Topic: No Going Back (Season of Pentecost 3, Lectionary C)
Scripture: Psalm 16, 2 Kings 2:6-14, Luke 9:51-62
Hymns: BB4 How Great Thou Art, VU436 Abide With Me, BB556 Now Thank We All Our God

———

Let’s take a moment to pray…

Lord, before this world's days even began, your Word was in the beginning, and it was with you and it was you. The mystery of that brings us to our knees. Yet today you allow us to open your Word and know you better. So, we ask that you would give us eyes to see and ears to hear. Give us hearts open to your Spirit as we seek you. AMEN.

(SLIDE) This morning's Scripture from Luke 9, which is before Jesus heads into Jerusalem, before the crucifixion, has a holy determination about it. (SLIDE) "**When the time had come for Him to be received up, that He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem**".

Jesus did not meander to the cross, he marched towards it. Jesus did not look for the path of least resistance, he walked straight into the fire. Why? Because the plan of salvation was not optional... it was essential. His love for us was not casual... (SLIDE of cross) it was cruciform.

I don't know if many of you remember the Apollo 11 mission of 1969. It was one of immense danger. Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin made no illusions about the dangers. Each moment was calculated...

Apollo 11 had a singular mission: get to the moon. Do what had never been done before, and then go home. Jesus' mission had a similar gravity to it... however the consequences were far more eternal and less scientific. Luke writes that Jesus set His face - this is code for (SLIDE) there was no going back.

Casual Christianity is foreign to the gospel. Any person or thing that treats Jesus as an accessory and not as Lord is not living in the truth, and the kingdom does not advance by convenience. It advances by conviction.

Elisha knew a little bit about this. He could see the faith as real and tangible as anything in this world by what he saw through his master, the prophet Elijah. But when it came time for Elijah to be taken up... Elisha set his face.

"I will not leave you", he says to Elijah. And Elijah challenged his student... challenged his conviction - leaving Elisha's request up to God to handle. "**If you see me go up into heaven,**" says Elijah to Elisha, "**you will receive what you have asked for**".

These men... Elisha, Elijah, Jesus, all had their eyes fixated on God, their faces set on the Most High God of Israel and were keenly attuned to Him as their highest goal. God is supposed to be our highest goal as well...

But sadly, even for many Christians, the world's highest goal has taken centre stage. Everybody worships something, even the most hardcore atheist worships something - it takes a different name. The world calls it "Culture".

Liberalism, which is a world and political view that has dominated our more prolific empires and kingdoms for the past 300 years, held as its highest goal the value of freedom. All other goals were subordinate to the freedom of man. This freedom was simply declared by the government, by the state, and protected from anything that would infringe upon it.

But, if freedom is the highest goal we can achieve, then everyone is free to define their own moral code, their own highest goal. If we could have left it at that... that might have been ok. But Liberalism is a peaceful pacifist ideology... and pacifism always loses to an aggressor.

Today's culture does not worship freedom as its highest goal anymore because the goal of freedom cannot limit itself. You cannot make an appeal to the good of children or the good of society or the good of safety because to define good, you have to define boundaries to what is not good. That means less freedom. Freedom lost to an aggressive new object of worship...

Today's culture worships at the altar of sex. Everything you see, everything you hear, comes under this new god. Education (think about it.. Sex Ed class is part of every school cirriculum now), Beauty ads (99% of them are women, models usually), clothing and fashion (look how short common everyday dresses are getting), billboards and advertising, television programming and movies (nearly every show has a generically beautiful love interest in it), the music industry and the internet. You don't have to look far to see it. Sex sells, and it sells everything.

As a society, there's no going back. Once freedom was enshrined as the highest goal, it was a matter of time before an aggressive ideology used that borderless freedom to take over as the new object of worship.

That leads me back to Luke. Jesus is approached by three men... three men who would be followers but in each case Jesus tests what they consider their highest goal. Each of them makes a bold offer - yet, each of them hasn't the conviction to move forward.

(SLIDE) "**Lord, I will follow you wherever you go**". Jesus' response is frightening. "**Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head**". Let's tighten that statement up... Jesus is saying He is homeless. Following Jesus isn't a weekend camping trip... it's a complete surrender to a wholly different lifestyle. Dependent, Poor, Vagrant even.

