

DON'T LOOK BACK

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Lamington Presbyterian Church

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Psalm 16; Luke 9:57-62

***“Jesus said to him, ‘No one who puts a hand to the plow
and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.’”***

Luke 9:62

I’ve been listening to a podcast recently, by a team from National Public Radio. It’s a true crime story called *White Lies*. It’s about an unsolved murder case more than fifty years old. If podcasts are your thing, I highly recommend this one. It’s gripping.

I got interested in the *White Lies* podcast because the murder victim and I have something in common. We both graduated from Princeton Theological Seminary.

The murder victim was named James Reeb. He was in no way a contemporary of mine: he graduated from the seminary in 1953, a generation before I did. But I knew his name, even back then. There was a bronze plaque to his memory mounted by the entrance of the Campus Center, where our meals were served. I walked by his plaque at least three times a day.

There was a whole collection of plaques there, commemorating martyrs of the faith. The oldest plaque bears the name of Elijah Parish Lovejoy: lynched by an angry mob in Illinois for running an abolitionist newspaper in the years before

the Civil War.

Then there are the plaques commemorating graduates of Princeton who died overseas, on the mission field. Two missionary couples were shot during a mutiny in India. Another couple was thrown overboard by pirates in the China Sea. Another missionary died during the Boxer Rebellion. Yet another Princeton grad, William Shedd, died of disease in 1918, while leading a party of Armenian Christians to safety during the Turkish genocide. Their stories were moving, but they all happened a very long time ago.

Except for Jim Reeb. To this day, his plaque is shiny: not so tarnished by time as the others. The date of his martyrdom was 1965: and it didn't happen overseas. He died of a brain hemorrhage in Selma, Alabama, after being beaten on the head with a wooden club.

He and a couple of fellow ministers — all three of them white men from the North — were attacked on the street by a gang of racist thugs. Three local men were charged with the murder, but despite eyewitness testimony from the two northern ministers, the all-white Southern jury acquitted them. The argument the defense made — incredible as it may seem — was that the leaders of the Civil Rights movement deliberately caused Jim Reeb's death, so they would have a white martyr for their cause.

The three ministers were there because they'd answered the call of Martin Luther King, Jr. to come to Selma and stand by the African-American demonstrators who were seeking the right to vote.

The *White Lies* podcast tells the story of how Jim Reeb answered the call. Along with other like-minded ministers, he received a telegram from Dr. King. His wife Marie told how she didn't want him to go to Alabama. She wanted him to stay in Massachusetts with her and their four young children. But she also knew there was no way her husband — being who he was — would not answer the call. Hesitation was not in his nature, when a matter of justice was at stake.

His plaque at Princeton displays this Bible verse, John 15:13: "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

I thought of Jim Reeb when I read the verse from today's Gospel lesson, that has Jesus saying, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." Say what you want about Jim and his decision, but when he got that telegram, he didn't look back.

The theologian Søren Kierkegaard once said, "Jesus isn't looking for admirers, he's looking for followers." He doesn't want fans. He wants disciples: men, women and children who get up from what they're doing, and follow him

along the road of life.

Jesus has no shortage of admirers, then or now. If you conducted a random, street-corner poll, asking passersby if they admire Jesus Christ, it would be a long time before you found someone who said no. Christians and non-Christians alike would say they admire him. Who wouldn't? What person who knows anything at all about Jesus' ethical teachings would say otherwise? Jesus is very likely the most admired human being of all time.

Yet, admiration is a far cry from discipleship. Actually following Jesus demands a good deal more than positive thoughts.

The Lord himself sets the tone. Today's passage begins with the line, "When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem." That line marks the great turning-point of Luke's Gospel. Up until now, he and his disciples have been traveling the length and breadth of the land. But now, he displays a laser focus on Jerusalem: where a cross awaits him.

Everything else we read in today's passage is an explanation — and an expansion — of what it means to set one's face to go to Jerusalem.

Someone comes up to him along the road and exclaims: "I will follow you wherever you go!"

One of the disciples eagerly steps right up, clipboard in hand. “Great! Glad to hear it. We have a little application form here for you to fill out...”

But then Jesus interrupts. “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.”

In other words: “Don’t be so hasty, my friend. It may sound romantic to you, spending your days with this company of believers — but there’s something you need to know. Some days, we’ve got only a stone for a pillow, and only the sound of our growling stomachs to sing us to sleep.”

There are others who approach him. Some of them, Jesus actually invites to become disciples. One of them says, “Let me first go bury my father.” Another says, “Give me a few days to go say goodbye to the folks at home.”

These don’t sound like unreasonable requests, until you realize that, according to Jewish tradition, “burying my father” is a euphemism for waiting around till the old man dies. That could take years! As for going back to say goodbye to the family, that too could turn into a much longer goodbye than anyone anticipated.

Lots of us go through life, year after year, fully intending to do something, someday, as Jesus’ followers. Now is just not a good time. Tomorrow — broadly defined — sounds a lot more feasible.

Next comes a sort of mini-parable, in which Jesus makes it crystal-clear what he's talking about. "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

I wonder how many of you have ever plowed a field by hand. How many of you have pushed an old-fashioned plow through the hard, lumpy earth, right behind a donkey or ox who provides the muscle? I never have. I'll bet you haven't, either — even if you live on a farm. We live in an age of mechanized agriculture!

One thing I've been told, though, about old-school plowing is that it's a hard thing to keep the plowshare pointed in the right direction, so the row you're digging is exactly parallel to the one beside it. The animal pulls in one direction; rocks and stumps push the plow in the other.

