

Hand on the Plow...Hold On
Third Sunday After Pentecost
June 30, 2018
Luke 9:51-62
Pastor Dea Sharp, Pikes Peak UMC

Luke 9:51-62 (NIV)

Samaritan Opposition

⁵¹ As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. ⁵² And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; ⁵³ but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem. ⁵⁴ When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them^[a]?"⁵⁵ But Jesus turned and rebuked them. ⁵⁶ Then he and his disciples went to another village.

The Cost of Following Jesus

⁵⁷ As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go."

⁵⁸ Jesus replied, "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."

⁵⁹ He said to another man, "Follow me."

But he replied, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father."

⁶⁰ Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

⁶¹ Still another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family."

⁶² Jesus replied, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."

I'm going to sneak in more of our lectionary readings for today, to get back to where we need to be.

Eugene Peterson translates the first few verses of Psalm 77 in *The Message*:

I yell out to my God, I yell with all my might,

I yell at the top of my lungs. He listens.

²⁻⁶ I found myself in trouble and went looking for my Lord;

my life was an open wound that wouldn't heal.

When friends said, "Everything will turn out all right,"

I didn't believe a word they said.

I remember God—and shake my head.

I bow my head—then wring my hands.

I'm awake all night—not a wink of sleep;
I can't even say what's bothering me.
I go over the days one by one,
I ponder the years gone by.
I strum my lute all through the night,
wondering how to get my life together.
7-10 Will the Lord walk off and leave us for good?
Will he never smile again?
Is his love worn threadbare?
Has his salvation promise burned out?
Has God forgotten his manners?
Has he angrily stalked off and left us?
“Just my luck,” I said. “The High God goes out of business
just the moment I need him.”

Ever felt like the person who wrote these words?
Haven't we all had times when we've felt like we've been abandoned and we
grieve for what we think we want or need?
I know I've had nights that were long and dark and sleepless.

I have several books of commentary on the psalms and one says *psalm poetry is the language of God*; at least us humans trying to find the right words to convey to God what's going on in our lives.

Our feeble attempts (especially the psalms) are language God understands because the words of the psalms represent the history of humans talking **TO** God. And, much like Psalm 77, the words convey the deepest feelings that we humans have as we cry out trying to get God's attention.

The poet of the 77th psalm describes our mood when we feel like we need some reassurance that somebody out there cares...and that somebody better be God, the Almighty, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus.

Last week we talked about the OT prophet Elijah who called down fire from heaven to out-manuever the prophets of the “little g” god Baal. We can believe that Elijah knew all too well the feelings of the 77th psalmist.

'Cause after he defeated (and killed) those false prophets, Queen Jezebel was honked off and she put a price on Elijah's head.

He's a hunted man.

So, if you'll recall, our reading last week had Elijah sitting under a tree and sulking, feeling sorry for himself because he thinks he's the only prophet of God left, feeling abandoned and even says he wants to die.

So God instructed Elijah to call Elisha to be his successor.

And, it seems like the only tactic Elijah and Elisha seem to know is to call for lightning and flames from heaven to strike back at opponents. They don't dabble in small stuff at all! In fact, one time after Elisha has had enough taunting about his bald head, he calls upon a couple of mama bears to gobble up the teasing little boys.

I'm telling you – NO. SMALL. STUFF.

So, it's little wonder, with this background, that the disciples in today's Gospel reading, wanting to "command fire to come down from heaven and consume" the Samaritans who want nothing to do with Jesus.

Those "sons of thunder," Zebedee's sons!

They're fast to the flame, aren't they? They know about Elijah and Elisha and *their* ways of handling "difficult" people. Why shouldn't they call down fire? It worked for the two Big E's.

And, if we're honest, wouldn't WE like to take care of the annoying or threatening people the same way?

Why not?

Well, as it turns out, "Why not?" turns out to be Jesus, who rebukes James and John.

Use your sacred imagination and hear something like:

"No, boys, we don't do that kind of thing.

We don't have time for that. Keep your eyes on the prize and set your faces toward Jerusalem.

*Keep your hand on **that** plow and hold on.*

There are a couple important things here.

First:

Luke is clearing up any confusion, that Jesus is not Elijah. Before, Matthew, Mark, and Luke had all believed that.

So, for a little more background, recall that when Elijah first called Elisha to succeed him, Elisha was in the fields.

