jesus called His first disciples, what did He say to them? *“Believe in me, accept the doctrines about me – and you’re good to go, ticket punched on that train to glory”*? No. He said, *“Follow me.”*³ “Follow me” – because signing up with Jesus means putting on our travelling shoes and setting out after Him. “Follow me” – because Jesus is leading us on an exodus journey out of our sinful ways, out of our mortal despair, out of the dead-end of this world and its fatally-flawed values; and into the new life, the new ways of life, which mark out the Promised Land of the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

If Jesus’ mission on this earth is to lead us on an exodus journey, then our life in Christ is best understood as a life-long journey in which we have the single focus of following Jesus as He leads us every day, closer to His Kingdom. And with that in our minds, we are now ready to look at our passage for this morning – because what we have here are a series of travel advisories, travel tips, for what it means to be on an exodus journey with Jesus to the Promised Land of God’s Kingdom. The key verse is verse fifty-one, which tells how Jesus set His face to go to Jerusalem, where our exodus story begins – and where we learn to set our faces on Jesus. And before and after that verse, in four separate scenes, Jesus gives us some important teaching about what it will mean for us to follow Him on this exodus journey to the Kingdom.

First scene. The disciples start up an argument over who among them is number one. Which reminds me of a Mitch Albom story from his bestseller of a few years back, Tuesdays with Morrie. Albom was with Morrie at a university basketball game. The student section, where they were sitting, began chanting, *“We’re number one! We’re number one!”* Morrie, who taught at the university, stood up and yelled, *“What’s wrong with being number two?”* The students looked at him, and stopped their chant.⁴

Well, that’s not exactly what Jesus did – but in the same spirit, perhaps. Jesus took a child, put the child before the disciples and said to them, *“Whoever receives this child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. For he who is least among you*

all is the one who is great.” In other words – exodus journey tip number one – if we are going to follow Jesus, then we’re going to have to drop the entire pecking order measurement of people altogether.

That child, in Jesus’ time, would have been viewed as the least important person – children were valued differently in that day than in our own. So what Jesus is saying, in effect, is that we’re going to have to get rid of all these false distinctions we have learned from this sinful world to mark off those we view to be important from those we view to be unimportant. In Jesus’ exodus journey, everybody is important. So, no more marking off the clean from the unclean, the rich from the poor, the good from the bad, the deserving from the undeserving. If we are going to follow Jesus on this exodus journey, then we are going to have to learn to see everybody else the way Jesus sees them – as individuals who are valuable, even precious, in His sight. What matters is no longer where we stand on the great pecking order of life, but how well we welcome and serve others – all others. Exodus travelling tip number one.

Second travelling tip for our lifetime exodus journey with Jesus. John, in a rather striking non sequitur, uses the opportunity to brag to Jesus that he and the other disciples had tried to stop a person who was casting out demons in Jesus’ name – because that person was not one of them. This person, whoever he or she was, was not part of the officially recognized group of disciples. Jesus is exasperated with John and the others: *“Do not stop him, for the one who is not against you is for you.”* Travelling tip number two for the exodus journey with Jesus: we are going to find ourselves, on this journey, joined by a host of people who don’t look like us, talk like us, even in certain ways believe like us. And not only is that okay, but – says Jesus – it is a good thing. And so we’d better get used to it sooner rather than later – the diversity of the Body of Christ.

Remember how much the scribes and Pharisees hated the fact that Jesus kept hanging around with, even eating meals with the wrong kinds of people – tax collectors and sinners? Remember, back when we were reading Galatians, how the biggest problem in the early church was how Jesus just kept on saving outsiders – Gentiles – and bringing them in to what was mostly then a Jewish convert church? That’s just Jesus’ way. He doesn’t care about the dividing lines we draw between who’s in and who’s out. In fact, in Luke 13, Jesus is going to tell us that He intends to fill the place settings at His dining table in the Kingdom with people drawn from east and west and north and south. Every sort, kind, color, country, and denomination of Christian is going to be there. So, if we’re going to follow Jesus, we have to be ready and willing to accept as fellow Christians, fellow exodus journeyers, Christians who aren’t like us, don’t worship the way we worship, even sometimes don’t believe some of the things we believe. Travel tip number two – anyone who is in Christ is our brother or sister, and should be welcomed as such. We might even learn something from them about following Jesus.

