

# FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

by Rev. Jeremy Wester

June 27, 2010

8:30 and 11:05 a.m.

9:45 a.m. Service of Word and Table



## ST. PAUL'S

### UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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**Lectionary Texts:** 2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14; Psalm 77:1-2, 11-20; Galatians 5:1, 13-25; and Luke 9:51-62

## **Psalm 77:1-2, 11-20**

<sup>1</sup>I cry aloud to God, aloud to God, that he may hear me.

<sup>2</sup>In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord; in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying; my soul refuses to be comforted.

<sup>11</sup>I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord; I will remember your wonders of old.

<sup>12</sup>I will meditate on all your work, and muse on your mighty deeds.

<sup>13</sup>Your way, O God, is holy. What god is so great as our God?

<sup>14</sup>You are the God who works wonders; you have displayed your might among the peoples.

<sup>15</sup>With your strong arm you redeemed your people, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph. Selah

<sup>16</sup>When the waters saw you, O God, when the waters saw you, they were afraid; the very deep trembled.

<sup>17</sup>The clouds poured out water; the skies thundered; your arrows flashed on every side.

<sup>18</sup>The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind; your lightnings lit up the world; the earth trembled and shook.

<sup>19</sup>Your way was through the sea, your path, through the mighty waters; yet your footprints were unseen.

<sup>20</sup>You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

## **Luke 9:51-62**

<sup>51</sup>When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.

<sup>52</sup>And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; <sup>53</sup>but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem.

<sup>54</sup>When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?"

<sup>55</sup>But he turned and rebuked them. <sup>56</sup>Then they went on to another village.

<sup>57</sup>As they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.”

<sup>58</sup>And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.”

<sup>59</sup>To another he said, “Follow me.”

But he said, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.”

<sup>60</sup>But Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”

<sup>61</sup>Another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.”

<sup>62</sup>Jesus said to him, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

The eyes of our Lord are set upon Jerusalem. He knows where he is going, he is leading his disciples toward the city where he will be crucified, dead, and buried. Jesus Christ is on the way to fulfilling his mission for the salvation of the whole world. And as we soon learn, he has embarked upon this journey with no place to lay his head, no place to call home.

I am reminded of the Israelites’ journey through the wilderness. Their 40 years of wandering about with no home but the tent in which the Lord dwelled; no food but the manna that God poured down from heaven; no water but the spring that poured forth from a rock.

I am reminded of Elijah’s journey; Elijah who fled for his life toward the mountain of God, sustained only by the food God had provided. He was alone, forsaken by everyone he knew, and traveled 40 days to hear the still small voice of God call out to him through the sheer silence.

I am reminded of Mary’s journey; Mary who traveled to Bethlehem in a time of great unrest to give birth in the chaos of a stable and raise a child who would be taken from her too soon. She gave all she had and all that she was; and by her faith, we are blessed.

The journeys of faith we find in our scriptures are rarely simple, never easy, and often challenge us to wonder if we could ever meet the standards that God has set forth for our lives. For the past several weeks, my wife and I have felt a particularly great amount of empathy for those on difficult journeys. I don't mean to compare myself to what Jesus must have been going through when he set his eyes upon Jerusalem. The horror of the crucifixion, the betrayal, the forsakenness of our Lord is, well, more than just a little worse than moving across the country to be appointed here. It's really like comparing apples to...a five-course dinner; sure they're both technically food, but I know which one I'm going to choose. You have all been wonderful to us both as we have journeyed to find our place in ministry with you; we couldn't be happier with the welcome we have received.

But no matter how many people have called or written to us; no matter how many smiling faces and outstretched hands we see; no matter how much this place already feels like home, the weight of the journey will continue to weigh on us for a while. It will take a while to find new routines and feel settled in. I like to know what comes next and where everything is. Being a life-long Methodist and a third-generation Aggie probably makes me especially fond of tradition and opposed to change. But there is something in each of us that longs for a sense of normal in our lives; for a sense of direction and order to the path we walk. Our level of tolerance for aimlessness and chaos is unique to each of us, but we all need some sense that there is a destination in sight. Or if not an actual destination then at least some place to stop and rest for the night, a place to get away from the chaos and to experience peace.

When we cannot find those moments and life becomes too much, we cry out with the Psalmist. We cry aloud so that God might hear. Moaning and meditating, we seek the days of old, the days of joy and hope when all was well. Will the Lord spurn us forever? Has the love of God ceased? In those times even more than others we need to find God's peace. We need to arrive in the arms of God to be reminded of God's unfailing love and power.

When the unnamed person in our gospel story approached Jesus and offered to follow wherever the Lord was going, I suspect he had a very positive view of the

journey in mind, one with lots of mountain tops and few valleys. I suspect he had high hopes to see and change the world in the name of the Lord and that he would go anywhere he was called, so long as he got to stay in the presence of Christ. It's strange that Jesus doesn't call him out for making a promise he couldn't keep. No one could, and no one did follow Jesus all the way to the cross where he would be lifted up, but that's not his concern here. Instead you find these strange words about foxes and birds. Even they have places to call home, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. I suspect the unnamed person in our story was in search of a travel plan fit for Expedia. His idea of a journey probably sounded more like that of a musician on tour than a wandering Galilean.

We're much more accustomed to his way of thinking than to Jesus' way. "You're headed toward Jerusalem? Great, I'll go there." Most of the time we think of our whole life as a series of destinations all taking us closer to our final goal. It begins early on in life. As a child, we want to be a youth, as a youth we want to be an adult, as an adult, we want to succeed at a job or career, when we succeed we want to do more, make more, be more. Along the way we have graduations, promotions, parties; we have events marking the most significant changes and destinations in our lives. And each time that we've arrived, something else comes into focus as our next goal and object in life.

