Following Christ


A sermon delivered by Reverend Thomas K. Frizzell, Jr, the Chapel Pastor of the United States Naval Academy, on the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, June 26, 2016.

In the computer age, determining the fastest route to cross an ocean is as simple as inputting your beginning and ending coordinates to determine your Plan of Intended Movement (PIM). However, thirty years ago, you would lay out a straight line on a gnomonic chart, which takes into account the curvature of the earth. Then you would transfer your Plan of Intended Movement (PIM) onto multiple Mercator charts for shorter segments of the journey, plotting several way-points on each chart. The Navy required two sets of charts, for each portion of the trip, to be prepared by the Navigation Team and approved by the Commanding Officer. These charts had to line-up perfectly as they were held together and viewed with a bright light from behind. As Navigator of USS Goldsborough, a destroyer home-ported out of Pearl Harbor, this was a process that regularly challenged my quartermasters, as we prepared for our journeys abroad.

In our Old Testament lesson from First Kings, Elisha begins a journey that will take him a long way from home, speaking truth to power. Elijah has designated Elisha as his successor – literally, the mantle had been passed from the prophet Elijah to the prophet Elisha. Elisha wishes to take care of loose-ends before departing, bidding farewell to his aging parents before slaughtering his oxen, hosting a Farewell Barbeque, and departing on his journey. It is unclear if Elijah allows Elisha to delay. However, in our Gospel lesson, Jesus frowns upon pre-deployment preparations before beginning what will be a rigorous journey of discipleship.
From this point on in the gospel of Luke, Jesus is intent on journeying to Jerusalem (see Luke 9:51, 53, 13:22, 33; 17:11; 18:31; 19:11 & 28). Having been transfigured on the mountain, flanked by Elijah and Moses, Jesus has begun the new exodus (translated departure in Luke 9:31). Rather than Moses’ exodus from Egypt, having placed the blood of the lamb above the door-posts of the Israelites, Jesus will become the Passover Lamb who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29). Jesus’ Plan of Intended Movement (PIM) will have him arriving in Jerusalem for the Passover, followed by his Passion. He has resolutely set his face to journey to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51) – an excursion with several way-points that spans nineteen chapters.

In today’s text, in our portion of the journey, there are several illusions to Elijah. Just as Elijah ascended (translated taken-up in 2 Kings 2:9-11) into heaven in a chariot of fire, Jesus’ day of ascension is near (Luke 9:51). Just as Elijah called down fire twice (2 Kings 1:10-12) on each Captain and his force of fifty men sent by Ahaziah, the king of Israel, James and John wish to call down fire on the unwelcoming Samaritan village (Luke 9:54). Jesus disapproves of this retribution (Luke 9:55). Instead he moves on (Luke 9:56), perhaps shaking the dust off his feet as a testimony against them, just as he instructed his disciples to do on their missionary journeys (see Luke 9:5; 10:10-11). Elijah seems to chastise Elisha for desiring to kiss his parents goodbye (1 Kings 19:20); Jesus insists that discipleship trumps worldly concerns. Jesus lets those who wish to follow know that the journey will not be easy.

En route between villages (9:57-62), Jesus informs one would-be-follower to expect none of the comforts of home while on the journey. No Courtyard by Marriott for them! Foxes may have borrows and the birds may have nests, but Jesus will have no place to lay his head (Luke 9:58), totally dependent on the generosity of others. A disciple should expect nothing more! Jesus asks another to follow, but he wishes to bury his father first – a reasonable request given the commandment to honor one’s parents! Another wishes to bid farewell to family and friends,
much like Elisha’s request. Jesus insists that they cast off all lines and immediately get underway. No turning back; no turning back. THIS IS RADICAL DISCIPLESHIP, in which we give-up not only the bad, but at times, what is good and integral to living in community.

Are we willing to pick-up our cross and follow Jesus to Jerusalem? The disciples in our text did not know where the journey would lead. However, like Luke’s community of faith, we know that the destination is suffering and death. No prosperity Gospel this morning - this is not Lakewood Church of Houston, Texas – Joel Olsten will never preach on this passage! Comfort is far more attractive than deprivation. Being liked is far more comfortable than alienating ourselves from family and friends. Conforming to society’s expectations is much easier than the radical discipleship suggested in our Gospel text. How are we to plot our Plan of Intended Movement (PIM) today? Are we committed to the way-points of discipleship? Do we pray often, study scriptures diligently, worship regularly, invite others frequently, instill the faith in others faithfully, and serve selflessly, giving of our time, talents, and resources? If Jesus were to inspect our actual track, would our journey line-up with his? Or does our own self-interest place us off course?

A ship’s Plan of Intended Movement (PIM) is the shortest distance between two points; however, rarely is the journey so simple. Weather, sea state, currents, engineering casualties, additional tasking – all of these complicate the journey, causing us to adjust course and speed along the way, until we arrive at our destination. The same is true for a disciple as we pick up our cross and follow Jesus. By following the way-points of discipleship, we will incur hardship along the way; however, Christ has blazed a trail that leads to our heavenly home, in the bosom of our Lord. In the words of that old hymn: The world behind us, the cross before us, no turning back, no turning back. Amen.