About the only way to do it well is to fix your eyes on a reference-point dead ahead: a large tree, perhaps, or a fence-post. Give that reference-point your full and undivided attention, and prepare to respond to every lurch in the wrong direction by throwing your weight against the plow's handles. Pay close attention to the reference point, and maybe — just maybe — you'll succeed in plowing a straight row. Abandon your reference point, though, and look to the right or left, and you'll very likely mess up. Should you be so foolish as to look back, it's

“game over.”

This theme of not looking back is not unique to Jesus. The ancient Greeks told the story of how Orpheus went down to the Underworld to seek his dead wife, Eurydice. She'd been taken before her time. Orpheus managed to wangle out of Hades, lord of the underworld, permission to bring her back. He could do so on one condition: that he would not gaze upon her face until they reached the sunlight. Tragically, Orpheus did look back: and instantly Eurydice sank back into the shadows, never to return.

In the Hebrew scriptures, the Lord warns Lot, son of Abraham, to flee with his wife and children from the doomed city of Sodom. They are to keep moving forward, and not look back to witness the destruction that's about to take place. Lot's wife is careless. She doesn't heed God's command. She looks back, and is turned into a pillar of salt. [Genesis 19:26]

Plowing a field, as Jesus well knew — probably from personal experience — demands total commitment. Nothing less will do.

Elsewhere in the scriptures, he explains the level of commitment he needs from those who would become his disciples. In John, chapter 3, he's talking to a Pharisee, Nicodemus, who's dropped in to see him one night, when he thinks no

one is watching. Nicodemus, it turns out, is a secret admirer of Jesus. He has a sincere intellectual interest in studying his teachings, comparing them against those of the other great rabbis.

Jesus sees right through him. He knows Nicodemus may be open to adjusting his way of thinking, but he has little intention of changing his way of living. That's why Jesus tells him he must be "born from above" (or "born again" in some translations). "You can no longer be Nicodemus, learned scholar of the law," Jesus is telling him (though not in so many words). "You can only be Nicodemus, child of God."

Nicodemus, it seems, likes his old life a little too well. He's not yet willing to make a total commitment.

The word "commit" comes from the Latin (*committere*). Literally it means "to put or send." If a lord has an urgent message to send to someone else, he's likely to call a servant in, saying, "Here, take this to so-and-so." As soon as he gives that command, the master is committing his message to the servant. If, for any reason, the servant is unable to deliver it — to fulfill the commission — then, the servant had better say so, right up front. The master is depending upon him to get the job done.

We often use the words "committed" or "commitment" in a much less

action-oriented way. We understand them to mean something like “holding a very strong opinion” — but that’s not at what Jesus means by a commitment to him. I said earlier that Jesus isn’t looking for admirers. He wants *disciples*: who do so much more than simply talk the talk. He needs followers who are willing, as they say, to walk the walk.

Let’s say that, besides the message the lord wants his servant to deliver, he also has something else to give him: a t-shirt with the word “Messenger” stenciled across the front. Oh, how proud that servant feels to go out of the house wearing the “Messenger” shirt! “Look at me!” he wants to say to the world. “My master trusts me enough to appoint me his messenger!”

But the master doesn’t need a messenger. He doesn’t need someone to hold that title. What the master needs is someone to *deliver* the message. If the servant goes down to the marketplace and spends the rest of the day strutting around, showing off his new “Messenger” shirt, but never carries the message to its destination, the master’s not going to be very happy. He will have committed the message to a person incapable of delivering it. It’s one thing to pull on the Messenger shirt. It’s quite another to follow through.

I began today by telling you about Jim Reeb, the 34-year-old minister who

answered the call to Selma, Alabama and died there for his faith. Remember how I told you that on his memorial plaque they said, ““Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends”?”

Well, here's the thing about Jim Reeb. He didn't know that, when he went to Selma, he wasn't coming back. He didn't set out to give his life for his friends: black, white or otherwise. Sure, he knew it to be a dangerous place for activists like him, and sure, he was a mighty determined fellow when it came to matters of social justice, but he and his two fellow ministers were not expecting men with billy clubs to attack them on the street, as they walked out of a restaurant.

He was not like certain other martyrs of the early church, who were asked to recant their faith but did not, knowing full well that their persecutors would put them to death.

But here's what we can say about him. When he received that telegram from Dr. King, there was no question in his wife's mind but that he would say “Here am I, send me.” His hand was on the plow. He didn't look back. He kept his eye on that reference-point on the horizon — the example of Jesus Christ — and he just kept walking until he could walk no longer.

What is it your Lord is calling you to do, at this point in your life? What

thought keeps coming up in your mind, what crazy idea about something you are uniquely equipped to offer, to advance the mission of Christ in the world? Maybe it's something you're meant to do. Maybe it's something you're meant to give away. Maybe it's something you're meant to say — words that will make a positive difference in someone's life that you've never had the courage to utter until now.

Maybe your hand is already on the plow. Maybe you can feel the well-seasoned wood of the handle. Maybe the plowshare is already dug deep into the earth, ready for that first push that will commence your journey across the field. And you know what they say about great journeys: they begin with a single step.

There is but one thing to remember: don't look back. *Don't look back.*

We end with a prayer of John Wesley that's known as his Covenant Prayer:

**Lord, I am no longer my own, but yours.
Put me to what you will,
rank me with whom you will;
put me to doing, put me to suffering.
Let me be employed by you,
or laid aside by you,
exalted by you or brought low by you.
Let me be full, let me be empty.
Let me have all things, let me have nothing.
I freely and heartily yield all things
to your pleasure and disposal.
And now, O glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, you are mine, and I am yours.**

**So be it.
And the covenant which I have made on earth,
Let it be ratified in heaven.**

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