Third travel tip for our lifetime exodus journey following after Jesus. Jesus and the disciples approach a Samaritan village. Jesus sends messengers ahead to arrange for food and lodging – but the Samaritans do not want Jesus in their midst, so they refuse. The disciples are furious for Jesus’ sake, thinking their anger at this village will please Jesus: *“Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?”* But our sin-smearing, often self-righteous anger almost never pleases Jesus. He turns to them and rebukes them instead – and then they just journey on. Travel tip number three: following Jesus on this exodus journey means we

can count on meeting opposition from the world around us, from the culture around us, even sometimes from our own family and friends. We can count on encountering those who think what we are doing is nuts, nonsense, a waste of time and energy to give so much of ourselves to this Jesus business. To follow Jesus will bring us into conflict with the world and the ways of the world. And we are not to let the world pull us back into conformity with its ways; but neither shall we hate the world and those who oppose us. We are simply to keep on following Jesus. And, like Jesus, respond to the world with grace, not with fire from heaven.

Here's an illustration – a small, little illustration. Will Willimon tells of a top law school graduate eagerly sought out by a top firm. It looked like his future was set in gold. But as he was about to sign his contract, one of the senior partners began talking about how one of their biggest clients was a company who ran all the gambling operations in that state. And this young lawyer then refused to sign the contract. He told that senior partner that, *“It may be legal, but it is not ethical. I could never support a company that makes money from human frailty and ignorance.”* Back home, without a job, he ran into Willimon, who asked how he was handling the career setback. The young lawyer said:

“Actually, I feel great. I’m grateful they gave me the opportunity to clarify who I am and what I want from the practice of law . . .” And then he added: “I’m a Christian. I’m not just living my life on the basis of what I want, or just by what seems right to me. I’m trying to live my life as Jesus might want. I just try to ask myself the simple little question, ‘What would Jesus [want me to] do?’”⁵

The third travel tip for journeying after Jesus – we will meet opposition. And when we do, Jesus expects us not to give in. But He also expects us not to call down fire from heaven – because Jesus loves even His enemies, which means we are also to love ours.

Fourth travel tip for our lifetime exodus journey with Jesus into His Kingdom. As they are going along, three separate individuals approach Jesus wanting to follow Him. But each has something he or she considers more important in that moment than following Jesus. The first has a new series on Netflix to binge, the second has this thing that just came up – but maybe next time for sure; the third has a sporting event that just can’t be missed – or something like those things. To the third – and, in essence, also to the first two – Jesus offers our final travelling tip: *“No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”*

Which is simply Jesus saying that if we are going to journey with Him, nothing else can ever then be more important to us than that journey. Jesus comes first – always and in every circumstance, no exceptions allowed. *“Seek first the Kingdom of God,”* He said in His Sermon on the Mount.⁶ What we see here, in this fourth scene, is just how truly, how seriously, He really means it. *“No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”* Travelling tip number four: to journey on this lifetime exodus following after Jesus into His Kingdom means learning to put Jesus first in our priorities, first in our goals, first in our loyalties, first in how we seek to live our lives each and every day. Nothing is more important than following Jesus.

This is a John Ortberg story, from one of his wonderful books. He and his wife Nancy decided to take ballroom dancing lessons together. And at the start of their first lesson, the instructor said to them, *“I have a very important question. You are going to dance now. Who leads?”*

There was silence.

I knew the answer, but I wanted to hear my wife say it. A few more seconds of silence, and then through gritted teeth she said, “He leads.”

“And who follows?”

Silence. Then, “I follow.”

It was hard for Nancy to follow for two reasons. One is that when you aren’t leading, you aren’t in control. It is hard not to be in control. The other is that when it comes to dancing, I am a thoroughly incompetent leader.

Jesus, however, is a thoroughly competent leader. When you wake up in the morning, you can feel completely confident in saying, “Okay, Jesus, today you lead, and I will follow. Whatever I have to do in my relationships, my body, my health, and my finances are in your hands. I won’t try to figure out the rest of my life. I won’t try to solve every day. Just today. You lead. I’ll follow.”

You don’t want to miss the dance. It is why you were born. And God leads it, not just for today, but into eternity.⁷

Travelling tip number four – don’t look back. Don’t even look around. Because nothing in this world is more important than following Jesus. And because where Jesus is leading us on this long exodus journey is better than anything we could ever have imagined.

¹ Luke 9:28-36

² Luke 9:31.

³ Mark 1:16-20.

⁴ Mitch Albom, *Tuesdays with Morrie* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), p. 159.

⁵ William H. Willimon, “True Freedom,” *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (July – September, 1999), p. 5.

⁶ Matthew 6:33.

⁷ John Ortberg, *The Me I Want to Be* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), p. 69.