

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost  
Delivered by the Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas

June 27, 2010  
Grace Church, Amherst, MA

1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21  
Psalm 16

Galatians 5:1, 13-25  
Luke 9:51-62

## Rise up and follow

*O Jesus, I have promised to serve thee to the end; be thou forever near me, my Master and my friend.*<sup>1</sup> Amen.

We begin a new section of Luke’s Gospel this morning, the so-called “travel narrative,” in which Jesus “sets his face” to go to Jerusalem. What does it mean to “set your face” toward something? It means to face something with unswerving commitment and determination. When you “set your face,” you know clearly where you are headed, exactly where you intend to go. As Jesus “sets his face,” we can imagine him filled with a deep sense of purpose, even destiny. He is steadfast as he begins that journey. He is resolute. He intends, as fully and completely as he can, to proclaim the kingdom of God, to walk right into the center of Jerusalem, right into the center of religious and political power, and to express right there the redeeming, transforming, and liberating love of God. He is heading for a decisive confrontation with the political and religious authorities, heading for the final and consummate act of self-giving, which he will accomplish through the cross, resurrection, and ascension.

During the next four months, our Gospel lessons will be drawn from this section of Luke, as Jesus shows his disciples what it means to follow him along the way. Of course, when I say that we “follow” Jesus, I am using one of the basic metaphors of Christian life. Just think of all the times that Jesus urges us to “follow” him. For example, early on, Jesus asks the fishermen to let down their nets for a catch; when, with amazement, they haul in a great load of fish, the men leave their boats on the shore, drop everything, and follow him [Lk 5:1-11]. Again, Jesus sees a tax collector named Levi, says to him, “Follow me,” and the man gets up, leaves everything, and follows [Lk 5:27-28]. A rich ruler shows up in search of eternal life; Jesus tells him to give his money to the poor, and then come and follow [Lk 18:18-22]. A penniless blind man cries out to Jesus, pleading for mercy; when Jesus restores the beggar’s sight, the man follows him [Lk 18:35-43].

---

<sup>1</sup> John Ernest Bode, Hymn #655, *The Hymnal 1982*.

“Take up your cross and follow,” Jesus says, in different ways and places in all four Gospels [e.g. Lk 9:23, Mt 16:24, Mk 8:34, Jn 12:25-26]. And so we do, every one of us who is baptized, every one of us who has promised to serve Jesus to the end.

But what does it mean to “follow” Jesus? When you hear the word “follow,” what kind of images spring to mind? If the Christian life is all about following, maybe it’s a good idea to bring to the surface our associations with the word “follow,” and to consider how well they fit with following Jesus.

For example, these days we often use the word “follow” in a very casual way. We “follow” all sorts of things, you and I -- we follow sports, for instance, or the news. We follow the stock market, the soaps, maybe the latest celebrity triumph or scandal. We follow Facebook and Twitter -- “following” in the sense of keeping up with the latest developments. When we follow something in this way, we add one more interest or hobby to our other interests or hobbies. We take up one more casual or ardent commitment, and we set it alongside our other commitments, adding one more thing to the pile.

Here’s another image of following. I think of taking a trail ride at a dude ranch. Maybe you’ve done that, too. You climb up on a sleepy horse and set out walking in single file, one horse following the next one, the nose of one horse just inches behind the tail of the horse ahead. The horse at the very front of the line is definitely awake and alert, with its eyes looking here and there, and its ears turning this way and that, listening closely. But I have to say: the horses following the lead horse are pretty much half-asleep. For them, “following” is a very passive affair, nothing more than putting one foot in front of the other and staying in line. If the horse we are riding is not the lead horse, we can practically doze off in the saddle. Our horse is going nowhere new; it is not thinking for itself or asking any questions; it is just following the same old well-worn trail, day after day, and it will do that until the day it dies or is let out to pasture.

Is following Jesus anything like that? Is it about adding one more interest to our collection of interests, or about dutifully following directions as we obediently walk in line? Not according to today’s Gospel passage. The journey of following Jesus is more bracing than that, more demanding, more costly, and more full of surprise. In fact, the call to follow Jesus is the call to become fully alive. In today’s Gospel, Jesus names himself the Son of Man, and one way to understand that term is as an archetype of the human being who is fully alive and living moment to moment completely surrendered to the divine. The Son of Man is a human being who lets the radiance of God shine out fully from within an ordinary life, someone who follows where divine love leads, someone who lives right now in the presence of the Eternal, and intentionally and deliberately opens his or her actions, words, and choices to the guidance of the divine. “God-pressure” is what

Archbishop Desmond Tutu calls it, the experience of sensing where the Divine is urging us to go.<sup>2</sup> That is what it means to follow Jesus -- to set our sights on union with God, and to do what we can every day, in the very ordinary, very particular circumstances and relationships of our lives, to let God's love shine out of us and to follow where love leads.

Is this costly work? You bet it is. As we heard in today's Gospel, an unnamed man catches sight of Jesus, and apparently sees something attractive in him -- we don't know what. Maybe the man sees the kindness in Jesus' eyes, hears the authority in his voice, or notices the compassion with which Jesus meets every person who crosses his path. In all sincerity, the man blurts out, "I will follow you wherever you go." What does Jesus say in reply? "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" [Lk 9:57-58]. It is a warning, perhaps, and also an invitation: an invitation to a kind of consciousness that is not attached to personal comfort and security. As we enter that big, wide consciousness and take up our God-given identity as the Son of Man, we learn to be light on our feet -- not to grip so tightly to our opinions and beliefs, not to retreat so readily into the safe little confines of what we know, or think we know, not to move so quickly and anxiously to defending and protecting and justifying ourselves, but rather to live out in the open, unguarded and undefended, cultivating an open mind and an open heart.

To someone else, Jesus says, "Follow me," but this individual answers that first he must go and bury his father. Of course that is a completely worthy, reasonable, and necessary task, so Jesus' response is all the more startling. "Let the dead bury the dead," Jesus says to the man, "but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." It makes you wonder -- does Jesus sense that the man is clinging to family duties as a way to avoid the radical claims of God? Is the man so caught up in being respectable, or so attached to fulfilling his social and filial responsibilities, that he cannot respond freely to the Word-made-flesh who is, after all, standing right there in front of him?

The next would-be follower also has business to take care of at home before he is able to follow Jesus: he wants first to say farewell to his family. Again, this is a perfectly reasonable request, and in our reading this morning from First Kings we heard how Elijah permitted his disciple Elisha to go home and kiss his father and mother goodbye before heading off to follow the prophet [1 Kings 19:19-21]. But Jesus' response is just as uncompromising as in the preceding encounter: "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God" [Lk 9:62].

---

<sup>2</sup> Desmond and Mpho Tutu, *Made for Goodness*, NY, NY: HarperOne, HarperCollins, 2010, p. 170.

It is as if Jesus were saying to each of these people: quit stalling. Quit procrastinating. Don't hang on to the past. Don't look back. Don't cling to your comfort and security, to your possessions or good name. Don't cling to your good causes, ideas, or rituals -- in fact, don't cling to anything at all! Drop everything you are hanging on to, and let yourself fall into the radical love of God.

Then you will know what to do.

Then you will know how to love, and what to love.

Then you will know the next step in your journey.

As we reflect this morning on what it means to follow Jesus, I want to leave you with two questions.

First, just as Jesus "set his face" to go to Jerusalem, how would you name your own deepest longing? What is the deep intention of your life, the direction toward which everything in you feels drawn, as filings are drawn to a magnet? Toward what end-point or destination do you desire to set *your* face with complete devotion and commitment?

And second, in order to move forward on that journey, what do you need to let go?