

## **Sermon: Your Face Might Freeze that Way**

Year C, Proper 8

[2 Kings 2:1-2,6-14](#); [Psalm 77:1-2,11-20](#); [Galatians 5:1,13-25](#); [Luke 9:51-62](#)

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You guys probably know that to be ordained in the UCC, you have to do an internship as a chaplain in a hospital or a nursing home. They don't want you to meet the physical reality of death for the first time in your parish. So I worked for a summer at Maine Medical Center in Portland, the level 1 trauma center for most of Maine and part of southern and eastern New Hampshire. Like most hospitals, it's grown from one building to many, mostly in a kind of bizarre organic way, throwing out wings and digging in garages, so everyone gets lost all the time. Tucked into one of the spaces between two of the buildings is a courtyard with picnic tables. Mostly it's staff out there because hopefully patients and their families aren't around long enough to discover it. One day, one of the picnic tables filled with a family and their lunch trays. They all sat down and bowed their heads. I put down my sandwich, asking God to answer their prayers. Now this went on for a while – these people were clearly varsity pray-ers. Finally I stopped respecting their privacy and just stared. They had all bowed their heads over their cell phones.

Today's passage from Luke starts with Jesus setting his face to Jerusalem. And set is the right word, like setting concrete or a broken bone. So where have we set our faces? Honestly, if the aliens come down, they're going to think our God is in our cell phones. OK fine, we also set our faces at our TVs full of reality shows. And, God forgive us, some of us set our faces towards the Red Sox, although at the moment, this year is better than last.

But think beyond that. When someone we love comes in the room, how do we set our faces? Do our faces and our mouths say, "hello beloved creature who routinely amazes me?" Or is it something closer to, "your shoes don't match, comb your hair, lose weight, get a better job, tell your spouse to pull it together, shape up your kids, save more, and don't roll your eyes at me. Your face might freeze that way." Because we love them and we want them to be happy and skinny people with good jobs and big bank accounts are assumed to be happier. We move so fast that we never really share that first step where we are simply delighted that someone we love is with us. We've set a pattern so firmly that we forget that first step was ever there. This is what it's like to want an ordinary life.

Jesus understands all those desires. He's picked his disciples. They're mostly tough guys. They've pulled nets in an open boat. They've served as toll collectors, a reviled job in their society. In all likelihood, they all had some teaching in the Torah, but none of them showed enough promise to make it as scholars, so they've gone on to their own productive lives. They may be poor, but almost everyone in their society is poor. These are the most ordinary people in the world and these are the ones Jesus has chosen to join him on his journey.

Jesus has set his face to go to Jerusalem. Jesus understands this journey as a call from God, something he has to do in order to prepare for the kingdom of God. There is plenty of evidence that the kingdom of God is not upon them then. Suffering surrounds them. Yet Jesus is using the journey to teach his disciples how to follow God's call. He's getting them fit for the Kingdom of God. They don't prepare for the Kingdom by staying inside their lives and setting

their faces towards the accomplishments of daily living. They prepare for the Kingdom by setting aside some very reasonable desires and following Jesus on the journey.

One wants to bury his father. Whatever story you want to tell about that guy, whether he loved his dad or not, he wanted to bury him. The son wanted his community to see him paying the proper respect to his father. But Jesus says “no”.

One wants to say good-bye. In a world where the majority of people never went more than 25 miles from the land they were born on, saying good-bye seems reasonable. At least his people won't worry about his disappearing. But Jesus says “no”.

This doesn't sound like the Jesus we know. So what's going on here? The scripture just before this passage is the one about sending down fire from Heaven against the Samaritans. Everyone who heard that would think of Elijah. So what are we to take from that?

Elijah too is on a journey that will end his time on earth. It's not entirely clear whether Elijah is still alive in the chariot that takes him away, but it's clear he's not coming back to this earth. Elijah has one disciple, Elisha, who has stayed with him on his journey from Gilgal to Bethel to the Jordan. When Elisha asks for a double share of Elijah's spirit as a gift, Elijah tell him he has asked for a hard thing.

