

## “The Kingdom of God Coming Near”

### Luke 9:51-62

People are not very good at predicting the future.

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit the United States in March 2020, many of us thought we'd be home for a few weeks. The virus would pass through the country, and then we'd all be back to school, work and church.

We thought we'd surely be able to gather for Easter Sunday in April!

Well ... it didn't exactly turn out that way.

Most of us *did* make it back for Easter ... in April of the next year.

But our vision of a quick end to the pandemic was not the most boneheaded prediction of all time. All through history, people have made terrible assessments of what a good next step would be.

In *The Washington Post*, columnist John Kelly lists a number of real stinkers. In the year 1486, a royal committee was gathered in Spain. They said it would be wrong for the king and the queen to provide funding for an Italian explorer named Christopher Columbus. The committee members insisted that sailing west to Asia would take a ridiculously long three years. And why would anyone want to spend so much time at sea? They believed that there was nothing between Europe and Asia but a vast and featureless ocean.

“Don't do it!” they advised. But the king and queen decided to fund Columbus anyway. He landed in the Bahamas in October 1492, starting a movement of globalization that continues to this day. Yes, there was a terrible human cost to this movement, especially among the indigenous peoples. And problems continue with globalization today.

But the Spanish committee of 1486 was wrong to assume that there was nothing of value between Europe and Asia.

The value of land has always been tough to predict. Nearly 400 years after the journey of Columbus, a congressman from New York named Orange Ferriss couldn't believe that the United States would be willing to pay Russia \$7 million for the Alaska Territories. That might have seemed like a lot of money, but it was still a good deal — just two cents per acre. Ferriss complained to his fellow congressmen, “Of what possible commercial importance can this territory be?”

In the gospel of Luke, Jesus knows exactly where he needs to go — “he set his face to go to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51). The importance of that city to his ministry and mission is very clear to Jesus. But confusion arises on his way to Jerusalem, causing his disciples and a number of potential followers to make some problematic predictions.

First, two disciples enter a village of the Samaritans and attempt to arrange some hospitality. But the Samaritans do not receive Jesus, because they are not supportive of his plans to go to Jerusalem. James and John are incensed. Predicting Jesus' reaction, they say to him, “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” (v. 54). They are convinced that Jesus would want the complete destruction of this rude and unwelcoming town.

But the prediction of James and John is problematic. Jesus is not interested in the destruction of the Samaritans, so he turns to James and John and rebukes them for their destructive impulses. Then the disciples and Jesus move on to another village.

A desire to use violence in the name of God is not unusual. In the Spanish Inquisition, Christians used imprisonment and execution to combat heresy. In European witch trials, flogging and exile were common punishments. And even today, Christians use violence against members of other religions, secular groups, and even other Christian denominations, like in Russia where Russian Orthodox Christians are supporting Putin even though his army is killing the Russian Orthodox people of the Ukraine.

Researchers have found that violence is often driven by negative emotions, such as anger or fear. James and John are certainly angry at the Samaritans for rejecting Jesus. But David Chester, a professor of psychology, has found that even positive emotions play a big role in aggressive behavior. Positive feelings of power and dominance can also drive violence.

“Aggression isn’t just about ‘I’m angry and I want to hit someone,’” Chester says. “It’s also about how it feels good sometimes to get revenge on someone who has wronged you.” Remember this insight the next time you want to lash out at someone who has treated you badly. Your anger might be righteous, but Jesus is not interested in destruction.

Next, as Jesus and the disciples are going along the road to Jerusalem, a person says to Jesus, “I will follow you wherever you go.” Jesus says to him, “Foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” (vv. 57-58).

The man probably thinks to himself, “Gee, I really like to sleep in my own bed at night.” Don’t we all? At this point, it seems that he slips away and heads home.

Then, Jesus says to another potential disciple, “Follow me.” But the man says, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father” (v. 59). That seems like a reasonable request, doesn’t it?

A good next step. After all, the Ten Commandments say, “Honor your father and your mother” (Exodus 20:12).

But Jesus says, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:60). The grieving man doesn’t know how to respond, so he drops out of the crowd — probably to take care of the funeral arrangements.

Finally, another potential follower says, “I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home” (v. 61). Again, a reasonable and respectful request: A quick good-bye to the family, so they won’t think that their loved one has disappeared.

But Jesus says, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God” (v. 62). The request of the final follower is immediately denied.

The first man envisions a place to rest. The second assumes he will be able to bury his father. The third is anticipating a chance to say good-bye to his family. They seem like reasonable expectations. So why does Jesus consider them to be problematic?

All three of these potential disciples fail to see that a future with Jesus is very different from the past. They cannot imagine a time in which they don’t have a bed to sleep in, or the opportunity to go to a funeral, or the chance to visit with their family.

They are like the man who wrote about airplanes in the March 1904 issue of *Popular Science Monthly*. He said, “The machines will eventually be fast, they will be used in sport, but they are not to be thought of as commercial carriers.”

Talk about a problematic prediction! Now, around the globe, roughly 100,000 flights take off and land every day.

Jesus is calling his followers to look towards a new way of life, one that is hard to predict with any accuracy. In the very next chapter of Luke, Jesus gives 70 of his followers a set of commands, telling them to “carry no purse, no bag, no sandals” (10:4). “Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this house,’” says Jesus. “Eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you’” (vv. 5, 8-9).

When Jesus looks into the future, he sees the kingdom of God coming near. He doesn’t see comfortable beds, respectful funeral services or satisfying family visits. Jesus envisions a future that is very difficult for us to predict, because it is a future being created by God.

But this does not mean there is nothing for the followers of Jesus to do. “We can’t build the kingdom by our own efforts,” writes biblical scholar N.T Wright. “But we can build *for* the kingdom. Every act of justice, every word of truth, every creation of genuine beauty, every act of self-sacrificial love, will be reaffirmed [in the kingdom of God].” All are solid next steps.

These acts do not have to be shocking in order to be significant. The cup of coffee given with gentleness to a homeless person at the Lakeside homeless shelter, “the piece of work done honestly and thoroughly; the prayer that comes from heart and mind together; all of these and many more,” says Wright, “are building blocks for the kingdom.”

Looking to the future, we followers of Jesus often fail to see what he desires for us. Like James and John, we assume that Jesus wants to destroy the people who disrespect us. Like the three potential followers on the road, we cannot envision that discipleship will disrupt our normal routines.

The truth is that our assumptions and predictions will cause problems for us unless they are in line with the coming of the kingdom. But if we act in ways that are in response to the words of Jesus, we will be adding important building blocks to the kingdom of God.

May the peace of God . . .

#584 – The Son of God, Our Christ