

## A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 9:51-62

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This story is one of many tough stories in the Gospel of Luke. I suggest that you simply tell it as strong and harsh as it is. This is the beginning of Jesus' travel journey up to Jerusalem which is the central section of the Gospel of Luke (9:51-19:27) and is a drawing together of a whole series of stories and teachings that are not always clearly related each other. There is no consistent theme. The journey itself is the overriding framework for the Gospel prior to Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem. This story is introduced by: "When the days drew near for him to be taken up." This is an allusion to his ascension that will happen in Jerusalem where he will, after death and resurrection, be exalted to a place of power and authority.

The initial episode of the travel story is Jesus being rejected by a Samaritan village. The motif of the story is that Jesus sets his face to go to Jerusalem and sends messengers ahead. In Greek the word is *angelous*: he sends angels/messengers ahead of him to prepare the way. That was a good idea if he was going through Samaria because of the depth of hostility that existed between Jews and Samaritans.

Such hostility is reflected in the parable of the good Samaritan. It is also reflected in the widespread and long tradition of people avoiding Samaria when going to Jerusalem from Galilee. It was safer for Jews to go across to the east side of the Jordan and then cross the Jordan at Jericho to go up to Jerusalem.

The Samaritans were the descendents of the northern kingdom of Israel that had been occupied by the Assyrians in the eighth century when the northern kingdom was defeated and integrated into the empire of Assyria. Assyrian policy was to intermarry with conquered peoples. As a result, the Samaritans were both ethnically separate from Jews and also formed another branch of the religion of Israel that was expressed in a separate temple and separate traditions that continue to this day. Today the Samaritans are a very small group, but they were a major group in Jesus' day.

Thus, the over 700-year-long history of hostility between Jews and Samaritans lies in the background of this story. But Jesus is going **through** Samaria. When he arrives at a certain Samaritan village, it would not receive him because he was going up to Jerusalem. The people of the village responded with the same kind of hostility that was being expressed on both sides of the conflict.

James and John's response to Jesus—"Shall we call down fire on them?"—was a typical response of anger. The question is spoken in anger and the desire to inflict punishment on the people of the village for the insult of refusing to receive Jesus. It recalls the story of Elijah calling down fire on two companies of fifty soldiers who had been sent by the King Ahaziah to inquire of Elijah whether he would live (2 Kings 1:10-12). Ahaziah had

fallen through a latticework and had been seriously injured. He also sent messengers to Baalzebul, the god of Ekron, inquiring whether he would survive. Elijah was furious about that and sent back messages to the king: "Is it because there is no God in Israel that you go to inquire of Baalzebul?" When Ahaziah twice sent two companies of fifty soldiers, Elijah called down fire on them and they were consumed. So James and John are responding in the tradition of the disciples of Elijah.

Jesus, however, rebukes them and disassociates himself from this tradition of violence. This is part of Jesus' training of his disciples for their future mission. They are not to respond with hostility or revenge against those who reject or oppose them. Jesus clearly indicates that is not his way. In telling this it is fully appropriate to decisively say, "and he **rebuked** them!" There is no compromise on Jesus' part in regard to this desire for revenge and violence in relation to enemies. Jesus' policy is no retaliation.

The next part of this story is the story of three young men who offer to follow Jesus and in each instance they want to have a modification of the rigor and extreme commitment that Jesus requires. The first one says, "I'll follow you wherever you go." Jesus then makes clear what that will mean. It means radical discipleship, no shelter, no home, and no family. Even animals have it more comfortable than Jesus' disciples who have no place to lay their head.

The second asks that he may be able to go home and bury his father. This was a broadly held tradition throughout the community of Israel. Every other Jewish sect required participation in a parent's burial. Even Nazarite priests and the high priest himself were required to be present at the burial of parents. Jesus then names discipleship as meaning even this most basic tradition of family ties is not to take precedence over the commitment to the kingdom of God.

The third provides another allusion to Elijah traditions. He asks if he can go home and say goodbye to his parents and to those who are in his home. Jesus says "No; no one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." This alludes to the tradition that Elijah put his cloak over Elisha, thereby inviting him to become his disciple. Elisha asks whether he may first go home and kiss his mother and father goodbye and Elijah gives him leave to do so. Jesus does not. Thus, Jesus is even more rigorous than Elijah in relation to the depth and intensity of commitment that he demands from his disciples.

These stories are about the cost of discipleship. Following Jesus means resolute determination. It means sacrifice of security, filial duties, even family affection. Those are to take second place in relation to the commitment to the kingdom of God and to following Jesus. This is a story to be told in the spirit of Jesus who is stating the realities without any sugar coating. There is no hostility, but there is a clear statement, without any modification or qualification, of the requirements for following Jesus and being a disciple of the kingdom of God. Jesus' requirements are in major ways even more demanding and rigorous than the requirements of military service.