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“Looking Back”

2 Kings 2:1-2,6-14 Psalm 77, Luke 9:51-62 Galatians 5:1, 13--25

INTRODUCTION TO LUKE 9:51-62

For those of you who don't know, I drive a Prius. One of the things I love about it is that it has a rear view camera. It allows you to back up without looking back. (although I probably still should look back) It's especially helpful for seeing small object behind me that are lower than my back window.

The design insures that the camera only engages when you are backing up. When you put it in forward, the camera disengages. You can't go forward and look back at the same time. There is no looking back.

This morning's gospel lesson has similar advice for us. Jesus is looking forward to going to Jerusalem for his last Passover. He's headed there knowing what lies in store for him. For Him, there is no looking back. Hear the Word of the Lord from the gospel of Luke 9:51-62.

In the early 1920's Philo Farnsworth was working on a farm, plowing a straight line on a potato farm. His mind was far away, thinking about the possibility of transmitting moving pictures through the air. He had no electronic or engineering background, nor was he a scientist. No one in the world of science would have considered him a serious contender in the chase to find the answer to photographic transmission without the aid of wires.

Scientists from all over the world had been struggling to solve this dilemma and although many had been aided by research grants, no one came up with the answer. So, what chance did Farnsworth, a potato farmer with no education, have?

While plowing, he imagined a different approach. He imagined dividing a screen into long rows just like the field he was plowing, using electricity to create areas of light and darkness at each point along the row. Then stacking the rows on top of each other, he imagined that they could bring to focus a picture. The results were better than anything the world of science had ever conceived.

What did Farnsworth invent? He invented television. It was his vivid imagination coupled with a propensity toward science that has literally changed the way the world communicates and gets its information and entertainment. Unfortunately, he was not credited with the idea since he was only 14 years old.

Two business men, George Everson and Les Gorrell took an interest in Farnsworth and invested their life savings in his research. In spite of his age they had faith in him and on September 7, 1927, Farnsworth transmitted history's first electronic television picture. He was a farmer, and a boy! From a farmer's mind came the logic needed to create the television. Farnsworth “literally” put his hand to the plow but didn't look back.

How do you see yourself? Do you see yourself as just a farmer, or just a secretary, or just a teacher? or just a programmer? Or just a lawyer? Or just a Doctor? Or do you see your strengths, skills, and intelligence as capable of offering great things?

Jesus had been just a carpenter. But in a matter of months he moved from an obscure little town in the north of Judea to cause a stir throughout the land. News of his miraculous healing powers had spread throughout the region. Crowds flocked to benefit from his powerful presence. His disciples followed him with enthusiasm. But his fortunes soon began to change. Opposition developed. The crowds got smaller. The zeal of the disciples began to wane. Caesar's reign became more self-evident than God's dawning reign. It was to this background, Luke tells us, that Jesus resolutely "set his face to go to Jerusalem," and there was no looking back.

Why should he spoil success by going to the capital? His strength was in the countryside. But there was no changing his mind. To announce God's reign, he would have to go to the center of earthly power. What caused Jesus to journey to Jerusalem?

First, Jesus knew who he was. Someone once asked Martin Luther what gave him the fortitude he needed to challenge the Roman Catholic hierarchy and unjust principalities. His answer: "I have been baptized." His identity came through his relationship with God. When we understand our identity and our belonging, it goes a long way to give us courage.

Secondly, Jesus knew where he was going. Back in the 1960's a movie came out called "The Graduate," which became an American classic. It starred a then very young Dustin Hoffman as a college student trying to decide what to do with his life. There is a scene early in the movie where Benjamin, the character he was playing was floating on a rubber raft in a swimming pool. His father comes out and asks: "What are you doing." He replies. "Drifting. Just drifting." I suspect this was the writer's way of letting us know what he was doing with his life. I fear far too many could give the same answer, "Just drifting."

Jesus knew where he was going. Literally, of course, he was going to Jerusalem, but ultimately that trip would lead to Calvary and his appointment with a destiny that was uniquely His. By walking toward something he was also walking away from something. He was turning his back to the false gods of popularity, power, and painless piety.

Albert Einstein, the German born mathematician, slowly watched his homeland give in to Adolf Hitler's fascist dictatorship. Einstein wondered if any were going to stand up and oppose Hitler. He said, and I quote, "When Hitlerism came to Germany I expected the Universities to oppose it. Instead they embraced it. I hoped for the press to denounce it, but instead they propagated its teachings. One by one the leaders and institutions which should have opposed the Nazi philosophy bowed meekly to its authority. Only one institution met it with vigorous opposition and that was the Christian Church."

Einstein confessed, "That which I once despised, I now love with a passion I cannot describe." The commitment of the Church in standing against evil made a profound impression upon Einstein. Those individuals in the 1930's understood the cost associated with their actions, and they did not back down. The church today can do no less.

Jesus knew who he was and where he was going and third, Jesus knew who was going with him. Far more than the disciples accompanied Him. He walked with the great "I Am," the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In the ancient men of faith we can hear their encouragement. We can hear Daniel say, "He was with me in the lion's den." We can hear Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego say, "He was with us in the fiery furnace." We can hear Moses say, "When the Red Sea was in my front and Pharaoh was in my back, He was with me." We can hear David say "Great is the Lord God of Israel His mercy endures forever." Wherever you go, God goes with you—even if and especially if you go into the face of opposition.

Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem and to get there he chose to take the direct route through Samaria. When he arrives in the villages the people there do not welcome him. Why? Because he is a Jew and he is headed to the city of Jerusalem for Passover. The disciples probably thought better of going the way Jesus chose. They would rather have taken the longer path around Samaria because of the centuries' old conflict between the Jews and Samaritans. It was a common practice to hinder any band of pilgrims who used their villages as a shortcut. It is therefore no surprise, when they are rejected by the townsfolk, that James and John, the Sons of Thunder, ask if they can call fire down from heaven to destroy them.

In conflicts there is nothing sweeter than the total annihilation of the enemy and when God can be included in the destruction, all the better. (I do have to admire James and John's faith that they could actually pray and call fire down from heaven like Elijah did on Mount Carmel)

James and John mistakenly believe Jesus' presence is a call to judgment. But Jesus' "rebukes" them and their eager offer to fight fire with fire. Jesus rebukes James and John for their suggestion. In fact, Jesus' choice to go through the villages of Samaria looking for hospitality tells us that he was extending a hand of friendship to enemies. Even when rejected by the Samaritans Jesus refuses to dole out punishment. Instead he simply moves on.

As Jesus makes his way to Jerusalem through another town, he meets three men who wish to follow him and he warns them that it will cost them dearly to do so. To the one who was willing to follow Jesus warned he would be homeless. To the one who wanted to bury his father Jesus responded with a ludicrous image--let the dead bury the dead...dead undertakers? To the one who wanted to say good bye to his family, to which Jesus responded with another ludicrous image of a man plowing backwards.

As you can imagine the three, who were once so certain, are now hesitant. This story is about commitment or the lack thereof. It is about Jesus "setting his face" and three men "turning their heads and looking back."

Frankly, it's hard to not look back. Our desires for soft pillows and comfortable beds, for fulfilling family and social obligations, will frequently have higher priorities than following Jesus -- especially following Jesus all the way to the cross. We might be willing to give up some evils in our lives to follow Jesus, but to give up all these good things -- to put them as a lower priority than Jesus?

Perhaps the image of putting one's hand to the plow and not looking back refers to looking back both at all the very good things in our lives like family and friends, comforts and satisfactions, "successful" programs. But it also could refer to avoiding looking back at all the bad things, the sins in our lives, which have been forgiven by Christ. We can neither wallow in our past sins nor boast or rely of our past successes if we are to be fit for the kingdom of God.

Some people are not able to enjoy the present or prepare for tomorrow because they are still living in the past. Dr. Warren W. Wiersbe has put it like this: "Do not say, "'Why were the former days better than these?' You do not move ahead by constantly looking in a rear-view mirror. The past is a rudder to guide you, not an anchor to drag you down. We must learn from the past but not live in the past." Or as Thomas Holdcroft once put it, "The past is a guide post, not a hitching post."

John Wycliffe had a vision of a Bible in the common English tongue. But dogmatists anchored to the past killed him for it. They were looking back.

John Huss dreamed a dream of a responsible Christian life guided by the scriptures. Traditionalists burned him at the stake... They were looking back

Martin Luther was awakened to a new reality of God's grace -- an awakening not shared by contemporaries profiting from the status quo. Consequently, he was hunted for years for revealing an exciting and preferable future. A kingdom was coming and the powers of the past could not prevail against it but they were looking back.

Those who founded this country....didn't look back. This weekend we will celebrate their courage and persistence in moving forward.

William Wilberforce is credited with being primarily responsible for the 23 February 1807 vote in England to abolish the slave trade. The vote was 283-16.

But that vote doesn't tell the story. William Wilberforce spent 20 years pushing for abolition. Few people in history were as stubborn as Wilberforce, and few people in history were as criticized as much as Wilberforce. In the 1790s he was slandered in the press, physically assaulted, subjected to numerous death threats, and once challenged

to a duel. During certain periods he had to travel with a body guard. His spirit was almost broken many times. He suffered a nervous breakdown.

But in spite of all the dirt thrown at Wilberforce, he kept moving forward. He handled criticism, not by turning back and engaging his critics, but by moving on toward his goal. He set his face toward the abolition of slavery, by looking forward and not looking back.

The call to follow Jesus is a call to put our hand to the plow and move forward and not look back. As Paul said in his letter to the Philippians, "Forgetting what lies behind, press on to what's ahead, press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Jesus Christ. We must not let our past successes tempt us to rest on our laurels. We must not let our past failures tempt us to give up and not try. We must not let our present circumstances distract us from our goal. Television was invented by a 14 year old potato farmer. We must put our hand to the plow and plow forward without ... looking back.

Let us pray.

I have decided to follow Jesus. I have decided to follow Jesus I have decided to follow Jesus no looking back. No looking back.

Jesus, don't let us be held back by our past, whether it is our success or failure. Give us the resolute resolve to keep pressing forward. Help us to fix our eyes on you the author and perfecter of our faith. Who for the joy set before endured the cross, despising the shame and are now seated at your Father's right hand. Open our eyes to see ourselves as you see us, to know who we are in you, to know where we are going and to know that as we go we are not alone. Thank you for going with us until we come to you.