

A sermon preached by the Reverend Michael Anderson Bullock,
St. Martin's-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church, Columbia, South Carolina,
on 1 July 2007 (Proper 8):
1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21; Galatians 5:1, 13-25; Luke 9:51-62

Digging In

In my junior year of college, I fondly remember taking an American Literature course for two semesters. One of the novels we read that year was Huckleberry Finn, and I remember Professor Louis Rubin (an accomplished southern writer in his own right) teaching us that Mark Twain used the mechanism of a travelogue as a literary device, by which he conveyed the point of his novel. This is to say that as Huck and Jim sail down the mighty Mississippi River on their raft, they encounter one adventure after another, and it is through these episodic adventures, along with the encounters with life that they fostered, that something unexpected – yet very telling -- occurs.

Through the excitement of Huck and Jim's shared adventures, we readers begin to recognize that a larger story is being told. Stringing the various "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" together, we see another story emerging, a story that stands above and beyond all the other tales told in the novel. In this, what we readers cannot escape noticing is the birthing of a dynamic and transforming relationship between the unconventional white boy and the runaway black slave. Through this unexpected, surprising and -- yes, even scandalous -- relationship between Huck and Jim, we readers also begin to catch the sound of another voice.

It is a larger voice, one that speaks to a more comprehensive, overarching vision and narrative. Of course, in the case of Huckleberry Finn, the larger voice is that of its author, Mark Twain, who through his characters and their transforming travels steadily suggests what might be possible for a racially divided America of his day, if only society would dare to see the larger picture.

In many respects, this morning's gospel lesson from St. Luke functions in a similar way. There are several episodic stories told in the reading, but they make very little sense, if one does not also notice the larger, overarching story that envelops them.

For instance, the gospel's opening verse states: *When the days drew near for [Jesus] to be received up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem (9:51)*. This is the way that Luke begins what biblical scholars generally regard as his gospel's travelogue section. From this point (9:51) in chapter 9 through the middle of Chapter 18 (18:14), Luke has Jesus quite literally "on the road," encountering all sorts and conditions of humanity and becoming more and more a public figure of record. And similarly to Mark Twain's use of the travelogue genre, St. Luke does not simply tell the stories of Jesus' encounters for their own sakes. No, just as Mark Twain speaks of the very large and necessary story of regaining

America's soul through the repairing of racial life in this country, so, too, does Luke point to the large and necessary story of God redeeming humanity's soul through the saving acts of Jesus, who is God's Christ.

Only in light of this overarching biblical story of God's salvation, a story of "health" and "wholeness" being restored through the saving acts of Jesus – only through this large lens can we make any real sense of the smaller, episodic life-stories about what it takes to follow Jesus as a disciple.

So, in this sermon I want to do two things. The first thing is to draw our attention to the larger, overarching biblical story of our salvation through Jesus Christ, specifically in the setting of Jerusalem. And then, with this larger, overarching story of our salvation as our lens, I want to see what the encounters Jesus had on the road have to say to us, as we take more seriously what it means to be Jesus' disciples.

To begin, one of the reasons that I am calling this large story of our salvation to your attention is that it seems to me the church in our time has largely lost track of this story. You and I have largely lost track of this story, to the point that many of us are even embarrassed to tell it. We have lost track of how this big story of what God in Christ has done for us and continues to do in us. We have lost track of what difference this salvation story makes to the way we live. And because we fail to tell the story of salvation, our lives degenerate into unattached narratives, lived in the immediacy of

the moment, in the desperate hope that someone, somehow will take an interest and give us some attention.

And so it is that we have in our culture competing individual stories, told incessantly and too often in public without any sense of shame, all driven desperately for their fifteen minutes of fame on "Larry King Live" or on "Oprah." And all because we have lost track of a larger story that is capable of giving shape and direction and meaning to our lives.

Again, my first and fundamental point in this sermon is to say that in the story of Jesus' passion, his death and resurrection, and in his glorious ascension (all events that take place in his climactic visit to Jerusalem), we have a larger story that gives profound meaning and life-changing purpose to our lives. It is a story of how God has made us for himself and will tolerate nothing that threatens to separate us from the Holy One or the life we need and cannot provide for ourselves.

So, to be clear and to deal with "first things first," let me pose this question: What is God's big story? What does it sound like? Here is my answer.

God's story of our salvation is a dramatic story, told in five, fundamental and telling acts. The first of which is the story of the goodness of God's **CREATION** and how humanity was made in the Holy One's image, for the purpose of being God's partners. Yet, the second act conveys humanity's **FALL** from this divine partnership. In a vain attempt to have life on our own terms,

humanity tore up the partnership and attempted to go into the business of life for ourselves. The result of this revolt led not to independence (the Fourth of July notwithstanding) but to a fatal addiction to fear and death.

