

“Setting our Faces to Jerusalem”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Ash Wednesday
Edina Morningside Community Church; March 1, 2017

Luke 9:51-62

When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” But he turned and rebuked them. Then they went on to another village.

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” To another he said, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” But Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” Another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” Jesus said to him, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

“There is a grace approaching”, the poem begins. An “insistent grace” that “we shun as much as death”. We will have a chance to hear, see, and speak this poem again tonight, so I suspect that you’ll notice different parts than I do right now. But in this moment, I’m struck by the way “grace” is described in rather uneasy terms. This is grace that calls us to face the truth about ourselves, which is not always altogether welcome. It catches us upwards, rather like a fish is caught, and leads to a shedding that we shy away from. Shedding of the mind in pursuit of the heart. Shedding of self-consciousness for dance and song. Shedding of safe territory for something new, “our enormity”. Shedding of life itself, for what else is “the completion of our birth” but death? On this night, the insistent grace that catches us includes our mortality. Though it seems macabre, when you remind people that they come from dust, and will return there one day, you’d be surprised the number of people who say “thank you”.

Jesus too is caught by an insistent facing of the truth, when we get in the very first line of Scripture tonight. “When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” He set his face, which is to say he began a single-minded determination to face what needed to be faced by going to Jerusalem. “Set his face” conjures both a judgment against the establishment religion represented by Jerusalem, and an acknowledgment of the suffering this will involve. Jerusalem—Jesus knows—is the place of ultimate trial, where he will be betrayed and crucified for teaching the wideness of God’s grace. Between now and the other end of Lent, we’ll see Jesus’ travels, hear his parables, and learn from what he does along the way. Through each interaction, Jesus has a keen sense of his destination. He’s always got Jerusalem in sight, and that colors what he says and does. Here it costs him the hospitality of the Samaritans, but he’s not meant to please them this time. Here it also gives him little patience for those who have other commitments come up. Family obligations and daily work may preoccupy the mind, but he calls on those who follow him to stay focused on their destination. Even *“Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”* These are extreme statements to underline the total focus of his ministry now. He set his face to go to Jerusalem.

We set our faces tonight as well for the days of Lent before us. Some of us have literally marked our faces, and all of us are here to face the completion of our births. Ash Wednesday is often thought of as a woe-is-me pious lament for sinfulness. Certainly that is here, and most everyone who has lived awhile has some sin to repent of. At the same time, I have found it helpful to recognize in the ashes a simple human truth: we will not live forever. There might be understandable fear in this—but also a relief in facing the honest truth. Only when we face the reality of death can we then ask: how shall we live? The

insistent grace that approaches us tonight is our own death, *and* the promise of holy love that extends even beyond the powers of death. We hold together both sides of this Serbian proverb: “Be humble for you are made of earth; be noble for you are made of stars”. We’ve placed it on the ribbons we’re giving out at church; so that you might tie them somewhere and see the reminder throughout Lent. Stop by the building and pick one up if you’d like one for the weeks ahead. We are both humbled by the inescapability of earthly mortality, and yet inescapably buoyed by the grace of God that accompanies us still.

A final word, about our next ritual. We have been through a year of great death, and the threat of it still keeps us from gathering in person tonight. While the ashes of this day are a reminder of death, we may not need that tonight! So we choose instead to balance this reality a year into the coronavirus pandemic with a different custom on this holy night. We remember and give thanks for the sacred and insistent grace shown to us and all the world in the sacrament of baptism. Take this moment to reach for a glass of water near you, and we continue worship with an affirmation of baptism.