



“Expectations – Downward”

Luke 9:28–36, 51-56

The time has come.

Jesus turns toward the cross.

Most of Jesus’ ministry happens at the Sea of Galilee. Venture inland to the west and the terrain quickly becomes hilly and difficult; it is no easy walk from Nazareth to the Sea of Galilee. In the midst of the Galilean hills, Jesus took his closest disciples up a mountain where Jesus’ glory was

revealed. Do we know exactly which mountain or hill? No, but Mt. Tabor is a good candidate and is often remembered as the Mt. of the Transfiguration. In addition, there are several wonderful look-out spots nearby that give amazing views of Galilee, enabling you to take in the big picture. Jesus would take Peter, James, and John up a mountainside, where all three disciples thought they had found the “big picture.”

The three

Peter, James, and John had known each other for a long time. They had met in Capernaum, a small town on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee. All three were fishermen and while they were working one morning, all three had been approached by a man from Nazareth named Jesus. “Follow me,” Jesus had said, “and I will make you fish for people” (Matthew 4:19). And they had simply followed. All three of them.

Soon, the three of them were caught up in the enthusiasm of the crowds who came flocking to this new miracle-worker. As the months passed, and the miracles and the healings and the teachings mounted, the crowds began to wonder who Jesus really was. There was even speculation that perhaps Jesus was actually John the Baptist or Elijah or Jeremiah. But Peter sensed that there was more to Jesus than even a great prophet. When confronted by Jesus, “Who do you say that I am?,” Peter had replied, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Though Jesus had inexplicably told the disciples to keep this to themselves, Jesus as Messiah was something the disciples could handle. The Jews had waited a long time for the arrival of God’s Anointed One and all Jews knew the Messiah’s job description – cleanse the temple and drive out the pagan foreigners. The Jews knew that the Messiah would come in power and might and wonder and glory for all the world to see. Even fishermen from Capernaum knew all this. They might be surprised to be a part of such big doings, but they had things under control. Or so they thought.

Rock my world!

How shocked and confused Peter, James, and John must have been. No sooner had Peter declared Jesus to be God’s Messiah then Jesus had begun talking about suffering, how he must die at the hands of the temple leadership and be raised on the third day. Peter and the others couldn’t make sense of such talk. “Suffering Messiah” was an oxymoron – two words that simply didn’t go together (like “Jumbo Shrimp”!). The Messiah was to lead an army in triumph, not die on a Roman cross. Jesus had even called Peter “Satan” for suggesting that Jesus need not suffer.¹ Take up your cross, Jesus said. Those who want to save their life will lose it, those who lose their life for Jesus’ sake will find it.

Then, Jesus led the three of them up a mountain in Galilee. There, Jesus was transfigured, *metamorphoomai* in the Greek. His face shone like the sun; his clothes dazzled. Alongside Jesus, Moses and Elijah appeared; the three of them talked amongst themselves. Nothing had prepared the disciples for this. Perplexed at the least,

¹ Jesus knows the path that lies before him. The last thing he needs is Peter tempting him to take another path, to avoid the suffering that lies ahead. Jesus will be faithful all the way to the cross and it is by his faithfulness that we are saved.

Peter asks an odd question – Can he build dwellings for the three?! But Peter is cut-off by a blinding light and a voice from the clouds saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” The disciples’ world was being blown apart. They thought they understood, but they did not. They thought they had things under control, but they did not. In utter terror and confusion, Peter, James, and John simply collapse to the ground. Then, as any loving friend or parent would, Jesus comes to them, touches them, and tells them to get up, they need not be afraid. They could trust Jesus. They must.

We are struck by Peter’s desire to set up tents for everyone on the mountainside, as if he could hang on to this moment for all time. Peter is ready to stand by Jesus’ side during this transcendent mountain-top experience. But he would prove unwilling to stand beside Jesus at the cross. We are like Peter in this. We are ready for all the moving, inspiring, uplifting mountains that God wants to give us. But when it comes to darkness and suffering, we have trouble seeing Jesus in any of it. *Jesus will always call us to leave the mountain eventually, because that is not where the work is to be done.*

“He set his face to go to Jerusalem”

And so it begins. Despite the enthusiasm of the crowds, despite Peter’s confession of Jesus as Messiah, despite the Transfiguration, the time has come for Jesus to begin his journey to Jerusalem. Jesus knows what lies ahead. He is under no illusions about the path forward. It will be difficult. As he told the disciples not long before, “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day raised” (Luke 9:22). No one would look excitedly toward such a day, including Jesus. He must, using an old Semitic expression, “set his face toward Jerusalem” (v. 51, 53). Surely Luke intends that we recall Isaiah 50:7, “The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame.”

