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 Proper 8C: 1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21; Galatians 5:1, 13-25; Luke 9:51-62  
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 St. James' Church, Monkton, MD

### **On the Road with Jesus**

In today's lessons we hear some things we ought to know about traveling with Jesus.

Summer is a season for traveling. My husband and I are getting ready for our vacation. This year we will drive somewhere -- to North Carolina to visit family and to spend some time in the mountains. Of course, whenever we travel somewhere, we have to make some preparations. We need to decide where we want to go, where we want to stay, what we want to do and see, how much the journey will cost. What kind of clothes do we need? Do we have the right maps? Actually, have I done all the right Mapquests? Will they be useful? I also like to ask what I want the trip to accomplish, what I'm hoping for: rest? Reflection time? To see something new? To have time to talk and visit, renew old friendships?

The connection between discipleship and being on a journey is an old one. One of the reasons I like the word parish is because it gets at the truth that we are all pilgrims on life's journey. It comes from a Greek word, *paroikia*, which originally referred to the community of strangers or sojourners in any city. Christians took over this word as a way of saying that our primary citizenship is in heaven. We are the pilgrim people of God. Our lives are a journey, from God, with God, and to God.

The early Church used to refer to itself by the name "The Way." The Way – not a name for a community that sees itself as settled or static. It is a good name for a community that sees itself on the move. The Christian life is a life on the move. To be a Christian means to be someone who follows Jesus on The Way, on the path he blazes for his disciples.

In all three of our lessons this morning, we are invited to reflect on these questions: As you travel through this life, what shape will your journey take? What's the point and purpose of your journey? Are you prepared for the high cost of the journey, the many demands that will be made of you? Will you follow the directions laid out for you, or will you be detoured from the way of discipleship?

In our first lesson, we hear about the call of Elisha to be the servant and successor of Elijah, one of the greatest prophets of Israel. Elijah finds Elisha out in his fields plowing with his oxen. The older and experienced Elijah throws his mantle over Elisha's shoulders, and Elisha realizes this means he is being asked to follow Elijah in his ministry and take on the role of prophet. Elisha's response is to stop plowing and instead he slaughters and cooks his oxen. Okay – it's a little hard on the oxen. But, it's a decisive act showing complete obedience to his new course. That is, he burns up all his former

means of livelihood and becomes Elijah's servant and apprentice in the difficult course of being a prophet of God. Elisha is ready to give up his former way of life to go traveling in the way God has set before him. How great and significant for us that Elisha marks the beginning of the next part of his journey by hosting a great feast.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus too is setting out on a very difficult mission from which he will not be deterred. He has set his face to go to Jerusalem, and we all know what will happen to him in Jerusalem. His heavenly Father has revealed the route, and his suffering and self-sacrificial death is part of the travel plan. Jesus' sense of purpose does not change as he goes, no matter what terrain he encounters, no matter who tries to deter him.

The first challenge on Jesus' road is the hostility of the Samaritans. The Samaritans reject Jesus because he is determined to go to Jerusalem, the capital city of the Jews, whom the Samaritans consider their enemies cultural and spiritual enemies. The disciples James and John are offended by the Samaritans' rejection and ask Jesus, basically, You're not going to take this, are you? You want us to rain down fire on them? Jesus says no. Jesus' way is different. He begins to prepare his disciples for the fact that he will not use violence or destructive force against his enemies, even once he reaches Jerusalem and faces angry mobs, Roman soldiers, Pilate. And Jesus' disciples not to use violence against their enemies either.

Jesus' sense of direction and purpose is extended to those who would travel with him. To those who would be disciples he offers no easy roads, no shortcuts. Now he meets three potential disciples. The first is enthusiastic: "I will follow you wherever you go," he says. Jesus responds, "Foxes have dens and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head." In other words, if you journey with Jesus, you will have no place of complete belonging on this earth, no real place of being fully and completely at home, except in God. Actually, that's true for everyone, not just disciples. But disciples are more aware of this truth – that, borrowing from St. Augustine, our hearts are restless unless we rest in God.

