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First Presbyterian Church, Athens, Georgia
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Text: Luke 9:51-62

On the Road

Route 609 is the rural dirt road which runs beside the wooded property in Southwest Virginia where my parents built a mountain cabin. In the spring, rhododendrons bloom profusely beside it. In the summer, it leaves your car enveloped in dust. In the fall, yellow poplars and blazing sumacs surround it. In winter, after a snowstorm, it's slippery and unplowed. A particularly treacherous and steep winding portion not far from our cabin we dubbed The Wendy Curve in honor of our neighbor Wendy Shook who begged and whined until that small portion got paved. When the 911 system required all state roads to have a name and not just a number, Route 609 became Belcher Mountain Road. This unpleasant sounding name seemed most unfitting to my father who loved that part of God's world. Alas, his petition to call it the more melodious sounding Belmont Road failed due to too many Belcher kin on the county commission.

Perhaps the image of "road" conjures up for you some other highway or byway or street. Most every road may have its smooth and scenic parts but inevitably, if you travel any road long enough, it will have its twists, turns, and bumps and go to some places which certainly are not on your bucket list. It's not surprising that journey is such an apt metaphor for the Christian life.

In our text for today, Jesus sets out on a road trip. Luke says that Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem. This journey from Galilee to Jerusalem takes up more than a third of Luke's gospel. It's during this section that Jesus does most of his teaching and tells some of his most beloved and startling parables. During these ten chapters from time to time Luke reminds us that Jesus is "on the road." But if you try to map Jesus' zig-zagging trip on an atlas, it becomes pretty clear that Luke is more interested in making a point about discipleship than geography.

While Jesus' path is winding, his destination is certain. He sets his face to go to Jerusalem. He knows that he must face the music there, as it were, in Jerusalem, the epicenter of Jewish faith and life. He knows that it will not end well. He has already twice told the disciples that he will undergo great suffering and rejection and betrayal. Yet he is determined to make the trip.

His first stop is Samaria, populated by those half-breed cousins of the Jews, so to speak, who rejected a reading of salvation history that centered on Jerusalem. He sends ahead two disciples to arrange for food and lodging. But they get booted out of town when the villagers learn that the rabbi Jesus is en route to Jerusalem. James and John, having forgotten Jesus' earlier advice just to shake the dust off your feet if you are not welcome, want to call down fire on the village. But Jesus will have no part of revenge and violence and rebukes the disciples. This outright rejection of Jesus at the beginning of his trip reminds us of the rejection he met at the beginning of his ministry when he preached in his hometown. And it certainly points toward the rejection he will meet in Jerusalem. It's clear from the outset, then, that this road of discipleship is not going to be a walk in the park.

Next Luke tells us that "as they were going along the road" Jesus and his company

encounter three people, three potential disciples. Jesus obviously has not taken marketing 101 as his response to each one is enough to make them think twice about signing on to discipleship.

He tells the first one who volunteers to follow him wherever he goes that foxes and birds have holes and nests but that he has no home. The implication is that following him means being vulnerable: roughing it and relying upon the hospitality of strangers. Not exactly a winning sales pitch.

To the second whom he invites to follow him, Jesus sounds downright harsh. This potential disciple wants first to go and bury his father. “Let the dead bury their own dead,” Jesus replies.

And to the third who wants to tell his family goodbye before heading out, Jesus says, in so many words, Forget it. “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” Following Jesus is committing to a road where allegiance to him is above all else and will not be easy.

We don’t know if any of these three followed or not. Would you? Will you? There’s no false advertising here. No bait and switch. Heading to Jerusalem with Jesus means facing rejection, conflict, suffering, sacrifice, death. Why would anyone want to go? Why, indeed?

Except that . . . except that in the strange reversal that Jesus preached and lived everything is turned upside down. The poor and hungry and weeping are blessed. The reviled and hated have cause to rejoice. The sick become well. The dead are raised. The empty nets come up brimming with fish. Love (not hate) your enemies, he said. Welcome (not dismiss) children. Lend without expecting anything in return. All of it—*all of it*--contradicted conventional wisdom.

And yet somehow while this hard road leads to a cross on a Jerusalem hillside, it leads to life. Somehow discipleship, which inevitably means offering up parts of yourself to die, results in being more alive than before. “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will gain it.” (Luke 9:23-24).

In Greek the word for *road* can also be translated as *way*. And that’s what Luke tells us Jesus’ followers became known as: People belonging to the Way. (Acts 9:2) Will you hit the road this Lent? Will you travel the demanding Way Jesus goes? Will you follow him to the Cross? Fair warning: it will be steep and dusty, but with beauty that takes away your breath. It won’t be easy. But it will be life-giving.