

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

JOURNEYING WITH JESUS

Luke 9:51-62

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Analysis by Carolyn Schneider

51 When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. 52 And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; 53 but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. 54 When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" 55 But he turned and rebuked them. 56 Then they went on to another village. 57 As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." 58 And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." 59 To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." 60 But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." 61 Another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." 62 Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

DIAGNOSIS: Looking Back

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Conflicting Points of View*

Jesus has set his face firmly toward Jerusalem. He has announced

that he will meet with trouble there. It seems that Jesus' disciples expected a prophetic showdown with the powers that be, something similar to the ancient prophet Elijah's confrontations with the kings of Israel over their idolatrous worship of gods other than Yahweh. But Jesus appears to have something else in mind because there is nothing but a series of rejections and rebukes as he journeys with the disciples. First, when they come to a Samaritan town, the Samaritans don't want to welcome Jesus because he is going to the other religious center (Jerusalem), not to their own religious center (Mount Gerizim). Jesus' disciples want to imitate Elijah (2 Kings 1) and call down fire to consume the Samaritans for their idolatry, but Jesus rebukes them. Other potential followers of Jesus want to imitate Elisha. When Elijah called Elisha to be his successor, Elisha asked to take leave of his parents before he followed Elijah, and Elijah permitted it. When Jesus invites people to join him and they tell him that, for family reasons, they cannot do so right away, he rebukes these would-be followers, telling them that they are missing the kingdom of God. Those who see Jesus as the reviver of Elijah and a righteous past find themselves in conflict with Jesus. They are looking back while Jesus' face is set forward.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Worship of the Past*

We worship what we know. Jesus' disciples want to relive the best strands of the religious history of their people, the parts where they knew that God was present and active, exercising justice through the prophets. Since the past is completely predictable from our perspective in the present, it is a safe refuge. We know how the story ends. We can judge which side was right and which was wrong, and we can put ourselves on the right side and thus be justified. From our righteous perch we can then judge others, too, and even seek to punish them, to play out the ending of the story as we know it. I imagine that Jesus'

followers were as hurt and confused as we are by Jesus' harsh response when we seek to make ourselves the prophets of God.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : Rejection of the Living God

While we, like the disciples of this story, may want to reclaim the past, Jesus wants to go forward. God is doing a new thing in Jesus, something different from what God was doing through Elijah. God is a living God who cannot be held captive to the past. So the kingdom of God, which is new, will always conflict with our ideas of the kingdom of God, which are old. We wonder how Jesus can reject what we know is right. This is why Jesus knows that he is headed for trouble. The reign of God that he carries along with him will be condemned because we will reject the living God who cannot be contained, but who challenges and opposes us and our human righteousness.

PROGNOSIS: Faces Set Forward

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Living God Taken Up*

Luke uses a loaded word to describe what will happen to Jesus in Jerusalem. There Jesus will experience his *analepseos*, his lifting up, or ascension (9:51). It's a strange word to use to describe a crucifixion. But God is doing something strange in Jesus. The king enters Jerusalem to be crowned and to ascend the throne. He does not call down fire from heaven on all of us idolaters, but reigns from the cross by taking into himself all of our idolatries, such as our worship of our past, our heritage, our ancestors, and our righteousness. He lets these be brought to an end in himself, and they lie dead in his tomb. But from that tomb he ascends again, the living God, now reigning by sharing his Spirit so that we can have a new life in place of what was destroyed on the cross.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Journeying*

Ahead

We set our faces toward Jerusalem, not to dwell on what happened to Jesus there in the past, but to see that Jesus' life story is not over and never will be. The living God is making of our own lives chapters in Jesus' story in ways that are not bound to what we know from the past. We who journey with Jesus become like him, free from anything that would trap us in the past. We look ahead to Jerusalem to see our own ascensions in Jesus, whether those are our ascensions to new life today or on the last day.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *New Points of View*

Our mission on the road is different from that of the great prophets from the past. In fact, Jesus now intends to follow his followers, sending us ahead of him as angels (angelos, 9:52), or messengers. Our message is the story of God's strange reign in Jesus. Jesus tells one potential follower to let the dead be, "but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God" (9:60). Those who hear and recognize the goodness of this promised kingdom of new life in Jesus welcome Jesus when he comes on the wings of the Spirit, for in this kingdom there is no longer any rebuke from the Lord.