

### Faces Set Towards Jerusalem

Having set his face toward Jerusalem, Jesus sends messengers ahead. Several enter a Samaritan village to lay the groundwork for his arrival, but when Jesus enters the city, they reject him. They reject Jesus (even though for some reason they'd accepted the advance team) because his face was set toward Jerusalem.

What a rich and mysterious phrase: *His face was set toward Jerusalem*. What does that mean? What did that look like?

We know, for example, that Jerusalem was to be a place of great suffering and pain. If the people of the village were looking for a guru who could wave away their pain, Jesus wasn't it. We know that Jerusalem was a place where Jesus would experience total humiliation of self. If the villagers were looking for a religious path to power or self-righteousness, Jesus didn't provide it. Jerusalem was a place where Jesus would die in the name of love and then enter an even more full life: the villagers couldn't comprehend that.

Jesus carried on his face the imprint of the eternal, but the villagers had no capacity and no desire for it. They already knew how the world worked. They had their stories to explain the world and their place in it, and they had no intention of letting those stories go. So they do not receive him.

Ever the faithful lieutenants, James and John, see this moment of rejection and are ready to jump in and fix it: *Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?* To which Jesus said, in an earlier edition of the gospel, "Wait, you can *do* that?"

He didn't really say that. But he did rebuke them, and then simply turned and went to another village. But let's stay for a moment with James and John. Though they are 100% all-talk, the original chicken hawks, this still is some awfully violent imagery that imagines we could somehow force people to think right and therefore know God.

Their idea is that faith is something that can be achieved through force, through coercion, through guilt, through threat of being considered outside the community if you don't get right with the lord. I am speaking of that unlovely hammering that many of us received as children, or try to do to ourselves, like trying to beat sheet metal into the shape that we're told

is right and proper. And by the way coercion can be the stick, but it can be the carrot, too. Having figured out that the stick of guilt has negative side effects, the church has replaced it with the carrot of programs!

Neither has much at all to do with following the one whose face is set towards Jerusalem, whose visage is reflective of the eternal. Coercion, whether harsh or pleasant, cannot transfigure us, only the fruit of the spirit can do that: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Only these can set our faces towards Jerusalem.

Now here's where it gets hard. Jesus says, "follow me," in almost the same breath as saying, "I am going somewhere where there will be no comfort, no respite, no security." Follow me. And then, as if that isn't daunting enough, Jesus rebukes the folks who ask for a few days to settle their affairs. Let me bury my father, says one, let me say farewell to my household, says another. No, Jesus says. Follow me now. Let the dead bury the dead.

I think – no, I'm sure – that Jesus and the evangelists throw things like this in to disrupt our hubris. Not shame us, but rather to activate our humility, to make clear that: those things you think you know and understand? You don't. You neither know nor understand. Let's begin there.

What I read in this now, *let the dead bury the dead*, is that Jesus knows the incredible pressure and pull of the old village ways. He knows the hold that those villages have on us, that without great help and great decision we cannot become dislodged from the stories that we are told that have nothing to do with Jerusalem.

We can even moralize and say that some of the old ways are good, and some of them are bad: Greed and lustful behavior, hurtful action, laziness, these are clearly bad. Responsibility, care of others, worship, praying the funeral rites, these are clearly good and necessary parts of life.

But we are fooling ourselves if we think we can cherry-pick the good qualities, and take them with us on our journey with Jesus, while moralistically discarding those "shameful" things by the roadside.

Because Jesus says: leave it all behind. Leave it all. Leave it now, and follow me. Or don't.

If you were hoping I'd come back from sabbatical with easy answers, all I can say is, "so did I!"

What separates us from this kind of freedom? Why might our village reject Jesus *because* his face is set toward Jerusalem? What prevents our own transfiguration, the setting of our own faces towards the eternal?

A number of themes emerged for me during my sabbatical, many of which I didn't expect. The Spirit is funny that way.

Besides getting a whole lot of time to pray, I read a lot about prayer. Mostly about Christian prayer practices, but I also read about prayer in Celtic traditions, in Buddhist teaching, in mindfulness practice. I also read books that had nothing to do with church or prayer but had much to say about leading a wholehearted, grounded life.

One of the themes that came up over and over and over again was: *drop the story*. We live our lives out of these stories that exist in our little brains, stories we were given in our childhood, or are taught by powerful people who wish to remain so, or which grow in us around wounds or insults or perceived insults, stories of how we imagine the world works but which really reflect our tragic *lack* of imagination.

These stories can become our whole reality. And I think that's the village, that's the place of stories and assumptions, all of which are compelling but few or none of which are true, a place rich in routine and repetition and familiarity but lacking in insight or imagination. We americans, we north carolinians, Episcopalians, we the citizens of this self-centered world of opinions and wounds, *we* are the village people, blind to the guest at our gate, unable to see the eternal in his face. We are weighed down with the stories we tell ourselves.

"Let the dead bury the dead" echoes the wisdom traditions that tell us that the more hardened we become around our own egos, around the stories in which are either the hero or the victim, around the memory of scores to settle, the more inside us dies for lack of love and oxygen. Our lives are filled with temptations to return to the land of the dead, and a great many of those temptations will *seem* benign and intuitive. But Jesus is challenging us to walk away, to be among the living.

Let the dead bury the dead. I believe that those stories we carry are 99% dead tissue, unnecessary burdens that can warp our souls, do great harm to others, and contort our lovely faces into something that cannot bear to face the eternal.

All it takes, though, to begin the process of transfiguration, all it takes to begin to follow Jesus, all it takes to re-enter the world of the living, is a little bit of imagination, a measure of honesty, and of course, hope. Assume here that imagination is one of God's greatest gifts to us because it allows us, whether playfully or creatively or even critically, to envision a different way.

Consider where your world has become hardened, calcified, around a few indispensable truths that may not in fact be true, and ask Christ to be with you there. Imagine what it might feel like to see in the face of Jesus, or on anyone's face for that matter, the imprint of the eternal, and then imagine the freedom that becomes possible as you yourself turn towards the holy.

Wherever you are this morning: whatever pain you might be feeling. Whatever story is stuck in repeat on the player in your mind. Whatever dead tissue is weighing you down: there is another way. That way can begin with a single act of imagination and hope, with a simple act of invitation. *Come, Lord Jesus. Enter the village of my heart, so that I may see your face.*

*The Rev. Bernard J. Owens*

*Proper 8, Year C*

*June 26, 2016*

*St. Andrew's Episcopal Church*

*Greensboro, North Carolina*