

“No one who looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” Ouch. Does that sound kind of harsh to you? I wonder if Jesus’ words leave you wondering if *you* are fit for the kingdom of God. Maybe this passage leaves you feeling anxious or worried, or maybe it makes you defensive or offended. Maybe you just don’t like it very much, maybe it doesn’t sound like the Jesus you know. Any of those reactions might be evidence of a seed of doubt, somewhere deep inside, about your own fitness. Personally, I wonder if that’s the question this story wants us to ask.

It starts out by putting us in context: “The days drew near for Jesus to be taken up.” Knowing that those days are drawing near, Jesus’ response is to “set his face to go to Jerusalem.” St. Luke isn’t telling us about Jesus’ geographic destination, but about his mission, his purpose. We know what happens in Jerusalem: that is where Jesus is arrested, tried and executed, and afterwards, where he is raised to new life. This is the logical and inescapable conclusion of Jesus’ ministry. He has come to proclaim God’s good news to a world that resists hearing it, and that can only mean that violence will happen; and when it does, he will be on the receiving end, not the giving end.

This point, it seems, is lost on his disciples. When this Samaritan village refuses to receive Jesus—perhaps for the same reason the city of Jerusalem itself refuses to receive him—James’s and John’s first instinct is to call down fire from heaven to consume these infidels, like the prophet Elijah once did. Does that fit with the Jesus we will see in Jerusalem? Of course not. *His* face may be set on Jerusalem, but it seems his disciples aren’t quite there yet. Their faces seem to be set elsewhere.

To drive this point home, St. Luke shares three encounters between Jesus and other would-be disciples. The reader might even imagine that, after being shocked and appalled by the casual violence of his disciples, Jesus decides that he needs to institute some sort of application and vetting process before he lets anyone else come along. He makes clear that God’s kingdom requires a single-minded devotion: having divided loyalties—such as selfish devotion only to oneself or one’s own family or kin group—is not consistent with what God is doing. That kind of prejudice can predispose a group of Jewish disciples to rain down fire on a Samaritan village.

This is why I hear this text asking me where my loyalties are. Am I looking ahead as I plow, setting my face on Jerusalem, or are there other goals, other destinations that are competing for my attention and ruining my furrow? Am I looking forward to what is next, or am I always looking back to what was, what I used to know, and hoping to get back there? Am I following

Jesus for myself, for the hope of some reward, or because I believe in the mission that's taking him to Jerusalem?

I think this text challenges us to consider why anyone would want to follow Jesus at all. If it takes such a strict and unyielding devotion, if it costs us so much, why should we bother? Perhaps it's better to leave discipling to the holier people and remain here in our comfy homes where we can raise our families and bury our dead.

Some believe the answer to that question is all about the afterlife. Following Jesus now, hard as it is, will assure one a place in heaven, while failing or refusing to follow is inviting God to rain hellfire on one for eternity. Is it better to suffer through this one in the hope of some reward later? Personally, I find that answer not only extremely unsatisfactory, but also inconsistent with the message of scripture—at least as inconsistent as a Jesus who calls down fire from heaven to consume infidels.

I find it inconsistent because that's not what I see Jesus doing anywhere else. When he proclaims the kingdom of God, it's not something for later, it's something for now. In fact, his first sermon in Matthew and Mark's gospels is "Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven has come near!" and in Luke's gospel, it is "Today these words have been fulfilled in your hearing." Whatever the kingdom of God is—and that's the question we'll be chewing on for the rest of the year as we journey along this road with Luke—it is not limited to what happens when we die.

This is what St. Paul notices, as well. He describes the kingdom of God as freedom: "For freedom Christ has set us free," he writes. "You were called to freedom; do not use that freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence." He goes on to say that we can see where our own self-indulgent "freedom" takes us. "The works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife..." etc, etc. Paul sees that the problems of the world that we hope to escape in heaven are the very results of our divided loyalties and lack of commitment. Can heaven really be free of those things if they follow us there?

