

Ash Wednesday

March 5, 2025

Lent: What is a Body For?: A Body Faces its End

North Decatur Presbyterian Church

Rev. David Lewicki, preaching

⁵¹When the days drew near for him to be taken up, [Jesus] set his face to go to Jerusalem. ⁵²And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to prepare for his arrival, ⁵³but they did not receive him because his face was set toward Jerusalem. ⁵⁴When his disciples James and John saw this, they said, “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?”⁵⁵ But he turned and rebuked them. ⁵⁶Then they went on to another village.

⁵⁷As they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” ⁵⁸And 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.” ⁵⁹To another he said, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” ⁶⁰And Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead, but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” ⁶¹Another said, “I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” ⁶²And Jesus said to him, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

By the end of chapter 9, Luke has finished describing who Jesus is. From his portentous birth to his baptism, to his calling of followers, to his zesty preaching, forgiving of sins, healing the sick, and raising from the dead, to the revelation of Jesus’ divine face on the mountain. It’s all there. This is the Beloved. This is the one in whom God dwells.

Now, a change: Luke says, “when the days drew near for [Jesus] to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” If this were a movie you would see Jesus, his face half in light, half in shadow, his strong nose and rugged chin in profile, thrust toward Jerusalem, a steely resolve in his eyes.

Or maybe not. What do you think this means, that Jesus “set his face” toward Jerusalem? It implies that he was facing something. Turning, his body, but also his energy, his life-force. And what is it he’s facing, “Jerusalem?” Jesus has been navigating on the margins, moving in less populated areas, not outside the gaze or reach of the authorities, but certainly in places where he could keep a lower profile. Jesus could proclaim an alternative empire “out there” without much fear. Jerusalem was different. The Temple is there. The religious leaders are there. The Roman military and government are heavily represented there. Jesus’ vision for human life undermines the authority of both the religious leaders and the empire. To go to Jerusalem is to go to the seat of authority. It is, a way, to recognize that power always protects itself, it always preserves itself. To challenge power, to offer a vision for human life that undermines the moral legitimacy of the existing power, is to make yourself the target of those powers.

I don’t know how Jesus felt as he “set his face.” Maybe he felt bold, like the hero of his own movie. Or maybe not. Did he feel uncertain? Even scared? Did he have to go *there*?

How often do you reflect on the direction of your life? How often do you stop and ask, “where have I set my face?”

So many things in life can point or pull us one direction or another:

- Our powerful appetites for food, for sex, for comfort. Those can lure us. But surely they shouldn't define where we set our face.
- Our ego needs can be equally as strong: for attention, for affirmation. But we can get attention and affirmation for all the wrong reasons.

What is it that points us in “the right direction?” How do we know which direction to “set our face?” How did Jesus know?

There is, I believe, in each of us, a compass, which tells us, amidst all the competing claims, which to go. But this compass, which God has put in you, doesn't always point the same direction.

The little arrow inside you swings, sometimes unexpectedly. You have to pay attention.

- One minute, you look and it's pointing you to veer off from your appointed task to draw near the man on the side of the road who seems to be hurt, to take time with him, even when there's somewhere else you are “supposed” to be
- In the next minute, this inner compass is pointing you in the direction of where the wayward sheep was last seen, and it's telling you to “set your face” in that direction, even when there are so many other sheep to tend to.
- The next day, you look down at your compass, and it's pointing you directly in the way you do not want to go. You shake it, hoping it will re-calibrate.
- But there it is—pointing you toward what looks like your own death. What on earth could be the point of facing our own mortality?

This compass you have, this compass God put inside of you—it's not magnetism. It's love. It points you in the direction of love. Even at the cost of your own life.

Each one of you has an actual compass in your hand. We give it to you as a gift for Lent. Keep it with you. Perhaps each day of Lent, you might spend a minute facing east, and like Jesus, set your face toward Jerusalem. As you do so, allow the courage and faithfulness of Jesus move into you.

Then, you will need to look at your own compass—the one inside. Where is love telling you to go? Find love's direction. Then, have courage. Set your face. Don't turn back. Go where it tells you.