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Christ Church Exeter  
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## The Many Paths of Faith

*Luke 9:51-62*

*When the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. 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?" But he turned and rebuked them. Then they went on to another village.*

*As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." 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." To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."*

If you are anything like me, you've may have some acquired nostalgia for those years before today's handy navigation and travel aps on our phones. Remember maps? Or those giant Atlas road map books that could fill the backseat of a car? Or when you were going on a long trip, AAA could provide those TripTiks where you would flip over one page and then the next. And then MapQuest come along on the internet. Today I have become so reliant on Waze and Google maps that I wonder how far I could ever go without them.

Knowing where you are is a good thing. Getting lost from my experience is no fun – unless you really want to be lost. And yet, like life itself, as the expression goes: the journey itself is the destination. What is learned along the way. The people we meet. The decisions that have to made. The roads not taken. The pace: rushing to reach the end or slow and steady.

Many Biblical commentators make big deal about the travel section in Luke's gospel that we begin today. They say that Jesus' journey towards Jerusalem for some ten chapters makes little geographical sense. He is walking around the region, going from one place to the next with little regard to the most direct way to get there – 'as the crow flies.' Which is a bit odd and interesting for someone whose "face was set toward Jerusalem." Jesus knew where the city was: he had likely visited it many times. So, with his face set, his mind made up, and his heart open to those he would meet along the way, the journey to cross and resurrection began. And at times geographically he was all over the place. And that in of itself was making a point. Which makes this starting point in a Samaritan village – a location and a people who knew something about boundaries and suspicion and hostility -- all the more curious.

What we see playing out: James and John got angry at the poor reception and rejection, yet Jesus did react. He moved on to another village.

Jesuit priest James Martin is one of my favorite authors and commentators. He has mastered social media and remains a progressive and learned voice within the Roman Catholic Church. In his

book entitled The Jesuit Guide to Almost Everything he sums up the teaching of his order's founder St. Ignatius Loyola. From the beginning, Ignatius declared that his new religious order would be different: not like the Benedictines or Cistercians or Carmelites. These new Jesuits would not cloister in monasteries but live out in the world as contemplatives in action. They would go on to found many universities in this country: Georgetown, Fordham, and Boston College.

Martin condenses Jesuit theology into simply: Finding God in all things. Nothing is outside of God's reach. God does not reside merely within the walls of a church, but in the works of charity and compassion, within our lives that include friends, family, work, relationships, suffering, joy, music and pop culture. (page 5)

God can be found in every dimension of your life.

Just as Jesus did not always take the most direct route to his final destination, neither do we.

When I listen to people's faith journeys, they often involve different phases and turns. They may stop practicing their faith – or even lose their faith for a decade or so before they pick it again later. There are stumbles, setbacks, dead ends, detours, and those new roundabouts/rotaries that have popped up recently on our roads that if you're not careful you can keep driving around and around. And there can be times of insight, wonder and deep meaning.

The path to belief – of being able to find God in all things – according to Martin has six possible routes. How might you describe where you have been or where you are now?

The first path is that of belief. Faith and church have always been a part of your life. The faith is a gift, but like a garden, this faith needs soil, seeds, water and tending. The benefits of this path are clear: faith gives meaning to both the joys and struggles of life. You know that you are never alone. Faith becomes an anchor and comes with it, we hope, a community and people with whom to share the life. Through thick and thin. Joys and sorrows. I believe at our best Christ Church is such a community for many.

I think of those poignant words from the prophet Elisha to his mentor Elijah that he repeated two times: "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." 2 Kings 2. A faith and assurance that never leaves us.

Another direction people take is the path of independence. This way is for those out there who would say they are lapsed or have fallen away and have separated themselves from organized religion. [I had a professor in college who pushed back on those who would lament organized religion, but asking: do think disorganized religion would be any better?] Many still believe in God, but have given up on the Church. And the Church, sadly, has offered them many good reasons to make this true. But this independence track has its downsides: the Church is as imperfect as are its members, past, present and those who have fallen away. We are all imperfect. As Paul wrote in Romans 3:23 "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

The path of disbelief is traveled by those who not only have turned off religion, but have also concluded that God may not, does not, or cannot exist.

The path of return. Return is a way for those who have grown up around church and faith but then drifted away when they left home. Then something happens in life to cause them to take another look. They find faith again, perhaps in a new community, but they still possess the same theology or teaching they had as a child. Their challenge is to grow up and into a more developed understanding of who God is and how God is present. This is when the Holy moves from being the great cosmic Problem Solver or Santa Claus in the sky, but present in our world in our loneliness, pain, in our joys.

The path of exploration is taken by those whose journey resembles the story of Goldilocks and the three bears – searching for that community or faith that is just the right size and feel. So, some will move from Episcopal and try being a Quakers, or a Unitarian, or pray with Buddhist monks or take on other forms of meditation. The danger of this path, Martin outlines, is that a person never settles down. No path seems good enough to suit them. One is forever standing at the buffet table of spiritual life but never takes a seat at the table. That is my take, not Martin's.

The final path is the path of confusion. This is taken by those who run hot and cold. They haven't fallen away, nor have they stayed connected. They pray and cry out to God at important moments in life, but they seem bothered or challenged in becoming part of a community.

Where are we? Those close to us?

Jesus set his face to Jerusalem. He traveled light, took others with him, and knew if wanted to reach his final destination he could not look back if he wanted to move forward. "No one puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

This is where the truth lays. Where we've been, the mistakes we may have made, the time that may have squandered and any opportunities missed... well, perhaps the best news in today's gospel is this: Move on. "Then they went on to another village."

Recall the blessing that we often use at the end of the service: "Life is short. We don't have much time to gladden the hearts of those who walk this way with us. So, be swift to love and make haste to be kind." — Henri-Frédéric Amiel

The apostle Paul put it another way: Galatians 5:1: For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

Our joy, the complete joy that Christ promised us, comes with the assurance that God will always be present in our lives: in our belief, independence, disbelief, our exploration, return and confusion. From Psalm 121: The Lord shall watch over our going out, and our coming in, from this time forth for evermore.