



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### **Pentecost 3 Proper 8 (C)**

#### **The Way**

**[RCL] 2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14; Psalm 77:1-2, 11-20; Galatians 5:1,13-25; Luke 9:51-62**

Every journey is a quest. At least, that's what people who think about stories tell us. It doesn't matter if you are King Arthur in search of the Holy Grail, Don Quixote in search of his lady Dulcinea del Toboso, or Dorothy just trying to get home. And if our lives, from birth to death, from ignorance to wisdom, from exile to return, can be described as a journey, then we are also on a quest. And no quest is easy. Every time we set out on a journey, we will face trials and tribulations. These may come in the form of a dragon or an evil knight or flying monkeys, but by confronting these challenges, we will be transformed. We will not be the same people we were when we set out on the journey.

Our Gospel lesson for today comes from the beginning of what scholars call Luke's Travel Narrative. It is the story of Jesus' journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, a movement from the north to the south. It is a journey from the life he knew in Galilee to the death he will experience in Jerusalem. It is a story in which Jesus will be transformed from a prophet into the crucified Messiah, and Jesus' followers will be transformed from bystanders into disciples. On the journey to Jerusalem, we explore the mystery at the very heart of the Christian faith, the mystery of who we are called to be and what we are called to do.

The early Christians used to refer to themselves as "The Way." Luke, our Gospel writer, is actually the first person to record this name for the early Christian movement. And it seems that by calling themselves "The Way," the early church was saying something really important about who they were. This was not a static and settled community. They did not refer to themselves as "The Immovable Fortress of Faith" or "The Mighty Temple of Absolute Truth." Rather, they referred to themselves as "The Way." And that is a name for a group of people who see themselves on the move, who find their true identity on the journey, who discover their deepest and truest lives as they follow Christ on his way of self-giving love. And this journey, like all journeys, will mean facing trials and tribulations. There will be risks and there will be conflict. But there is also a promise. The promise that on the journey we will be transformed. The promise that in losing our lives, our lives will be saved. The promise that on "The Way," we will find new and abundant life. Luke tells us, "When the day drew near for Jesus to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem," and some of his disciples followed him on "the way."

The first episode of this journey occurs in Samaria. It is a fascinating story that we might think of as a bit of First-Century, Middle-Eastern Road Rage. Jesus and his disciples are traveling through Samaria on their way to Jerusalem. Now, that Jesus chose a route through Samaria is itself an interesting detail, because Jews and Samaritans did not like each other. Like so many Middle Eastern neighbors, then and now, they had a centuries-long conflict going. One of the flashpoints had been the destruction of the Samaritan Temple around 128 BC by the Jewish ruler, John Hyrcanus, because he saw it as an unholy rival to the true temple in Jerusalem. A sure-fire way to get a group of people to really hate you is to destroy their place of worship! In fact, the dislike between Jews and Samaritans was so bad that in Jesus' day, many Jews avoided traveling through Samaria altogether. They would take a long detour around the whole country. There was sort of an unofficial travel advisory saying it was unsafe for Jews to travel through Samaria. Then, as now, there are just some places in the world where it is not safe to go.

But Jesus does not take the detour around Samaria. He resolutely sets his face toward Jerusalem, and he begins traveling south on the road through Samaria. And not surprisingly, because he is on his way to Jerusalem, the site of the hated Temple of the Jews, Jesus is not welcome. Luke tells us that they “did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem.”

At this point, his disciples, James and John, become enraged. They are traveling along, and the Samaritans basically blow them off, and they completely lose their temper. True to their nickname, “the Sons of Thunder,” they turn to Jesus, veins bulging and hearts pounding, and say, “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?”

Now, this is some serious First-Century, Middle-Eastern Road Rage. A village does not welcome them on their way to Jerusalem and the disciples want to call down fire from heaven!

Think about how different the meaning of the Christian life would be if Jesus had said “yes” to their request for vengeance. Can you imagine tuning into the nightly news and hearing that there is a backup on the Beltway because of a road rage incident? *It seems like one of these aggressive drivers from D.C. cut off a van carrying the “Sons of Thunder Glory Hallelujah Praise Band from the Church of St. James and St. John.” The Church members became so enraged that they called down fire from heaven, which completely consumed the vehicle from D.C. Emergency workers are on the scene and the clean-up could take several hours.*

Sometimes, we may wonder where Jesus found these early followers! For goodness' sake, they honestly asked Jesus, the Prince of Peace, “Lord, do you want us to call down fire from heaven to consume them?” Of course, Jesus says, “no” to the disciples' request for violence and vengeance. In fact, he says “no” in the strongest possible terms. Luke tells us that Jesus “rebuked” them. In the Greek text, the verb “to rebuke” is what Jesus does when he encounters demons. In the disciples' request for vengeance, in their request to call down fire from heaven on their enemies, Jesus sees something demonic, and he rebukes them.

No more vengeance. No more First-Century, Middle-Eastern Road Rage. The way of discipleship, the way of being a follower of Christ is not to be the way of hatred and revenge. Traveling with Jesus, on the road

to Jerusalem, the disciples learn a deep truth about the Christian life. No more hate. No more retaliation. No more fire from heaven. Jesus had taught his disciples to love their enemies, to do good to those who hate them, to pray for those who mistreat him. In fact, Jesus had taught James and John these very lessons in the Sermon on the Plain before they had begun their journey through Samaria. And yet, we know there is a big difference between understanding the words and living the truth of the words. Traveling with Jesus, on their journey to Jerusalem, the disciples learn the hard truth of loving their enemy.

It is easy to say, but hard to do. It was hard to do then, and it is hard to do now. But we are called to follow a Lord who did not call down fire from heaven on his enemies. We are called to follow a teacher who told us to bless those who curse us and to pray for those who spitefully use us. We are called to follow Christ on his way to Jerusalem, on his way to the cross, where he did not curse his enemies, but rather prayed, “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.”

The Christian life is a journey. It is a journey in which we discover our deepest and truest lives, the truth of who we are called to be and how we are to live together in this world. The earliest Christians called themselves “The Way.” On the road to Jerusalem, following Jesus on his way of self-giving love, the first disciples learned that they must die to the old ways of anger and hatred, and rise to the new life of forgiveness and love. This may not have seemed like a realistic way for first-century Jews traveling through Samaria to live. It may not seem like a realistic way to live in our present-day world, either. And yet, it may be our only realistic hope for the future.

On a dusty road, in the middle of a hostile, Middle-Eastern country, some followers of Jesus asked, “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?”

Jesus turned to them, and he rebuked them.

And they went on to another village.

As they were going along the road, they met another person.

And Jesus said to him, “Follow me.”

***The Rev. Joseph S. Pagano*** is an Episcopal priest who serves in the Anglican Parish of Pasadena and Cormack in Newfoundland, Canada. He is a faculty member in theology at Queen’s College in St. John’s, Newfoundland. His most recent book is *Common Prayer: Reflections on Episcopal Worship*.