So, as Luke beautifully put it, Jesus “set his face toward Jerusalem” (9:51). And he won’t begin by bypassing the Samaritan villages. Instead he will pass through them, sending messengers ahead to prepare the way. But the Samaritan villagers want nothing to do with Jesus. This is not surprising, but the disciple’s reaction shows how little they’ve learned. Perhaps thinking of Elijah (2 Kings 1), they want to call down fire from heaven upon the village. But Jesus’ way is not that of vengeance and violence. If the Samaritans refuse him, he will simply go on toward Jerusalem and a Roman cross.

How committed are you?

As Jesus and the disciples travel along the road toward Jerusalem, they attract some would-be followers who seem most enthusiastic about joining the movement. But each of them are not quite so ready to join up as they thought.

LUKE THE PREACHER

Luke wrote two volumes, *Luke* and *Acts*, sometime around 80AD, about 50 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection. Luke is a well-educated man who writes in a sophisticated Greek. Luke’s immediate audience is Theophilus, who is a follower of Jesus but new to the faith, and, perhaps, a patron of Luke’s.

Though Luke is explicitly writing a history, he is also a preacher. He has a theological story to tell about Jesus, the Spirit, and God’s work to redeem humanity and all creation. Today’s passage from Luke is a great example. It marks the beginning of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem, the story of which spans ten chapters. The geography of this journey jumps around in ways that don’t seem too realistic if one’s focus is only on the itinerary. But Luke is less interested in the geography and timeline of it all, then he is helping us to grasp the growing tension surrounding Jesus’ ministry and Jesus’ determination to stay faithful to his mission. He uses the journey motif as a way of helping us to see that God is always active and caring, moving us forward in history toward a goal, namely, the full consummation of God’s kingdom.

The key to understanding Jesus' encounter with these three men is to see that all three have perfectly fine reasons for taking care of some things before they head out on the journey. One man merely wants to bury his father. What could be wrong with that? Another wants to say goodbye to his family. Who wouldn't? But Jesus won't have any of it. If these three men want to follow Jesus, they must be prepared to drop everything, that minute, and go. There can be no other loyalties. There can be no other priorities. Elijah had at least let Elisha kill his livestock and throw a barbeque before heading out (1 Kings 19:19-21). But then again, Elijah wasn't Lord. Jesus is.

If you've known Jesus only as Jesus-meek-and-mild or Jesus-of-the-nice-hug, then passages like today's are jarring. Can't even bury his father!!?? But hard teachings demand hard techniques. Jesus knows well that his followers simply don't get it. They don't understand where his vocation will lead. They haven't counted the cost for Jesus, much less for themselves. They may consider themselves to be fully ready to be Jesus' followers, in the strongest sense of that word, but they are not.

Are we ready? Am I? This is a question I keep asking myself. Do I really understand the shape of a Christ-centered life? It can't always be the easy way forward. But can I see the hard way and, if I do see it, do I trust God enough to press on?

As Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem, he knows the difficult path ahead for his disciples even if they do not. But he will do all he can to teach them about commitment and submission, even if the lessons seem harsh. I guess that is what we might mean by tough love.

Daily Bible Readings *More stories on the journey to Jerusalem in Luke's gospel*

Monday	Luke 11:1-13	Jesus teaches his disciples about prayer.
Tuesday	Luke 11:37-54	Jesus confronts some Pharisees and lawyers.
Wednesday	Luke 13:10-21	Jesus heals a woman on the Sabbath and teaches about the way small acts lead to great consequences.
Thursday	Luke 13:22-30	Jesus teaches about the narrowness of the path to God. This is a teaching about obedience.
Friday	Luke 15	Stories about a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son.
Saturday	Luke 17:11-19	Jesus cleanses ten lepers.