

“Between Intention and Action”
Luke 9:51-62
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church
February 18, 2026
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Today we join Jesus as he “sets his face toward Jerusalem.” For forty days, we will let the Gospel of Luke guide us as we examine our lives through the lens of Jesus’ teaching and example. We will think together about the polarities that so often define us – supposed binaries like “faith and works” or “rest and growth” or “grief and hope.” We often consider these ideas to be in opposition to one another, but as we examine them through scripture, we find nuance and complexity. We find that these are false dichotomies. We find that God is present in between.

Tonight we read the story of the outset of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem, and three would-be followers who, despite their very best intentions, couldn’t quite make the commitment to leave their former lives behind to embark on the journey with him.

The first follower apparently was looking for at least a few creature comforts on the road. He approached Jesus and said “I will follow you wherever you go,” but then when Jesus pointed out that he didn’t even have a place to lay his head, this man turned aside.

Jesus approached another person and said “Follow me” but he needed time to bury his father. Perhaps suspecting that the father hadn’t yet died, Jesus rejected their offer.

And a third prospective disciple expressed a desire to follow Jesus, but only after he had said goodbye to the folks at home. Again, Jesus said no.

So what are we to make of all this? Does walking in the way and in the spirit of Jesus really mean that we have to give up our homes and our obligations to our families? Over the centuries there have indeed been folks who have done just that. But I don’t think that’s the primary meaning of this story. I think this text is a classic example of Jesus using hyperbole to help us think about the nature of discipleship.

The would-be followers in our text all had good intentions. They saw something in this itinerant rabbi named Jesus that intrigued them. They wanted to know more. But they all had excuses, too - excuses that got in the way of actually acting on their intentions.

We can understand that, I think, because we too struggle, at least from time to time, to align our own intentions and actions. We mean well. Really, we do. But there are things in our own lives that sometimes get in the way of saying “yes” to the way of Jesus. The call to follow Jesus is a call to a radical commitment, and you never know where that will lead.

The question before us is this: Does following Jesus, trusting in God’s grace, mercy, and love, shape our lives, or do we shape our faith to fit the lives we’ve already planned? Because sometimes our plans and hopes and dreams get overturned when we heed God’s call. We get offered the promotion that will mean more hours at the office and less time following our passion for social justice, and we turn it down. We get a year end bonus and decide not to take a cruise but to give more freely to others.

Will Willimon, former Dean of the Chapel at Duke University and now a professor in the Divinity School there, says that he frequently interacted with the parents of Duke students around this very point. He summarized those conversations this way: “What did you all do over there at Duke?”, the irate parents would ask. “Our daughter went to school to become a research scientist but now she is going to become a medical missionary to Haiti. You ruined her life. Why did you do that?” A ruined life? I think not.

Each year the season of Lent provides an opportunity for us to examine ourselves and to consider whether we are embracing old ways of life that need to be put to death, and buried, and grieved. So I ask: Are we ready? Are we willing to explore areas in our lives where our best intentions do not result in action? May it be so. And let the church say “Amen”.