

Pentecost 3C, Proper 8, June 30, 2019. Luke 9:51-62.

My college girlfriend attended a church called the Baptist Church of the Boanerges. It was nestled among the idyllic hills and streams of lower Appalachia, in Southeast Tennessee. In this gentlest of landscapes, this little church was appropriately named—the kind of faith there matched their name, rather than their environment. It was all thunder and cymbals. “Boanerges,” unfortunately, isn’t a term we use very often. It’s a nickname Jesus gave two of his friends, the brothers James and John, and it’s a Greek rendition of Aramaic slang meaning “Sons of Thunder.” The name matched that old Baptist church that had so much to say about the sinfulness of the world they had built, and today we see how it matches these two fierce, faithful, but flawed friends of Jesus—as they suggest that the Christian response to inhospitality should be divine annihilation.

The Boanerges interlude seems out of place with what this passage is trying to do. The overwhelming tenor is urgency and the theme is the cost of discipleship. Jesus has been ministering in the north of Israel-Palestine, near his hometown and far from the seat of imperial and religious power. But in the first verse of our reading today, he “sets his face to go to Jerusalem.” It is the hinge of Luke’s gospel, when the hometown ministry ends and Jesus begins the trip towards his confrontation with the powers of this world. Now, granted, this travel narrative takes about ten chapters and will, in fact, occupy us for the rest of the year. We’ve already read Luke’s account of what happens when Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, raids the Temple, embarrasses the collaborationist religious leadership, and eventually is arrested and executed. But we would do well to remember this summer and fall that all the stories and teachings we will encounter are while Jesus is on his way to confront the powers that be and go through the cross to resurrection. That trip starts today.

And it starts with urgency. As soon as Jesus has set his face to go to Jerusalem, we get this rapid-fire cryptic recruitment process. Someone volunteers to join the Jesus team, and Jesus responds by emphasizing how hard it is to be on that team. Then Jesus calls someone else to come along, but when the guy asks for time to bury his father, Jesus suggests there’s no time for that and sends him off to proclaim the kingdom of God. And then another volunteer shows up, but just wants to say goodbye to the folks back home, and Jesus says that such delays render one unfit for the kingdom of God. I suspect that this interview process would be frowned upon by most human resources professionals.

Luke isn’t really criticizing people who want to bury their parents, or say goodbye to family, or have homes. He is trying to impress upon us the urgency of Jesus’ mission and to insist to us that discipleship requires immediate and total commitment. It is less that we shouldn’t bury our parents, and more that following Jesus can only be done when we do it with our full selves. It is an adventure to which we must commit fully, and preferably with as little hesitation as possible. Jesus is on the move, getting to work, and we need to fall in if we’re going to.

And in the middle of this, we get the Sons of Thunder recommending calling down fire from heaven on an inhospitable town. (To be fair, God has previous on this count.) Samaria isn't just inhospitable, it is cowardly. They don't want Jesus to come because they see that he has Jerusalem in his sites, and it doesn't take a prophet to be able to see that Jesus isn't going to Jerusalem quietly to visit friends. They reject him because they are afraid of being associated with him when he gets to Jerusalem and confronts the empire. It's a rejection of what has become the core of Jesus' mission.

James and John seem out of place in this passage, but their nonsense actually plays into the main theme here quite well. Following Jesus requires this itinerant and holistic urgency, but we may never forget that we are not just in a hurry. The Boanerges Brothers get that drastic action is what is called for here. But they have forgotten what it means to be a follower specifically of Jesus. The path Jesus leads us on will confront the wicked and convict the cowardly, but it will not destroy either of them. Our calling is to resist and defeat the powers of hell, but never so that we can take that power for our own benefit. Our task is to defeat, without destroying, and to be more ready to die than to kill.

The Samaritans are cowardly, the Romans and their local religious collaborators are wicked, people are suffering. Something must be done. But our urgency cannot drive us, as it does James and John, to do in the name of Christ what Christ would never do. Christian urgency drives us into love and truth, and arms us with courage and peace. To go to the heart of power, healing and helping all along the way, and then tell the uncompromising truth in love is a great deal more demanding than divine carpet-bombing. To keep healing and helping and telling the truth, even at great risk to ourselves, is the path on which we run to follow Jesus.

Rome is very much still in charge. Many people who should be our leaders are very much still greedy collaborators. And many people who should be our friends still can't overcome their cowardice. But Jesus' face is always set to go to the place where the chains that bind his people are made, and he is always calling, "follow me." Amen.