

It's almost 2200 miles from Springer Mtn. Georgia to Katahdin Maine on the Appalachian Trail. 2200 miles! We here at Trinity have a front row seat to viewing the journey of hundreds of hikers as they make their way from the beginning of the trail in Georgia past here. It's kinda nice to have the trail's detour come by here for this summer until the bridge over the Housatonic is completed. About 1400 hikers have been recorded as having begun the long trek this year from Georgia to Maine. I wonder how many of those will make it this far. How much fortitude and determination it must take to decide to take a good part of a year and hike the trail ...in snow, in rain, in winds and in heat. If they do make it this far, surely it will be in part because they just kept putting one foot in front of the other.

I've had a chance to speak to a few of the hikers that have come past our church. Some come in looking for directions – to make sure that they are really on the right road. They want to know when they'll rejoin the real trail and, of course, how far it is to a grocery store.

One woman I spoke to is a grade school teacher and is hiking the trail in sections...her trail name is "Spirea Virginiana" and she signed our guest book. She told me that this quest has really given her life new meaning. There was a beginning, a goal to reach at the end, and on the way she has met some amazing people and learned some important things about what she is capable of doing. There have been some difficult sections for her; times when she shivered all night, times when she hiked soaking wet. Times when the backpack felt like it weighed a hundred pounds instead of only 40. But she keeps on because she has made this AT hike the priority of her life for the last few years.

I don't know about you, but that's not something I am called to make a priority in my life. There are some journeys that we don't want to take. They are not ours. And there are some journeys that we just cannot make, no matter how much we might want to. That is where we

find Elisha, the man who will take the mantle from his mentor Elijah. I'll try to carefully pronounce those names so you can tell one from the other.

In today's reading we reach the end of our month long Elijah saga. This is the end of the journey for Elijah. He knows this, and he doesn't want his protégé, Elisha to come with him on his final trip back to God. But Elisha loves his master and wants to be with him no matter what he is going through. This story is portrayed as a physical trek, but the important part of it is the spiritual passage. We are told that Elijah was taken up to heaven. He is not described as having died. Only two characters in the whole of the Bible are said to have been taken up to heaven in this way; Elijah and Enoch, who is the grandfather of Noah. Because of this strange way in which Elijah left the earth, it is thought that he will return again and for the Jewish people will herald the coming of the messiah. That is also the reason why we hear of his presence at the transfiguration. He heralded the coming of Jesus.

Those of us who have experienced great loss can surely identify with Elisha who will not leave the side of his dear friend. No matter what Elijah says to him, Elisha refuses to stay behind. "I will not leave you," he repeats twice over.

I have been with several people as they passed from this life to the next one. It is a very lonely feeling to know that there is one journey that you cannot go on with someone you love. No wonder that when it happened to Elisha he grasped his clothes and tore them in two pieces. And those of us who are left behind when someone who is dear to us passes through the veil, well, we just put one foot in front of the other for a while in our grief. It's an interesting expression, that, one foot in front of another. It's as if we feel as though we must keep walking, traveling, moving. We don't feel like we can just sit down and be sad, but must try to stay the course, and keep on the journey whether we want to or not, whether we know where it will lead or not. When we use that expression we really mean that we are not going to try to see the whole of our journey as it stretches out ahead of us. That is too daunting. But that we will live one day at a time, or if necessary, one hour or minute at a time.

You know, I started the “walk, talk, pray” group on Friday mornings. There’s some more putting one foot in front of another, although for us it is in joy and not sorrow. We are walking on the AT too although our goal is clearly not to reach some distant physical location. Our goal is not a physical one so much as a spiritual one. We put one foot in front of the other to talk to each other and to share our lives and our faith. We haven’t yet come across any through-hikers on our Friday mornings, probably because Dugway Rd. is quite a distance from any of the lean-to camping shelters on the trail.

So, that brings us to Jesus who we heard this morning is setting his face to go to Jerusalem. This spot in the Gospel of Luke is like the hinge in the story. It is the time when Jesus and the disciples begin in a more meaningful way to make their way to the holy City and towards the events which would take place there.

So, does Jesus begin to put one foot in front of the other? I’m not sure. I think that is a good question for our prayers. That image is helpful for **us** in the way we falteringly get ourselves moving when we aren’t sure where we are supposed to go. But I’m not so sure that it is a way to describe the journey Jesus makes towards Jerusalem. He has set his face towards Jerusalem, even if it will take many, many stories to get there. I say many stories, because, we don’t really have a way to tell the time in which all of this happens, we can tell how many chapters and how many stories it takes for Jesus to get to Jerusalem, but not how many months or years.

Jesus stops in first this town and then that one. His route is cir-cú-i-tous. He takes time to stay with people there, to eat with them, to heal the sick, and to teach. But, he has set his face towards Jerusalem, and his stories will reflect that fact. His priority will not change. He will not waver from his goal, **but** he will take his time.

Today in our reading he asks those who would go with him if they are prepared for that. Jesus is preparing those who will follow him for two things; for what they will face in Jerusalem, of

course, but also preparing them for their own ministries after his death and resurrection. So, by extension we are being prepared for our ministry, and all the stories we will hear this summer and fall about the people healed, the parables told, the meals shared are meant to be lessons for us in our discipleship.

So, let's hear again those nameless "someones" who speak to Jesus along the road about following him. One says, "I'll follow you" and Jesus cautions him that it's not going to be such a soft and easy journey. There will be no going home to sleep in one's own bed on this path. Another assures Jesus that he's ready to follow but wants to bury his father first, an understandable, and also an important Jewish custom to honor one's parents. Still another wants to just take long enough to say goodbye. To these Jesus says, "No, it's now or never". This seems contradictory! How come Jesus will take time over someone to heal them or eat a meal with them, but won't let these take a few minutes to tie up loose ends? We've just said this is not a race to Jerusalem. So, why is Jesus being so hard-nosed and even cruel to these would be disciples? Is the only way to follow Jesus to walk away from everything and everyone in our lives?

As usual Jesus is speaking metaphorically and not literally. You know sometimes Jesus says things that are a bit outrageous to get to get our attention. What he is saying to the disciples is; OK, it's time to set your priorities. So, NO, we do not have to walk away from everything that we are, and have, and do in order to be a disciple of Jesus. We do not have to all become monks and nuns, and take a vow of poverty. What Jesus is asking us to do is take a vow of faith.

So what are the most important things in your life? What are your priorities? For the through hiker on the AT the priority and the goal is to reach Katahdin, Maine. If they are really set on that goal it will see them through the hardships they face in month after month of strenuous physical activity.

For us, I will be so bold as to venture to say that you and I have the priority of deepening our relationship with God through Jesus Christ, to live fuller, more joy filled lives. God's grace will sustain us in the journey of faith so that we can stay with Jesus all the way to Jerusalem, putting one foot in front of the other.