The road seems to become even more steep for the next potential disciple. Jesus invites him, "Follow me." The man replies with an honorable and decent request to be allowed first to go and bury his father. Interpreters differ as to whether this means the man's father has recently died, or would die soon, or whether this is an expression that means he wants to fulfill familial obligations in general until some day in the future when the man's father would die and he would be free to go, as in, my responsibilities mean that the timing's not good right now, but someday, in the next phase of my life, I'll be free to follow. Either way, Jesus' reply stresses the immediacy of following. "Leave the spiritually dead to bury the physically dead," is probably what Jesus means. "Your task is about life: proclaim the kingdom of God." At the very least, Jesus seems to be asking us to examine our priorities, even choosing between two competing goods. What comes first?

The conflict continues with his response to the third would-be disciple who wants first to say good-bye to his family. Jesus replies, “No one who sets a hand to the plow and looks to what was left behind is fit for the kingdom of God.” Jesus is saying disciples must be committed to the values and purposes of God’s kingdom above everything else, however dear and important those other things and commitments seem to be, however good those other commitments are. Our task is to make loving God our priority and then allow all other priorities to fall in line behind our commitment to God.

It is hard to follow this Jesus, with his face so firmly set, his demands so clearly made, and his own route leading so directly to the cross.

And yet, we can trust that however difficult the road is, we are not alone on it. Jesus is our leader on this way of love and life for us. And Jesus’ image of the hand set to the plow, while still describing the need to stay focused and purposeful is not so much about deadly seriousness as it is about hope for the future. If you’re going to plow a straight furrow, you need to look forward. You need to have a goal, some point on the horizon to aim for. And no farmer plows without the hope of harvest. Discipleship is about looking forward, with great expectations for the journey.

Taking Jesus’ route, walking with him, means other roads hold less possibility, hold less meaning. Traveling the road with Jesus leads to joy and peace and life, not just in heaven, but now.

That’s Paul’s point in our reading from Galatians. Traveling with Christ offers us genuine freedom, not to do whatever we please, but, as St. Augustine, again, put it, to love God, then do as we please. We are freed for a life of service in love. With love as our motivation, and the Holy Spirit as our guide and source of power, we have complete freedom to be all God intends us to be. We can enjoy the fruit of the harvest, the fruits of the Spirit now: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Just imagine carrying these as you travel! What a wonderful journey that would be!

So we gather here this morning to make some travel plans, or to look again at our maps, or to gain some reassurance and direction for our journey with Christ as disciples. None of us possesses the map that lays out our whole journey, and life is such that we never exactly know what we may encounter around the next bend. But what we do have is exactly what we need: a Savior who tells us the truth of what’s demanded of us for the journey -- the need to put God and God’s kingdom first, and to offer ourselves completely to God’s service, whatever that means for each of us in our lives, with the gifts and challenges and opportunities God gives each of us. We have a Savior who has drawn us together into a parish – a community of fellow travelers, fellow pilgrims on the way. We have a celebratory meal to nourish us for the next part of our journey. We have a Savior who was willing to walk the way of the cross and resurrection before us so there is nowhere we can go where he has not gone ahead to prepare the way, and who walks with us still. We have freedom to travel in the way of love, and to enjoy the fruit of the Spirit now as we journey. We have reason to hope, like a farmer preparing the field for a

rich and glorious harvest. We are not promised an easy journey, but I suspect the most rewarding travels never are.

Philips Brooks, once Bishop of Massachusetts, wrote, "O do not pray for easy lives. Pray to be stronger! Do not pray from tasks equal to your powers. Pray for powers equal to your tasks! Then the doing of your work shall not be a miracle. But you shall be a miracle. Every day you shall wonder at . . . the richness of life which has come in you by the grace of God."

Let us go with God, and have a wonderful journey.

Amen.