

I Kings 19:15-16, 19-21; Psalm 16;
Galatians 5:1, 13-25; Luke 9:51-62

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Jeff and Rachel, in about 15 years you'll be teaching Abigail how to drive. Oh, I'm not meaning to rush you on this. After all, our newly-baptized sister in Christ is only 10 months old. But the years will go by quickly, in the blink of an eye. And the next thing you know, you'll be sitting on the passenger side, needing all the patience you can get, seeking all the wisdom you can dispense, in order to teach her the skill of driving a vehicle safely and well.

I have some advice for Abby—at least the day she takes her driver's test. Speaking from personal experience, Abby—do **not** take your driver's test on a hot summer day at 3 in the afternoon in an UNair-conditioned car with a cranky police officer who's been testing would-be drivers all day. You will not pass. Instead, take your driver's test at 9 in the morning before it gets hot and the police officer gets cranky. Trust me—things will go much more smoothly.

As for advice on driving itself, consider this story **not** from my personal experience. There was a young man receiving driving instruction from his teacher. After they had pulled out from the high school parking lot, the instructor noticed the youth had an odd habit. While behind the wheel he never seemed to take his eyes off the left side-view mirror. The instructor grew concerned about this, and asked the young man, "Why do you keep looking in that mirror?" The teenage boy answered, "My dad says that if I can see the white line in my side-view mirror, then I'm going straight." The teacher said, "With all due respect to your dad, you can't be a safe driver if you're always looking backwards. You've got to keep your eyes on the road ahead of you."

You know, Jesus would make an excellent driving instructor. He tells his would-be followers flat-out that they cannot be looking backwards. They need to keep their eyes on the road ahead of them. Luke describes an occasion in Jesus' earthly ministry when three different potential disciples meet up with him, and the conversation turns to what that very discipleship means. The first person says quite willingly, "I will follow you wherever you go." Jesus' response to the would-be disciple is that the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. This is not Jesus whining and complaining about the lack of 4-star hotels along the way. It's a matter-of-fact statement about the faithful life, and its potential consequences. Jesus says that to follow him may mean leaving behind the things that make us most comfortable. That when we take on the Christian life and follow our Lord, doing his ministry in the world, sharing his love, the things we now hold dear may not necessarily stay with us.

Nowhere to lay his head? I like my pillow. I like my pillow a lot. Do you take your pillow when you travel and sleep in some other place? Lots of folks do. I like my home. I like my van. I like my neighborhood. I like my well-stocked food pantry. I like my free time. I like my income. Now, am I holding these things dear, or rather, do they now have a hold on me? For the thought of **not** having those things makes me feel scared. **Having** those things makes me feel secure. But Jesus calls us to feel secure in **him**. Jesus on his journey has nowhere to lay his head; he's totally dependent on his Father's care. He places all his trust in his Father.

Then Jesus says to a second person, “Follow me.” That person, however, has something he needs to do first. None of us can fault him for what he wants to do. He wants to bury his father. After all, isn’t family important? Shouldn’t we fulfill that commandment to honor our father and mother? Jesus’ reply startles us: “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom.” Such a reply sounds harsh to us. Yet look at his words. Jesus tells the man, “. . . as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom.” Proclaiming the kingdom was to announce the power and presence of God in the world and the wonderful changes such a power and presence was making. Changes like repentance and forgiveness, healing and wholeness, compassion and community. So, Jesus says, this is the choice one has regarding discipleship—you can either tend the dead, or you can go out and give life.

The third would-be disciple pledges to follow Jesus, but like the second, wants to do something else first. “Let me say farewell to those at my home.” Now, that seems a wise course of action for those of us who thrive on getting our affairs in order, prudently organizing our lives before heading out into the unknown. But Jesus, the driving instructor for our journey of faith, replies, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” Remember—using only the side-view mirror to see if you’re driving straight is not a good way to drive. Just so, you can’t plow a straight furrow for growing crops if you keep looking back. You can’t do the work of God’s kingdom that way. Jesus urges his would-be followers to look ahead to where Jesus himself is walking. Only by doing that could they truly follow him.

Of course, we might recall the Old Testament lesson and say, “Hey, Elisha was allowed to go home and say farewell to his family before following Elijah in the prophet-of-the-Lord business.” Yes, that’s true. He does look back, so to speak, before journeying forward to serve the Lord God. However, consider just what he does when he “looks back.” Elisha takes his oxen—his own property and livelihood, the stuff that he holds dear, that makes him feel secure—and slaughters them. Then he takes his plow, breaking it up and using it for firewood to cook his oxen, and Elisha feeds his family and his neighbors. Elisha’s “looking back” is by no means a return to an old way of life, or even one last fling before serving the Lord God. This act of feeding is an act of service in itself. Elisha **serves** God in that community, giving fully of himself, before that serving would take him on journeys unknown, where he would need to place his trust, not in the oxen, and not in the plow, but in the grace and goodness of the Lord God.

Jeff and Rachel, you and I have talked together about how you hope Abby will always look ahead so she can see where Jesus is leading her. You’ve got your work cut out for you. The world quickly finds new ways for us to look in the wrong direction, and hold onto things we mistakenly believe to be important. But you’ve promised to help Abby look ahead. You’ll fulfill that promise as she grows by telling her about our God, by teaching her how to pray, by giving her a Bible and reading it with her, by bringing her to worship where the story of Jesus Christ is proclaimed in community and the community responds once again in prayer and praise. **That’s** how Abby will be encouraged to look ahead. That’s precisely how each of us is enabled to look ahead so we, too, can daily see where Jesus is leading us. We can trust Jesus to lead. For, while the various journeys we disciples travel are unknown and make for uncertainty in our lives, the one who leads us through them **is** certain about **his** journey. Luke reminds us in our Gospel lesson today that Jesus’ face is set toward Jerusalem. No looking back to Galilee with either regret or nostalgia, but looking forward, Jesus journeys to the cross to give himself for the sake of the world. And because of that cross, and what lies beyond it, Jesus, our leader, takes you and me with him into **his** future, and it becomes **our** future—the fullness of new life for all of us in the kingdom of God.

Abby entered those waters of baptism with nothing save her parents' promises to teach her about our God, and to guide her in the way of faith. She entered those waters with nothing, yet came out with everything. Thanks be to God. **Amen.**

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