We have been walking with Elijah for the past weeks. We know how hard a thing it is that Elisha is asking for. You have to challenge hundreds of other prophets who claim to represent a false God (1 Kings 18:20-39). You have to live in poverty, out in the wilderness. You have to rely on the charity of a widow who is down to her last mouthful of meal and tablespoon of oil (1 Kings 17:8-16). You call the king and queen to account after they have killed an innocent man and the king calls you “my enemy.” (1 Kings 21:1-10,15-21a) You have to hide from the world and ask God to release you from your burden. And when you do, God shows up as an earthquake and then a tornado and just when you are shaking with terror, as a still small voice (1 Kings 19:1-4, 8-15a) . Elisha is asking for all that and Elijah isn't sure he really understands what he's asking for.

That is what Jesus is saying to his disciples too: you have asked for a hard thing. There are the hard things you know about. You had a trade and now are going to proclaim the kingdom of God. You used to know where you were going to sleep every night and now you don't. You knew where you were in your town's hierarchy and now you visit towns that feel free to turn you away.

By pointing at what they have already figured out, Jesus is trying to point at the really hard things they can't possibly see. So he makes the examples really stark. Foxes in his day were the animals that were cunning and deceitful, like we would call someone a “weasel” today. Birds of the air stole grain from hard working farmers, just like all the other obscenely wealthy people who called it taxes and kept the majority in poverty. Not burying your father shames you in front of all the decent members of the society. Not saying good-bye is inviting death in a society where dying was often easier than living. That's how hard a thing the disciples were asking for when they asked to accompany Jesus on his journey.

And really, that's not even the half of it. Because at the end of the journey, there is that awful Saturday. Jesus is dead. All those hard things have been endured. And for what? Anyone who followed Jesus has given their life over to a fraud, to someone who talked about the kingdom of God like it was real. Clearly it wasn't. And once that horrible Saturday was over, in all

likelihood, the Roman and Jewish authorities were just going to round the rest of them up and kill them too. They had set their faces to Jerusalem and God had deserted them. No chariot. No cloak that parted the Jordan. No fire coming down on anyone. He wasn't Elijah. They weren't Elisha. However hard they had thought it was going to be, they had no idea it was going to be this hard.

When you become a parent, you sign up for a whole bunch of things. New sneakers every six months and the political infighting of the PTA and teen smoking and car insurance. You sign up for those days when "wait until your father comes home" is more a prayer than a threat. You sign up for the reality that your happiness is now inextricably tied to the happiness of another human, over whom you have very little control. Even if you are great parent when your kid is 7, you may not be when they're 17 or 47 but you sign up for the whole journey. Once you sign up as a parent, you ask for a hard thing.

Except that I have no idea what it's like to sign up to be a parent. However hard it is, however clearly you try to tell me what it's like, I'm not going to get it. I do know what it's like to sign up to not be a parent. I know in my bones that the young man of my youth was simply not strong enough to be my husband, but we could have been a family for a while. And the occasional lonely night would not be upon me now. I know what it is to rely on someone else in my old age, someone who has no real obligation to me. And however hard it is to decide not to be a parent, I can't explain it to you guys who are parents.

And all these hard things, all those choices that we think we understand and then find out it was *way* more complicated, they set our faces. They set us in a direction that we head in. We look into our cell phones and TVs for a break or an illusion we have control over something. Some of these things are so hard that our faces may set like concrete. Even if we hear God's Call and recognized it for what it is, our faces may have frozen so firmly in another direction that we feel cannot turn them.

So Jesus showed us how to follow God's Call. Gather together the most ordinary people we can find. Know that those ordinary people have already done hard things in their lives, even if we don't exactly get what they are. Realize that whatever we have already done, it's only a trifle compared to what following God's Call is going to ask of us. Go together on this journey. Together become fit to enter the Kingdom of God. Set aside the cell phone from time to time. Look at each other with faces set in the love and awe we feel for each other.

As ghastly as that Saturday was, there was also that Resurrection Sunday, better than any chariot, cloak or fire from the sky. That Easter Sunday was the promise that the Kingdom would come, that the wrongs of this world would be righted, that the hard things we had undertaken would be worth it. Jesus turned out to be Elijah. Those who followed him, then and now, turned out to be Elisha. Elisha had asked for a hard thing. But he was promised a double share of Elijah's spirit in exchange. Perhaps that is the hardest thing of all. Setting our faces so that a double share of Jesus' spirit shines through as we help get this world fit to enter the Kingdom of God.