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Believers Keep Jesus in Focus

Life is so full of distractions. A horn blares while you're turning a corner; a dog barks while you're taking a walk. You look quickly, alarmed by the potential danger. The same happens to us as Christians. We live the life of faith and all at once something threatens us or tempts us. We look quickly, not always alarmed by the danger. Jesus speaks to us in the Gospel today and encourages us to keep our focus on him.

Sermon Luke 9:51-62

Introduction – When you come back from a vacation, you know you have to get serious again. I figured that out last Monday. It happens to all of us. If you know the family is coming to your house for Thanksgiving, you have to get serious. If you see the tassels on the corn, you have to start planning to bring it in. There come times in our lives when we have to start to think differently.

That's where Jesus was at in the Gospel today. For more than two years he'd been preaching and teaching and doing miracles up and down Palestine. Thousands of people followed him; he was nothing short of a sensation. People wanted to hear what he said and see what he did. But the good days were gone. People started to walk away; what Jesus said was hard for them to understand. The ministry in Galilee came to an end; the important people in Jerusalem were openly hostile. The committed people still followed Jesus, and he still preached wherever he went, but it wasn't like before. The cross was six months away and Jesus knew it. He was ready and he was willing to do what his Father had sent him to do and he was thinking about that more and more. Luke began today's Gospel by writing: **As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.**

Those faithful followers were going to be the ones who carried on Jesus' work when he was done and gone. The events St. Luke relates in the next few chapters after this Gospel didn't take place one right after the other. Luke's purpose was to let Jesus explain a variety of concepts that believers need to think about as they share the good news. That's where we fit in. We're a lot like those followers Jesus was walking with. We're committed to Jesus—have been for a long time. We know our task is to share the good news. And the crowds around us today are just as hostile and just as dwindling as they were then. We need to listen to these lessons and let Jesus guide in some very practical ways. And so,

We Keep Our Eyes on Jesus As we follow him to save As we follow him to serve

1. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, probably for one of the great Jewish festivals. When Jews traveled between Jerusalem and Galilee, they never went through Samaria—bad blood there. That didn't make a difference to Jesus. Luke tells the story. **And Jesus sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him—** maybe lodging or a place to preach—**but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem.** You have to believe that this teed the apostles off, especially the brothers John and James. **When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?"**

They knew Bible history; they knew how God had sent down fire and destroyed the priests of Baal during Elijah's time. They were thinking: Let's do that again.

Jesus turned to them and rebuked them. Not a big surprise, is it? Jesus didn't come into the world to destroy people but to save people. Jesus isn't Darth Vader and Vladimir Putin. He doesn't hold a sword to people's throats to gain their faith. Jesus doesn't flinch when it comes to what God expects: Jesus can thunder the law. He doesn't soft-pedal sin, either: he can threaten hell. But he doesn't solve those problems with bombs and howitzers. He destroys those problems with the good news. Jesus says, I did what God expected of you. I carried the sins God saw in you. I did this because I love you and now I forgive you. That's exactly how Jesus deals with us. When we were little our parents may have laid down the law about going to church but laying down the law didn't lead us to Jesus. Jesus comes to us with the gospel. That's how Jesus saves us; that's how he wins our hearts. James and John needed to hear Jesus' rebuke, and so we do.

Christian churches haven't always listened to Jesus. Roman Catholic missionaries baptized the heathen with water in one hand and a sword in the other. Lutherans weren't innocent. They signed a legal agreement in Reformation times that forced people to worship according to the religion of their prince. Forcing people to become Christians or punishing people when they aren't Christians may be convenient, but it isn't Jesus' way. When it comes saving people, when it comes leading people to faith, when it comes to encouraging people to live as Christians, we need to keep our eyes on Jesus.

You get that this is a very practical issue right now, right? We rejoice that the Supreme Court overturned Roe vs. Wade and we support legal efforts to stop abortions, but laws are never going to change people's hearts. Unbelievers will always find ways to get around the law. All the evils that we see in our nation and world—all the despicable murders, all the godless lifestyles, all the wicked attacks against Christ and people—all of this will end only when people find Jesus to be the way, the truth, and the life. Loud screams don't change hearts; quiet whispers do. And you and I are the people who need to whisper the gospel.

2. The people following Jesus were in the same boat as we are. They were the ones who were close to Jesus and they were the ones who would spread the good news around the world. They were willing to do it. So Luke adds a second event that teaches a good lesson. After the rejection and the rebuke in Samaria, **Jesus and his disciples went to another village. As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go."** What a commitment! But there was a lesson Jesus needed to be shared. **Jesus replied, "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."** Jesus had places where he could lay his head. There was a home in Capernaum where he stayed and another in Jerusalem and he was always welcome at Mary and Martha's in Bethany. But there were many times when Jesus didn't have a place to lay his head. Jesus needed to teach this follower what he needs to teach all of us. Sharing the good news isn't always comfortable, not always easy. It wasn't for Jesus and it isn't for us. Sometimes we sleep with a stone for a pillow.

Luke relates another conversation. **Jesus said to another man, "Follow me." But he replied, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father."** Jesus said to him, **"Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God."** This isn't as harsh as it sounds. What the man was really saying was this: "My dad is aging. Let me stay at home for a few years until he dies and then I'll come and follow you." Jesus is all in favor of caring for the physical needs of others, especially family members—Honor your father and mother, remember?—but he needed to remind this man that spreading the good news about the forgiveness of sins is always our highest priority. Caregivers, doctors, and funeral directors, even if they're dead unbelievers, can give comfort and care to people. Only believers can proclaim the gospel. And we are believers.

Still another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family." Jesus didn't tell this man to leave his family. But he made a point that's worth remembering. **"No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."** The farmer who plows his field by hand—I'm not talking about plowing with a tractor or even with a team of horses—but the farmer who pushes the plow through the dirt and guides it with only his hands, that farmer will always plow crooked furrows if he doesn't keep his eyes on the plow. Christians

who want to share the good news or support the good news are always going to struggle if their priorities get mixed up and confused.

There was never a time when the Son of God didn't know what his assignment was. He knew he would come to earth and put himself in the place of a world of sinners. He knew he would defeat the devil and demolish sin and destroy death. At a certain point in his ministry, he set out resolutely to finish his work. Now he has called us to be his witnesses in the world. Not all of us are pastors or missionaries, not all of us can speak quickly and easily, not all of us can offer lavish gifts. But we are all witnesses in our own way and Jesus urges us to set out resolutely to do the work he had called us to do. Not with threats or laws, but with the good news of his love. Not looking for trouble but being ready to meet challenges and make sacrifices. Not ignoring the needs of others but recognizing that everyone's greatest need is forgiveness in Christ. Not overlooking our personal needs and desires but believing that our highest and greatest priority is to believe and share the good news. Today Jesus encourages us to be resolute in our work. And so we keep our eyes on Jesus as we follow him to save and to serve. Amen.