

SCRIPTURE TEXT: Luke 9:51-56

SERMON TITLE: Journey to Jerusalem

Transforming Journeys is the theme for our sermon series during Lent. This morning I share with you a story that has had transforming effect on my life. It comes from the gospel of Luke, 9:51-56. Listen for the word of God. **SCRIPTURE LESSON.**

When the days drew near from him to be taken up, he set his face toward Jerusalem.

We know what this means, don't we? Luke made sure that we know: Luke 9:22, *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 be raised.* Luke 9:44, *The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands.* Obviously, Jesus is intending to confront his enemies. Where will this happen? Jerusalem.

So Jesus is headed for trouble but apparently he's determined to confront his enemies on their own turf—which is actually God's turf—a fact that powerful people often get confused about. In fact, at the time of Jesus, the Holy City was a center of human power—religious, political, economic and military. The elders, chief priests and scribes were centered there. And, of course, the Romans kept a close eye on Jerusalem with troops on hand to secure the peace.

But get this, Jesus runs into trouble before he ever gets to Jerusalem. It's a preview of things to come. He faces opposition from a Samaritan village right at the beginning of his journey. You may recall that the Jews and the Samaritans had a long history of hating one another. So the Samaritans would have nothing to do with Jerusalem and with Jews cutting through their territory on the way to Jerusalem. So when the messengers sent from Jesus show up in this Samaritan village, the Samaritans refuse to receive him.

I know something about this—about refusing to receive Jesus. Now I've said yes to following him in general as long as things don't get too costly or uncomfortable or dangerous.

I've heard his call, I have a good idea of he wants me to do, and of what he wants me to refrain from doing, and yet I persist in saying no—in remaining disobedient. I call Jesus Lord, but in so many ways I refuse to practice what I preach; I fall short of doing the will of God. So I guess I've got something in common with those Samaritan villagers. I know what its like to oppose Jesus and his way.

Now James and John show up in the story. When they see what's happened in the Samaritan village, their thoughts turn to retribution. They ask Jesus: *Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?*

Now let's be honest. As long as fire comes down from heaven and consumes other people—namely, our enemies—we see the value in this kind of retribution. We call it justice.

Now granted, some people who embrace this theological view of God as one who sends consuming fire down from heave to consume enemies, go off the deep end. We've seen this happen, for example, when some religious leaders blamed 9/11 or the Haiti earthquakes on an execution of God's wrath against unrighteous nations and peoples. In fact, I just saw a news report the other day about a church whose members picket the funerals of service men and women killed in Iraq and Afghanistan because these church members have concluded that their deaths are God's punishment for our nation's tolerance of homosexuality.

Now aside from these disturbing fringe perspectives, in many ways the urge to exact divine retribution upon our enemies reflects the way the world works. Think about it. In the fall of 2001, when our nation "set its face" toward Afghanistan to confront our enemies on their own turf—to exact justice for 9/11—we didn't have to call down fire from heaven, instead we relied upon our own military power to consume our enemies—and the fire still burns. We did the same thing in the spring of 2003, when we "set our face" toward Iraq. These are the kinds of things

we do as human beings to exact retribution—to execute justice—against our enemies. Why shouldn't God act this way to?

So I understand the question posed by James and John to Jesus. In some ways it seems a logical question not only when applied to the Samaritans, but to the opposition that awaits Jesus in Jerusalem. Why not burn them up as well?

But then I remember my own opposition to Jesus—I remember how much I have in common with those Samaritan villagers—and all of a sudden my life is on the line. And I wonder: Is there a limit to God's love? Is there a point at which God's love yields to God's justice—especially when God has to deal with the depth and persistence of my own opposition to Jesus and his way?

And this question used to bother me a lot, until I truly embraced Jesus' response to the question and his approach to his opponents in Jerusalem. With regard to the Samaritans, Jesus turns to his two disciples and he rebukes them. With regard to his opponents in Jerusalem, when they come to arrest him on the Mount of Olives, Peter asks, ***Lord, should we strike with the sword?*** One of the disciples doesn't wait for the answer and he cuts off the ear of the high priests slave. Jesus then exclaims: ***No more of this!*** From the cross, Jesus says, ***Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.***

For me, Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and then to the cross, transformed my life when I finally came to see that God's never-failing mercy and steadfast love are even greater than my sin. What a relief this was. A heavy weight was lifted off of my shoulders. Now I see that if the opposition is ever to be overcome, it will not be through a consuming fire from heaven destroying all of God's enemies. Instead, it will be through God's long-suffering and persistent love revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

So this is my story. What about you? How will this story of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem transform your life over this Lenten season?