But, one of the great difficulties in our Christian lives is that our journey doesn't often follow an itinerary that we can map out and check off. The type of road signs we prefer just don't exist. Graduate from seminary and you'll always have at least a degree and probably a student loan to show for it. Celebrate your victory over the sin of pride and you'll already know the irony of thinking you are good enough to rid yourself of pride. Reach 40 and your friends won't let you forget the milestone you've hit. Reach 40 years in the church and you'll realize you are no closer to solving the mysteries of God than when you first began.

We never arrive at the point where we can just kick back on the sofa and relax. We never get to look around knowing that everything is in its place, the pictures are all hung, the boxes are all gone, and there is nothing left to do. Just when we think

we are settled, something always manages to come into our lives and shake things up again. It may be the shock of a new career, or it may be the jarring loss of a friend. Or it may simply be the gradual realization that our complacency, or perhaps our arrogance, has kept us from seeking after our Lord, and we are struggling to see what God is doing in our lives. Surely, nothing can separate us from the love of Christ, but there will always be something to keep us moving, to keep us searching for God to reveal His grace and love.

It would be absurd for us to think we should stop marking all of the significant events in our lives simply because our Christian journey doesn't lend itself to such a clear system. Marking the significant points of our lives is almost as natural as breathing, but those are not the places that define who we are. We live in the chaos and uncertainty of a world in need, a world that is hurting and longing for success, longing to reach that next life destination where the pressure stops and for once it is enough. But, try as we might to make our home in this world, we know from experience that no success or milestone is sufficient to bring peace and rest. The satisfaction of reaching the next goal quickly fades and the next big step is always waiting to be taken.

Christ reminds us that we are not long for this world. We are aliens and strangers, and we must find our way by focusing on Christ, not marking our progress. When the goals of success define who we are, we have begun to think like the unnamed person in our story. We have begun to live as though the place we are traveling is more significant than our God who has shown the way. Sallie and I can speak from experience having just been through several rather huge life changes with my graduation and commissioning; with the joys of moving and getting used to the Houston traffic and heat. Although at this point in our lives it's easy to be consumed by the significance of all that is happening to us and for us, we are called to focus not on the next big event *in* life, but on our God who *gives* life.

We're not strong enough to follow all the way to the cross. We're not faithful enough to never look back. But praise God that Christ is strong enough and Christ is faithful enough. Christ is calling us to live not for the promise of a grand journey

or an exotic destination, but for the moments that have little or no significance for the rest of the world; Christ is calling us to live for the moments when His grace overflows and His presence overwhelms. Praise God that our journey together as a church revolves around two such moments of grace. To the rest of the world, it is only water, but for us baptism is the strength of God's love poured out upon the cross. For the world, it is only bread and juice, but for us the Lord's Supper is the faithfulness of God's Son that conquered even death.

Instead of trying to iron out the details of what we must do to respond to Christ's words, instead of worrying about the milestones we've reached or the itinerary we've planned, we must meditate with the psalmist upon the mighty deeds of God; the greatness, the wonder, the unseen footprints of God guiding us home. We must focus upon Jesus Christ, who gave up his very life so that we might live in him. Jesus Christ reaches into our lives, reaches to the far side of sin, the far side of failure, the far side of every power in our lives that would distract us from the love of God and by dying and rising he has pulled us back into relationship with God and one another. God has made the way back through the immersion of Jesus Christ into every part of our world, and it is God's victory that we celebrate today around the baptismal font. By Christ's faithfulness, by his love, by his grace, we are healed.

But the sacrifice God made for us is only the beginning of our journey. It is the poignant call of our Lord, to come, "Follow me." Through the sacrament of Baptism we experience that call as we are incorporated into God's mighty acts of salvation and asked to journey forward to the table that our Lord has set before us. Through baptism the scales are removed from our eyes so that we may finally see, and when the church is gathered together in worship, when we are gathered around the table of our God, our eyes are focused solely upon Jesus and our hearts find a moment's rest. Gathering in worship, raising our voices in praise, reading God's Word, these are the things, the moments, the places in which we set our eyes upon the Lord to mark out exactly who and whose we are.

As I begin my time here with you, I pray that these two markers, baptism and the Lord's Supper, will be the moments that define what is normal in the ministry

we share, that these will be moments of peace and grace in the midst of a chaotic and hectic world. There will be other celebrations that we share together. There will be birthdays and holidays and groundbreaking. There will be new programs and send offs, hellos and good-byes. But no matter how big or how little those moments may be, none can compare to the grace poured out to give us peace and comfort in this place. I pray that in these grace-filled moments, in these holy mysteries God will reveal to you the power of His love that conquers all; and by the grace that we receive we will be carried onward until that day when we shall feast at the heavenly banquet table in the overabundance of God's peace.

Jesus Christ set his eyes upon Jerusalem, and by the power of what he has done, our eyes have been opened. Set your eyes upon Jesus, set your eyes upon the manna from heaven to sustain you in the wilderness. Set your eyes upon the living water to quench your thirst. Set your eyes upon the one who speaks in the midst of silence. Set your eyes upon the one who gave all that he had and all that he is.

You cannot go where He has been. You cannot do what He has done. But by His grace we are washed clean. And by His grace we are sustained. For by the cross God has conquered even death. Set your eyes upon the cross, set your eyes upon the face of the living Lord, and through the grace of God we shall receive life and life abundant. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.