

**THE ROAD NOT TAKEN; LUKE 9:51-62; JUNE 26, 2016; THOMAS H. YORTY;  
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If the bible is the story of the forces of good vs. the forces of evil – as everyone from Dante and Milton to Tolkien and CS Lewis seemed to think – then what we have today is a turning point in the war.

Luke says ‘the days drew near for him to be taken up, and he set his face toward Jerusalem’. Time is growing short. After his Galilean ministry in which he confronts prejudice, disease and oppression, Jesus focuses on the final leg of his mission – going to Jerusalem to stand before the trumped-up charges of the authorities and break the reign of death.

Yet, just when he could use a few friends as he pushes into the heart of darkness – everyone deserts him. The difference between Jesus and Alexander the Great or Hannibal or Eisenhower is that those generals had legions of soldiers; Jesus has only himself – unless you count twelve weak-kneed, confused disciples.

The Samaritans refusal to provide help is understandable – he is a Jew, a rabbi, a teacher of the law; they are not Jews, nor obligated to the law he keeps and preaches; they do not want to be associated with someone who is about to challenge the state and religious authorities; they are an oppressed minority, the fallout could bring more hardship; not unlike the scorn Muslims now face in the US because of radical Islam.

The disciples propose firebombing the Samaritans for their lack of hospitality much like Elijah who incinerated the prophets of Baal; in doing so they demonstrate one more time how out of touch they are with Jesus’ mission and message. Luke says, “Jesus rebuked them.” His tactics and weapons are different than those used by traditional armies.

You’ve got to wonder what was going through his mind at that point. Here they are after three years of apprenticeship to Jesus traversing Galilee, under his instruction, learning what the Kingdom of God is about, and their role in particular to proclaim the ‘year of the Lord’s favor’; just when they should have been showcasing their leadership and skills, they demonstrate how completely they misunderstand who he is and what his aims are.

Then, once underway on the road to Jerusalem, Jesus is met by three would be followers who, for various reasons, announce they’re ready to follow him, but not just yet. “I’m all in, Jesus but not right now,” one says, or “we’ve had a death in the family,” or “I have to go home to say goodbye before I can join your cause.”

Most of us have heard and perhaps made such excuses before; unwilling to commit, not wanting to offend – we try to have it both ways.

God and Nietzsche would spew us from their mouths as lukewarm versions of red-blooded human beings, not fit for the struggle, for God’s fight with the Devil. What army would allow such equivocating on the eve of battle?

No wonder Jesus utters that haunting line, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” The irony of that observation is chilling – the one who created the natural order can find nowhere in the natural order – even among those made in his very image – to call his home, to call his friends with whom to find respite and refuge.

It is a searing judgment on the human condition; our all-encompassing self-absorption, our myopic personal agendas, our fickle capacity to sacrifice for the Kingdom of God.

But the irony burrows more deeply. We’re talking about the one who comes to save us from ourselves, from self-destructive tendencies and warring behavior. We’re dealing with a savior who is the antidote to our inflated egos and thinly disguised prejudice – the one who shows us the path to life can find no fellow travellers.

Luke offers today what my art history professor taught us sculptors refer to as ‘relief’: ‘a projection of figures and forms from a flat surface so that they stand wholly or partly free;’ and provide a ‘sharp contrast of ideas, actions or events.’

Luke is a master of relief. He contrasts Jesus’ utter commitment to go to Jerusalem to suffer and die with the fickle, cork-tossed-in-the-sea allegiance of those who pretend to follow him.

‘No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God,’ Jesus says. For those who sign up to plant the vineyard, tend the crops and reap the harvest, looking back is intolerable. It is as powerful a wake-up call as there is in the bible. Life goes on and we are lulled into thinking it will remain the same forever; for Luke’s would be followers of Jesus it will never be the right time to decide or commit. No doubt he faced the same cold feet in his own community which is why we have the story.

Are Jesus’ demands unreasonable? Sure, if we want to live in the past or in a world of fantasy. Harsh? Yes, if we don’t want to rock the boat or disrupt the broken systems and relationships of a marriage or family or church and prefer to witness a slow death.

Luke is calling today for a state of readiness and willingness to go where Jesus leads; to face the dark forces, to begin the journey to Jerusalem; this is the experience of Robert Frost’s traveler in the “Road Not Taken,” standing where “two roads diverged in a yellow wood.”

I performed a wedding last weekend. The father of the groom is a retired airline captain. In his last years, he worked at the airline’s training center. He said the new generation of flight simulators is exceptionally realistic. Often, captains come in for their annual check-up with a chip on their shoulder suggesting they don’t need to go through all the hoops. He said those are the pilots he and his team made sure had multiple, very real crisis scenarios to respond to. We got their attention he said. They were unprepared when they came in but ready to deal with any emergency when they left.

Maybe we should have spiritual flight simulators for the Christian life; checkups to make sure we are ready for what life throws at us. Judging from the Gospel of Luke the bar was pretty low for those first disciples. They tended to over-react, under-respond, mis-interpret Jesus, and fall asleep – ill prepared to face the challenges that lay ahead when their leader fell into the grip of the authorities; nor was Luke’s church much better off trying to gain a foothold in a society hostile to Christians – which is why we have the story today.

We live in challenging times. The vote in the United Kingdom to depart the European Union last week – rattled financial markets; but, perhaps more ominously it reflects a global movement against established norms and criteria for running societies. As one commentator said not just Britain but everyone of the twenty-seven EU nations is heading into uncharted waters. The turn inward, away from unification could dismantle a post WWII European community with common economic, military and political goals.

The degree to which the US will be impacted by a fragmenting Europe is unknown. But I can imagine Vladimir Putin and the leaders of China are not all that disappointed.

Course corrections in politics and economics are not necessarily bad – and as our presidential candidates tell us we do need some course correction;

but it is concerning that the road to a new equilibrium and world order seems increasingly paved with a dark narrative of xenophobic practices for people on the margins, for the disadvantaged, vulnerable or simply different.

Failed immigration policies, proposed isolation and surveillance of all Muslims and the refusal to pass legislation to keep assault weapons out of the hands of suspected terrorists are the red flags of a foreboding and unjust future.

I had reservations about delivering this ‘call to arms’ message today, especially on the heels of the tragedy in Orlando.

But then I might sound like one of the three would be followers of Jesus. When that flight took off from LaGuardia airport a few years ago that landed in the Hudson River no one expected it to fly into a flock of geese; it was just another flight on its way to somewhere. Thank goodness the captain knew what to do in a crisis –

as did the flight attendant when they landed in the river. She immediately felt the floor boards for moisture, found water seeping in, then directed everyone to the exit doors in the front of the plane.

We don’t use the same tactics as the military but we are in a battle against powerful forces that would lull us into passivity or an impotent religion divorced from the concerns of the world. At the least we are called to be an early warning system.

But today’s lesson calls for more than that; it is a call to go to Jerusalem and witness to the power of life.

There are lives at stake, maybe even our own. Amen.