

ASH WEDNESDAY
Luke 18:31-34
We Are Going to Jerusalem

“*We are going to Jerusalem,*” Jesus says. He doesn’t ask. He doesn’t even command. He simply and matter-of-factly states, “*We are going to Jerusalem.*” And so we dress ourselves in the purple of repentance, turn our palms to ashes, store away our alleluias, and glue our eyes to the Savior’s feet. But beware. We walk a bloody road that turns riches to rags, chews up pride and laughs at human plans. “*We are going to Jerusalem,*” He says, “*to suffer, to die, and to rise.*”

Don’t expect to understand it all. This is divine wisdom made Man, not human wisdom made God. Christ does not call us to understand. He calls us to follow. Understanding is on the other side of that mountain of the rocky skull soon to be baptized with the Savior’s blood. Don’t expect to understand it all, even though He’s told you what will happen, because what will happen is a new creation, more amazing than the first, created, not from nothing, but from nothing gone bad.

Through disobedience, obedience will raise His thorn-crowned head. Through blasphemy, the hands of Father will lift up the sacred for all to see. Through mockery, compassion will pray for His enemies. Through the poison of the evil one, the medicine of God will be made known. Through hatred, the loving heart of God will pump with the blood of our redemption. Through arrogance, humility will plant His eternal flag on a hill to claim us as His own. Through hunger and thirst for power, weakness will set His table with a timeless Feast of bread from heaven and living water. Through darkness, the Light of the World will spring forth from His tomb.

And you are to follow Him through it all, and you must do the dirty work. You must work all that is shocking and sundry. You must betray Him with the kiss of your fair-weather friendship. You must treat Him shamefully with your shameful secrets. You must mock Him with your second-guessing. You must spit upon Him your hurtful words. You must despise Him with your lusting eyes. You must flog Him with the reckless disregard of your offenses. You must deny Him with your doubts, crown Him with the very thorns of your fallen labor, and sink your anger into His feet, hands, and side. You must leave Him to hide in the fear of a terrified conscience. You must abandon Him with the embarrassment of silent faith, even as He is more alone than any man to ever breathe our air.

And don't you dare, you dare not lessen His burden. You must increase it. Treat Him as you've treated each other and withhold any thought of forgiveness, of mercy. Drag out every thought, every word, every deed and heap them on His quivering, bended back. Weigh down His cross with your confessions. Dress Him in your wretchedness because you must hate what you see when you see Him. His own Father will turn from Him in disgust. Are you better than His Father? Just don't forget from whom you turn, what it is that unsettles your stomach. It is you, undressed for all to see, nailed to a cross. Push Him down the road even when you long to help Him, because, unless He dies, you will never truly live. The gates of Paradise will remain locked, guarded by His holy angels.

In the days to come, you must not only walk to Jerusalem, but through your own hearts. You must stand aghast at who you are to stand in awe of who He is. Only the sick need a doctor. Here your disease is on full display. "*We are going to Jerusalem,*" and you will never be ready, but your Jesus is. He knows what is ahead, and He walks towards it all with resolve, because this is why He was born: from the wood of the manger to the wood of the cross. He is going to make all things new. So put one foot before the other and follow Him. It is not easy, but cancer is not wished away; it is cut out.

Christ's cross is heavy, but His shoulders are broad. As He carries your sin, He carries you, your wayward feet in His sandals, your red hands in His own. And on the putrid, horrid battlefield where human hatred joins the devil in insurgency against God, a flower, a lily in the valley of the shadow of death, will bloom, all the more fragrant as it flowers amidst the stench of sin.

It is always sad when a forest burns, but, with time, new life, greater life, more beautiful life rises from the ashes. Such is the case with Lent. The Lord our God is a consuming fire and He will bring us to ashes with His law. But hope does not die in the ashes. No, hope lays its roots there. New life follows the fire. Resurrection follows crucifixion.

"*We are going to Jerusalem,*" Jesus speaks with the voice that is every church's greatest treasure, not asking, not commanding, but simply and matter-of-factly stating. We can never be ready for such a journey, but He is, and that is all that matters, that is all we need to know. Betrayed, He will never abandon you. Baptized in spit, He will baptize you with forgiveness. Mocked, He will console you. Hung in condemnation, He will pardon you. Crucified, He will put your sin to death. Raised, He will raise you to new life. So put on your repentant purple, turn your palms to ashes, and follow, for His glory is brightest in the shadow of His shame. "*We are going to Jerusalem.*" May it be a trip we'll never forget! Amen.