For both Jesus and Paul, salvation is less about gaining entrance to some fanciful kingdom than it is about turning—or being turned—away from those things that cause us to bite and devour one another until we are consumed. But it isn't just turning away, not really; it's a turning toward. It's setting our faces on "Jerusalem," as Luke says, or what Paul calls living "according to the Spirit." "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." That sounds more like what we think of when we think of heaven.

I hear these texts challenging us to consider what discipleship means for us, both individually and communally. Are we following God's path, or taking our own? Are our faces set on Jerusalem, or on the other things we think we need to be happy, successful, and fulfilled? Is discipleship just about hanging onto some doctrinal statement, or is it more about letting go of those other priorities that pull us away from where God is calling us?

If these stories do cause you some anxiety about whether you are fit for God's kingdom, this challenge may not exactly be a comforting thought; but I wonder if that's the point. As the old saying goes, the gospel comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. And yet, I think there is also good news in this challenge, at least in part because it assures us that salvation isn't some reward that God dangles in front of us to bribe us into moral living, but an ongoing process of creation in which God continually invites us to participate. Salvation is the work of God constantly turning our faces toward Jerusalem and the fruits of the Spirit. Maybe I'm not fit for the kingdom of God today, but tomorrow is a new day.

Think about the unnamed people in the story. We are never told how each of these encounters resolves. Do these folks follow Elisha's example and burn their bridges to follow Jesus? Or do they return to their lives and give up the dream of discipleship? If that's what they do on this day, what happens to them after Easter? Might some of these folks been among the 3000 who joined the Church on Pentecost? Or numbered among the believers baptized in Samaria?

In my experience, we tend to think of salvation in dualistic terms: saved or unsaved, believer or doubter. This story makes me wonder if it's not that simple. Having set his face on Jerusalem, Jesus still has a long road to travel to get there. This is chapter 9, and he won't arrive there for another 10 chapters. Luke's story isn't even half over at this point! The bulk of the gospel story takes place not at one place or another, but "along the road." It's Jesus journey to Jerusalem that gets the most ink because that's where the action is. That journey has its climax and its grounding in what happens at the destination, but all along the road there is life and growth and epiphany and movement.

In the Acts of the Apostles, St. Luke's sequel to his gospel story, he records that the community formed by the Spirit after Pentecost, the community of Jesus' disciples and friends, was known as "the Way." The Greek word is the same one used in the phrase "along the road." In a sense, even Jerusalem is just one stop on this much longer journey that the gospel is taking, a journey embodied in that community. One might even say that the journey *is* the destination; that

“along the road” is where we are trying to get to. In fact, it makes me wonder whether heaven, as we’ve classically understood it, is really what salvation is, or if salvation is something else entirely, something to be experienced in anticipation of heaven.

Perhaps grace is most visible in these stories in that God keeps seeking out and inviting people who are “not fit” for the kingdom to leave behind what holds them back—including people like James and John and Peter of the three-fold denial. Maybe, rather than a condemnation, this Luke’s story stands as an invitation to consider what holds us back from following Jesus and to think about how important those things really are in light of the alternative to which God continues to invite us.

The works of the flesh are obvious: polarization, overconsumption, persecution and fear, violence, greed, xenophobia and racism, an unsustainable and exploitative lifestyle that undervalues God’s good creation... The list goes on. What else belongs on that list? Now, as we look across the chasm from where we are to where we’d like to be, as we envision the just and peaceful world God is creating, can we start to see where some of those “fleshy” things may be keeping us from taking the leap from here to there?

The promise of Scripture is that that world we envision—the one I think we sometimes confuse with heaven—is the world that God is creating. It’s the world that lies at the end of this road, our destination; there’s no avoiding it. So I wonder, if we know that’s where God is taking us all eventually, if that might give us the courage to set aside those things that hold us back and get going along the road as God sets our faces on the New Jerusalem.