He took his hands off the plow (as if he was ready to go) but then asked to have a farewell party with his family before following Elijah.

And **THAT** day, Elijah said, "Okay."

Not so with Jesus.

When he called the man in today's reading and that man asked to "first let me bury my father," Jesus said (again with sacred imagination,) "There's no time! Not to bury your dead father or for saying good-bye. There's no time to turn back to the old ways. Set your face toward Jerusalem, keep your hand on **that** plow, and hold on."

We hear Jesus saying there isn't time for everyday things because the urgency of proclaiming the kingdom of God calls for a radical break with tradition and familiar things.

Do you 'spose Jesus was telling US that?

You bet he was.

We've got to set our faces toward Kingdom building and empowering new believers; set our faces toward Jerusalem, and keep our hands on **that** plow, and hold on.

Wouldn't you agree that most of Jesus' ministry was about carving out new approaches for dealing with the things, like the rejection he's experiencing in Samaria in today's reading?

Jesus has to keep focused on Jerusalem.

And he wants us to do the same: to keep focused on the good news of the kingdom of God,

...to plow a furrow straight into the heart and mind and love of God, where there is no place for silly displays of power and destruction of someone who has wronged us.

Jesus seems to be saying to his disciples:

“Remember who **I am**. I’m not Elijah.

God used Elijah to get your attention to see the One God who matters, the One God who, at the end of the day, will lead you to something better, just as God led the people out of Egypt into freedom.”

Jesus probably went on: “Now God has sent me, part of God’s self, to dwell among you and help you see that it is useless and meaningless to dispute something like “which mountain should we use for worship?”

What’s at stake is serving God and serving your neighbor. And guess what: those stubborn Samaritans, (or homeless people,) like it or not, are your neighbors.

Someday I’ll tell you a story,” Jesus says, “when you’ll learn that on some days the only person who seems to understand what I am really saying, doing, and urging you to do, will be one of those Samaritans you want to reduce to heavenly barbeque! There are good Samaritans (did you catch that hint?) everywhere. You can’t judge a book by its cover. How many times must I tell you that?”

Frankly at that point, Dear Ones, Jesus could just as well have started in as Psalm 77 does.

Facing exasperation dealing with his motley crew of disciples and rejection among the Samaritans he could, like Elijah, sit under a tree and complain:

“Just my luck,” he might have said. “The High God goes out of business just the moment I need him.”

But Jesus knows what Paul Harvey used to call “the rest of the story.”

The poet in Psalm 77 sat down, at first, feeling utterly abandoned but then, begins to remember.

Peterson’s translation continues:

“Once again I'll go over what God has done, lay out on the table the ancient wonders; I'll ponder all the things You [O God] have accomplished, and give a long, loving look at your acts.”

When we set our faces toward Jerusalem, the only place on earth, where God makes God’s name to dwell on top of the holy hill of Mount Zion...

...when we hold on to **that** plow without looking back at all the distractions and rejection and hurt and brokenness;

...we will see and we will remember the things God has done.

We’ll remember God’s care, all through history for Gods’ people.

We’ll be able to stand in awe of the mighty things the Almighty has done all the way back to “In the beginning.”

Jesus knows that by fixing our hearts and minds on the God of the Bible we’ll be led away from senseless “things.”

Reset your faces toward Jerusalem.

The God of the Bible will encourage and empower us to put our hand to **that** plow and hold on.

As we prepare to celebrate the life of Hal Smith tomorrow, we’ve got the entire Bible to choose Scripture from that will not only encourage the grieving family, but also remind all believers present of the Good News of Jesus Christ who loved and saved us...even us.

Jesus told Thomas, “I AM the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me you will know my Father.”

Hold onto THAT plow, Dear Ones.

It's Good News plow that takes us straight to the heart of God and God's love.

Hold on, because God has new, awesome, and amazing things for us to do and to experience.

Some of it we may not like. Jesus knew that he would and that WE who believe in him, will face rejection of all sorts.

But when we, like the psalmist, "strum our lutes all through the night pondering how to get our lives together," Jesus wants us to remember that there will be singing like psalms and OUR God will not only hear us, but will hold us in his hands.

When we keep our hands on ***that gospel plow***, when we read these psalms of old, when we take time to remember what God has done, we find ourselves moving away from things that are senseless, and towards Jerusalem, 'cause our eyes are on the prize.

Keep your hand on **that** plow, hold on!