

Psalm 16 ~ Luke 9:51-62

But First...

June 30, 2019 ~ Third Sunday after Pentecost

Introduction to Scripture

Remember what happened to the wife of Lot when she looked back at the destruction of Sodom? The unforgettable image in Genesis 19:26 goes like this: “But Lot’s wife behind him, looked back and she became a pillar of salt.” Yikes. Fast forward to you and me driving along in our cars hearing a text message come in on our cell phones... and deciding to check it out, thinking it can’t wait it could be really important. OK, we know how dangerous a move that is. Resist. It’s not that important. I’m thinking that driving and texting just might have been the image Jesus would have used if he was telling it in our time and culture.

Moving forward, undeterred and undistracted, into the new and unknown has always been scary. Do we ever feel ready? Today’s story lurches us forward with a hinge text that points Jesus in the direction of Jerusalem. Are we ready to go now? Can we go the distance? This is a text that asks more questions than it answers. Perhaps the answer depends on us.

Sermon

So, a Catholic priest, a Baptist preacher, and a Presbyterian pastor went into a bar... And, after a few beers (this was obviously in Wisconsin) they got a little more honest with each other and the priest said, you know, if Jesus said, “Follow me” like he did in that Luke passage, I would say, “yes Lord, but first let me say one more Mass.” Then the Baptist preacher thought about it and said, “Well, I would say, “Yes Lord, but first let me baptize at least five more souls...” Finally the Presbyterian pastor piped up, “Well, I would say, “yes Lord, but first let me form a committee!”

We all have our “yes, buts,” our “go-to’s” that we cling to, before we think we are ready to go in a new direction Christ is calling us. Like the three would be followers in our biblical text or the three clergy in my silly joke: those things, our “go-to’s” can be good things, important things and even holy things. Like burying a father, (having just buried my mom, this one sticks in my gut today) or saying farewell to loved ones (come on, Jesus, even Elisha got to do that before he went off with Elijah). If Jesus sounds kind of abrupt in the way he responds to these potential disciples; if this passage feels kind of herky-jerky, you are starting to get the message. It’s raw and real, as the rubber is hitting the Jerusalem road.

Luke sets up the urgency in his opening sentence: “When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” And in this context, Jerusalem means way more than a point on a map. It is Jesus’ destiny and his destination. It’s the place where the political and the spiritual will intersect and realign the world. Before that Friday when the Noon day sky turned dark and the Temple was torn in two, Jesus still has a lot of work to do to teach his disciples what it means to follow him. Over ten chapters worth of work in the narrative world of Luke. We’re entering into the section of Luke that is like disciple boot camp. No place for slackers or distractions that delay the mission.

We will be traversing this ten-chapter terrain together in worship all the way through the summer and into the fall, during what we call in our Christian year “Ordinary Time” symbolized with our green paraments—our chance for extraordinary growth in our walk with Jesus. Our chance to think through, pray through, live together through the intersection of how our spiritual walk and our call to do justice and intertwined and interconnected. Today, we will begin with a good look at one three-letter word and see what it can teach us.

That word is b-u-t, “but.” You might not have noticed just how many “but’s” are in today’s scripture passage. You can hardly find a sentence without one. I invite all of you, including the children and teens, to grab a pencil right now, find the Luke text in your bulletin and circle the word “but” on every time it appears in this scripture, Luke 9:51-62.... How many did you find? There are 7 “but’s” in 11 verses. It’s a handy little word that actually can be used as four different parts of speech. I’m sure you didn’t come to church for a grammar lesson, so I won’t elaborate on those four different kinds of buts except to point out that all 7 times in our passage “but” is used as a conjunction, to introduce a phrase in contrast with what has just been mentioned.

The first two “buts” in verses 53 and 55 whip lash us around the Samaritan’s rejection of Jesus and then Jesus’ rebuke of James and John’s big idea. “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” Those two were ready to kick some religious butt. (That’s the but with two t’s). They thought they were on solid ground—their dramatic idea of judgment and immolation from heaven, came right from the Good Book, the prophet Elijah did it, not once but twice, each time to a group of fifty men (check it out in 2 Kings 1:9) . But Jesus said basically, “no” guys, absolutely not.” Boot Camp attendees take note: Jesus did not overreact. Nor did he underreact. Jesus’ response to the Samaritan’s rejection was to neither judge them *nor* to dismiss them as a lost cause. Reaching out to outsiders (no matter how hard that may be) and being rejected but not dejected or derailed are two rules of the road. The Jesus’ road. Yes: the path of life, as our Psalmist called it. Jesus rebuked, not the Samaritans, but his disciples.

