

## *No Turning Back*

1 Kings 19: 19-21    Luke 9: 51-62

If we're out exploring new terrain on foot or in a car, we often have a certain degree of confidence that, even though the new territory is unfamiliar, you can always turn around, retrace your steps, and get back to something familiar.

That is, unless you're driving in Boston. If you're driving in Manhattan, it isn't so bad; most all streets run north-south or east-west. The side streets are consecutively one way in one direction, then one way in the other direction. Most are numbered with east or west, or north or south designations. You pick up the sequence while you experience being cut off and blocked by double and triple parked cars and trucks more times than you thought possible. Driving in Manhattan is not for the uncertain or nice guy driver; driving is an aggressive survival skill.

On the other hand, Boston is said to have streets that originated as cow paths. They make no sense, have no order, and you should *expect* to get lost. Driving in Boston is also an aggressive survival skill, like in Manhattan, but add in a heavy dose of crazy. People run stop signs and red lights as frequently as they stop dead in the middle of the road to let jaywalkers cross the street. In Manhattan, a jaywalker will die; the car won't stop, and the driver will loudly curse out your dead body, too. In Boston, a jaywalker will cross safely, but there will be a multi-car accident because of them.

Traffic circles, called rotaries, demand nerves of steel as drivers hurtle into the swirling traffic. The technique – and I'm serious about this – is **not** to look at the other cars or drivers when you drive into one. You drive in and make them adjust to your entry. The poor sap who thinks someone is going to let them in will have to wait until about 2am when the traffic has died down.

In either place, a car is a liability. Besides the exhausting adrenaline depletion of the driving experience, then there's the burden of having a ton and a half of metal that will cost you dearly to park anywhere. Mass transit, despite its many faults, is always preferable. Once you enter the city with that car, there really is no turning back. You're stuck. You suck it up, take deep breaths, drive to survive, and hope the hourly parking rate isn't more than double your hourly wage.

Often it seems wise to turn back when the horizon offers something uncertain, ominous, or unpleasant ahead. We may discover that we're in over our heads in an undertaking that became much more than originally expected. We may find that our expectations were woefully off base in assessing an enterprise. We may feel overwhelmed when the odds start mounting against attaining our objective. There are lots of reasons for turning back, for surrendering, for retreating, for giving up, for heading back into our comfort zone. It's in such times that the person of faith is tested.

Today's reading from Luke starts off with the disciples proving themselves once again to be wildly exuberant and totally inept. Preceding this story is goofy Peter at the

Transfiguration being utterly confused and clueless, the disciples unable to exorcise a demon, followed by an argument over which disciple is the greatest, among other stellar performances by Jesus' closest companions. In our reading, Jesus and his disciples are refused welcome at a Samaritan village. James and John ask Jesus if they should call down fire from heaven upon the village. Here they echo Elijah who did call down fire on a village, but neither is Elijah.

These nincompoops have a track record; they couldn't call down a taxi much less call fire down from heaven, and Jesus knows this. Jesus was probably caught between shock and awe and *couldn't* talk; **shock** at their arrogant stupidity and **awe** at their incredible lack of understanding of the mission. In any case, Jesus was appalled at them ... again! The text simply says that Jesus rebuked them and they moved on.

The story continues as potential disciples come by asking to share the journey to Jerusalem. One man comes up and says he'll follow Jesus wherever he goes. Jesus reminds him that he will be giving up his earthly home to accompany Jesus; *Foxes have holes and birds ... have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head*. In essence, Jesus asks him, *Will you give up everything?* No answer.

For the next, Jesus tells the man, *Follow me*. Quick thinker, the man wants to go and bury his father first, a very sacred duty among Jews. The next man wants to say good-bye to his family, echoing Elisha's reply to Elijah when he was called. Elijah allowed it, but not Jesus. These failed recruits cause Jesus to say, *No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God*.