Consequently, the third act of the big story has to do with the calling of **ISRAEL** to follow the creator God back into partnership and, thereby, to lead all the nations to return to the life-giving God. But, alas, Israel, too, became part of the ongoing problem, as well as the promised solution. So, the fourth act of the big story is **JESUS**.

Jesus embodies what life with God is like, to the extent that he would rather die than break the relationship with the Creator-Father in heaven. Therefore, as God's Messiah, as God's "anointed one," Jesus comes to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves: namely, love God more than fear death.

In Jesus' obedient trust of God's promise of life, the powers of fear and death were given their opportunity to exercise their ultimate and destructive power. (And they did just that.) Yet, what God reveals through Christ's fidelity and his resurrection is that the Holy One is the author of the larger story, and that God's salvation story is a story that overcomes the fear and destruction that death's story always peddles. In God's story, death is real, but it is not the end. With God, the story of life contains more – always more.

And so in the triumph of this fourth act, we encounter the fifth and final act. Beginning with Easter, this fifth act is the one you and I live in now. Its opening scenes are rooted in Pentecost, where believers are given the life and power we have seen in the risen Christ; and we are to use this new life and power to guide and direct **THE CHURCH** as the continuous human stage on which God's redemption-drama is performed – always live and in person.

That's it: Creation; Fall; Israel; Jesus; Church. It is one way of encapsulating the overarching God-story. It is, as I say, a story with which you and I need to reacquire ourselves. For without this God-story, our stories are just one more sad tale among incalculable other versions, all clamoring at once for attention. But with this story, we have a clear beginning, a middle part, and an end that directs and provides meaning to the small, personal stories that you and I live day-by-day.

To me, this is the significance of Jesus setting his face to Jerusalem. He is enacting the great story of our salvation, which is nothing short of the great and eternal story of the love and life that God wills to give to us and to all creation. This is the big story, the one you and I must re-familiarize ourselves with so that we can keep our heads and guard our hearts, as we raft our way through the adventures and trials of this life.

Now I mentioned that once the big story was re-established in our minds, we could then deal more

clearly with the smaller stories that define our lives. As we heard in the gospel lesson, St. Luke provides several of these smaller stories, and as I have said I think these small stories require the context of big story of Jesus in Jerusalem to be fully appreciated.

In particular, the vignettes about Jesus' interaction with three potential disciples raise some serious questions about what it means to follow Jesus. In all honesty, the point that hits me squarely in the face about the three men who would follow Jesus, told as they are in travelogue sequence – the point that hits me is that the demands of discipleship are more than I can shoulder. They even appear to contradict what is reasonable, both in terms of observant religion and common sense.

On the face of it, these stories seem to tell us that if we value discipleship with Jesus, we are not allowed even the time to bury our mothers and fathers (something Torah commands) before following him. Neither are we permitted even to say “goodbye” to our loved ones before heading into divine service; and in any event following Jesus will be costly, with no place even to lay one's head. So, if this is what discipleship is about, then who can do it? Moreover, why should we even try?

How is it that Jesus comes off looking so unreasonable, so callous and cold, so insensitive in these small episodes? Even when we wrestle this issue of the cost of discipleship to the ground and conclude that Jesus is simply

reminding us of priorities, that we are to seek as a matter of “first-things-first” God's kingdom and the rest will be given to us, nonetheless, how many of us would respond differently from the three men? Not very many and that includes me.

Painfully, I must admit that my discipleship has limitations. So does yours. But here is the point. Once we swallow hard and make our confession that we hedge our bets with God in Christ (that we believe; but God help our unbelief) – once we do that, we can also recognize the One who did not hedge any bets. What you and I have dismissed as inconvenient, nonsensical, or just off-the-wall, Jesus takes on and accomplishes. And fundamentally, this is what Luke's story is about. It is not just about our inability to follow all the way to the cross and empty tomb; it is not just about our refusal to move beyond what we are comfortable with. No, the gospel is not about us. Rather, it speaks essentially to the fact that – uniquely – Jesus is faithful. And in his keeping the trust, Jesus opens the way for us to come to the cross without fear but with gratitude.

This is the larger picture, given as “Good News” by God in Christ – for us, even when he hedge our bets with God.

One last word about our penchant to hedge our bets with God: You and I have made promises to God, to the church, and to one another. We have promised to follow, to be Christ's disciples. But let's be clear about one thing. As important as following Jesus is, discipleship is not the goal.

Transformation is the goal. Being changed into what we have seen in Christ – that is the goal; that is God’s will. Transformation takes place when we confess our limitations and ask God to lead us.

And so, as we honestly pray and reflect on our discipleship, on our being the church, with all our limitations, I offer you the insights of the French philosopher, Gabriel Marcel, as a way forward, as a way of moving into and beyond discipleship.

*Do not run or fly away in order to
be free.
Rather dig in the narrow place that
has been given you.
You will find God there.
Vanity runs.
Love digs.*

Amen.