The despised outsiders, the Samaritans, carry a central thread throughout Luke, including this pivotal story. We will see them play surprising roles in his parables and on his path to the cross, and even in Jesus’ parting commission in Acts 2:8 just prior to his ascension: “and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” So today the answer is, “No James and John, we will not retaliate with fire from heaven. Zapping people you don’t like who disagree with you, just because you can—is *not* how you follow me.”

“But come on Jesus, wouldn’t that be cool?” Essentially Jesus said to them, “No, James and John, *not* cool-- let’s keep going toward Jerusalem, there is another way. Watch and learn. We have a long way to go.”

The next five “buts” in our story ping pong back and forth between Jesus and three different aspiring disciples. What I love about this story is the struggle we feel in those “buts”—a struggle that is so true to our life with Jesus. How many times do we say, “Yes, Lord, but first...” God knows, that I do. And so does my husband, Bob. Recent example: on Friday, he comes to me while I’m working at my home desk and says, “Let’s go out to breakfast, honey.” What do I reply? “Sure, but first I need to write my sermon.” Undaunted, he replied, “But we could discuss your sermon over breakfast.” Clever fellow. But we didn’t go. And too late, I realized I’d missed the mark, ironically—given the theme of this sermon.

On a more serious note--whether in our personal discipleship with Christ, as a family, or as a church body, I hear this passage calling us to listen carefully to our “but firsts” and notice when they are distracting or detouring us from Jesus’ path for us. As theologian Karoline Lewis has written, “There are way more “but firsts” than we are willing to admit. We rationalize them as strategic, best practices, following protocol. We justify them as necessary decisions, just balancing budgets, or keeping denominational order... Complicity is all too often attractive. Complacency is all too often the easier way.”ⁱ

But Jesus' path of justice, especially for the "least of these" depends on us responding to a call that presents a challenge, "Here I am, ready or not" rather than "yes, but." The story of a young boy named Levi Coffin, told by Jonathon Wilson-Hartgrove, (writer, speaker and activist), offers one stirring example. It goes like this, "In the early 1800's, when he was growing up in the same North Carolina where George Freeman would preach evangelization to slaveholders and Franklin Graham would declare progressives atheist, a young white boy named Levi Coffin watched people who looked like him march enslaved African Americans down the road in front of his house. These men had run away to freedom, Coffin later learned, but the laws of the United States allowed slave catchers to capture and return them to bondage. Coffin was troubled by what he saw, and he never forgot it. *Following the Jesus he first met* (emphasis mine) in a Quaker meeting house outside of Greensboro, North Carolina, Coffin went on to devote his life to abolition, becoming the unofficial "President of the Underground Railroad" before his death in 1877. By grace, Coffin learned to see. Yes, you have to want to see.ⁱⁱ He develops this idea one step further with this important insight: "The desire itself to see differently, is the interruption that can save us."

Our "go-to," reliably all too consistent, "yes, but's" can be our way of shielding ourselves from Jesus' interruptions that can actually save us, as Wilson-Hartgrove puts it. And by extension can save our communities and world. What are ours, as a church? Let's talk about that in the weeks to come. Following Jesus is a call into a dynamic, day-by-day, sometimes hour-by-hour call to love Jesus *more than* our idea of Jesus. Did you ever notice, Jesus never says "worship me" he says, "follow me." To be ready to be unblinded, to see more clearly or differently than we did before can start with the choice to turn our "yes, but" into our, "Here I am, ready or not."

The urgency in our text was Jesus' inexorable turn toward Jerusalem and the cross. That shifted priorities, making burying parents and saying goodbye come second. The urgency for us now to follow Jesus in the face of our broken world can seem inexorable. We are all too aware of the ticking time bomb that is climate change; and the increasing flow of migrants all over the world fleeing for their lives, which for some is related to climate change. We hear the cry from the "Samaritans" of our day – those on the margins or disempowered because of their race, their poverty, their refugee status, or their sexual orientation calling out to us. These are only two of the most pressing problems Jesus came to save us from. Clearly--Jesus doesn't have time for our "Yes, but's" today, either.

Luke doesn't tell us whether the three would-be disciples decided to go with Jesus anyway, despite their initial reservation. But the real question is about us. Will we follow Jesus, and let our "yes, but's" take a hike or at least a back seat? Listen to yourself in the coming week and notice when those objections rise up inside of you. The more we become aware of them, the greater our chance of letting them go. When it comes to following Christ, my fellow Presbyterians (committee or no committee): Let's kick our "yes, but's"—and see what we can do.

ⁱHere is the link to Karoline Lewis' Working Preacher piece. I also credit the idea of my sermon title to her article on this passage. See: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5362>

ⁱⁱ Jonathon Wilson-Hartgrove, *Reconstructing the Gospel: Finding Freedom from Slaveholder Religion*, (Intervarsity Press Books: Downers Grove IL, 2018) 55-56.