The man cannot put God or Discipleship before his need for a home, for a life with luxuries and money, the occasional splurge where they go out and spend on something big.

"**Follow Me**" Jesus says to another. (SLIDE) The second man responds, "**Lord, let me first go and bury my father**". We saw in the 12 Disciples the same call, "Follow Me" and each gave a positive response. Jesus said to each "Follow Me" and each said "Yes, Lord" and dropped what they were doing to follow Him.

This man, expressly invited to become a Disciple, has to tend to a funeral before all else. Jesus' response is again frightening. He says, "**Let the dead bury the dead, but you go and preach the Kingdom of God**".

The third man is even more blasphemous and exposes the heart of the matter, the object of his worship...

(SLIDE) "**I will follow you, but let me first go and bid them farewell who are at my house**". It feels almost mocking. Yea yea... I'll come follow you but I've got important life stuff to deal with first. You wait here, Son of God, while I say goodbye to my friends and family.

The response to the third man is a sobering sentence from Jesus, and one we should examine carefully. (SLIDE) "**No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God**". That's a hard passage to hear... and I can only imagine how heartwrenching it would be if I were hearing it from Jesus Himself.

Jesus is cutting straight to the point. These things may seem innocent enough, I mean what's the harm in saying goodbye to family before leaving for a trip or making funeral arrangements? But Jesus is seeing deeper than than surface. The problem with these men is their hesitation... the delay to obedience, them putting God last and their idols first. It's a heart divided.

The agricultural reference of the plow would have been well understood in the moment Jesus said it, and I think most of us get it here given we live in a farming community. The plowman must... MUST... look forward to keep his furrows straight.

His face MUST be set. If he turns his head, even for a moment, the plow will veer off. Oddly enough, I learned this lesson in bowling, because the same principle works there. Your hand and you eye line up... where you look is where you'll throw.

My bowling instructors, when I first started, would watch me bowl. They noticed I looked away from the pins... I looked down at the ball when I bowled it. It took years of practice to trust my body to follow my eye.

For the farm, crooked lines mean wasted seed and an unfit field for working and harvest. In the same way, the disciple who looks back - who clings to the past, who hesitates at the call - isn't ready for work. Where you look is where your body goes... if our face isn't set towards God, are we moving towards Him?

It reminds me of Lot's Wife from Genesis 19. God was delivering her and her family from the destruction all around her and yet she looked back at Sodom, at the sin and corruption. She turns to salt.

You cannot serve two masters - you cannot walk forward while staring backward. In 2 Timothy 4, Paul writes about a man named Demas. "**Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica**".

Who is Demas?! Never heard of 'im!! We do not know all the sordid details, but we can infer that Demas began strong. He travelled with Paul, learned from him, ministered along side him, probably preached the gospel. But the pull of the world was stronger. He looked back ... and veered way off course.

This is a tagedy, of course. Paul uses the word "deserted", that's a pretty strong word. And for Paul to even include him in a letter means that Demas meant something to Paul. The Kingdom isn't for the double-minded... one eye on the cross and the other on the world.

Jesus didn't flinch from his gaze. (SLIDE) "**He set his face to go to Jerusalem**". Jesus didn't hesitate. He didn't try to attend a last minute funeral for someone, He didn't need to check his emotional readiness, He didn't stop for the concerns of culture. He marched toward Jerusalem, knowing the cross awaited Him.

Hebrews 12 reads, "**Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus... who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising its shame**". Let's fix our eyes on Jesus. Don't glance back at the sins He has delivered you from.

Don't cling to comforts He called you to forsake. Don't second-guess your salvation, or put stipulations on your belief. Press forward, eyes on Jesus. Run the race, abandon the escape plan, there's nothing in Sodom for you... the only way is forward, the only way is Jesus.

So many of us treat Jesus like a weekend hobby, or we get our fix of the world THEN we come to God. Maybe it's an old relationship God told you to let go of... a past life of sin that still whispers in the dark of night... or some ambition that God hasn't blessed.

It's time to choose: will you follow Christ with an undivided loyalty, or will you live half-turned, always wondering "what if"? The plow is in YOUR hands and the call is clear. The King is ahead of us, the perfect place to keep our eyes to make straight the path.

Set your face. No turning back from Jesus.