This may sound harsh, but the practicality is unavoidable. If you're plowing a row, there is no meaningful way to go besides forward. Once you start, you better be ready to go the whole way. And the whole way means a complete and thorough commitment. Half-hearted, half-baked and half-measured isn't going to cut it.

In the Old Testament reading, we find the prophet Elijah fulfilling one of God's instruction to him on the mountain. Besides telling Elijah to go back the way he came, the prophet was to select and begin grooming his successor, Elisha.

Elijah finds him, and what is Elisha doing? He's plowing a field. (Here are one of several allusions between Elijah's story and Jesus' story in Luke.) Elisha is plowing the field with 12 yokes of oxen. That's a lot of oxen. A farmer would consider himself blessed to have one ox for plowing. **Twelve** oxen indicate the wealth that Elisha possesses.

What follows is a strange sequence, starting with Elijah simply draping the mantle onto Elisha's shoulders and walking away. There is no anointing mentioned that would indicate the fulfillment of the calling. Instead, Elisha has to run to catch up to Elijah and asks the prophet for time to say farewell to his mother and father. (Another allusion found in Luke, right?) Elijah says, *Go ahead*. But then he says something no one really understands, *What have I done to you?* Or: *Have I done anything to you?* Elisha doesn't reply, so commentators feel the prophet is saying in an odd way, 'What have I

done to prevent you (from saying good-bye to your parents)?' Or is Elijah saying, 'Do you know what I have done to you?' as in 'Do you know what you're getting into?'

The lack of verbal reply may be irrelevant after we hear what Elisha does. He slaughters the oxen, uses the plow for firewood and has a huge barbecue. He gives away the food and then he follows Elijah. In a bold, definitive statement, Elisha has acted without words to commit himself to the mission ahead. He has reduced his known life to ashes in order to fully accept the mantle that Elijah has conferred upon him.

Elisha takes the time to do something that Jesus would not allow. Perhaps this is due to the greater sense of urgency for Jesus' mission since Jesus believes the last days are imminent, or perhaps to set Jesus apart as even greater than Elijah the great prophet. In any case, Elisha goes back only to finalize his decision with actions showing that there is no turning back for him. He surrenders his known life, renouncing that life by liquidating it in order to become a servant of God and join the prophet Elijah on God's mission.

You'll be relieved to know that I'm not suggesting that you need to make a similar commitment or take similar actions in order to faithfully follow Jesus Christ. Yet the point is clear that the one who seeks to follow the Lord can expect exceptional demands. The one who chooses to be a disciple of Jesus must (ultimately) leave much of their life behind in one form or another. By choosing Jesus as Lord, there is a choice made against certain things that have been part of our lives, our assumptions, and our expectations. Serving the Lord, we begin to have a new life designed within our faithfulness that won't look much like the former life.

This isn't a great message for Christians in today's church. We're pretty confident that being a follower of Jesus is like an identity quality rather than an identity crisis for who we are, who we have been, and who we are to become. 'Good heavens, who ever thought following Jesus could have such an impact? Or be so demanding? I thought going to church was enough.'

Today's scriptures challenge us to ask ourselves some questions.

What exactly have we turned *away from* in our faith journey? Have we turned away from judgment and condemnation? Have we turned aside from coveting and envy? Have we left behind anger and self-righteousness? Have we gotten past our servility toward the Powers of this world? Have we rejected contentment and complacency? Have we said farewell to fear and defensiveness?

And what have we *turned toward* in our faith commitment? Have we turned toward grace and forgiveness? Have turned to acceptance and welcome of all? Have we moved toward humility and devotion? Have we gone the distance in love and reconciliation? Have we advanced in generosity and sacrifice? Have we heard the call to serve and walked into its challenges?

And whatever we have done so far, *what's next?* The process is never complete, at least until we depart this life, so that question, "what's next?" remains a constant. Whatever we have turned away from and turned toward, we are ought to expect that something, whatever it is, is next.

When we choose to serve the Lord, in any capacity, we need to be forewarned, there's no turning back. But the way forward is in partnership with the kingdom of God and the promise of life. It's worth it.