

Fire from Heaven?

A Sermon Expositing Luke 9:51-62

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Well, this episode didn't end anything like Morgan Spurlock's, *30 Days*. You've probably heard me talk about one of my favorite television shows or you may have even taken in a couple of episodes as part of our Education programming a couple of years ago. Morgan Spurlock is the guy who made a movie about the nutritional value of fast food. He decided to eat McDonald's and nothing else for 30 days and have a documentary crew follow him around. The results were predictable. In 30 days he gained 25 pounds, increased his cholesterol to 230, was diagnosed with fat buildup in his liver, and began experiencing situational depression that was only relieved by – surprise, surprise – eating at McDonald's.

The success of that film called *Super Size Me* led Spurlock to consider what else might be gained by putting himself or someone else into an experimental situation for 30 days. This time though, he focused on residing within or having someone reside within a social situation about which much of the world is clueless, and judgmental. He especially focused on having people or families from opposite ends of some social spectrum reside together for 30 days. During its three seasons Spurlock asked a pro-choice woman to work at a pro-life maternity home, a border patrol agent to live with an immigrant family, a hetero man to live with a gay man, a gun control advocate to live with gun enthusiasts, a Christian to live with a Muslim, and an atheist to live with a mega-church-going Bible-believing Christian family – all for 30 days. With no significant exception at the end of each episode the folks who've resided together still disagree with one another, but have an entirely new understanding of and respect for one another. It is an absolutely heart warming and hope generating experience to watch an episode of *30 days* and this episode of people trying to reside together we've read about in the gospel of Luke this morning is absolutely nothing like it!

We reach the most significant turning point in the story of Jesus's life as told by Luke this morning. It's one little verse that shifts the entire tone and direction of the gospel, "he set his face to go to Jerusalem." To this point Jesus has recruited 12 disciples and has taught and preached and healed and restored his way into the favor of the people of Galilee, his home region north of Jerusalem and separated from it by a region called Samaria. When Luke says Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem it means he oriented himself in body yes, but also in heart and mind toward Jerusalem the place where he knew his radical ways would get him killed. Everything that happens in the gospel from this point forward will be shaded by the readers knowledge that everything Jesus says and does is adding to the case that will be used against him and will ultimately end his life.

Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

But there is no way to that place except through Samaria so Jesus sends some of his disciples as a scout team to make preparations for him to travel through and apparently spend a bit of time there. When the disciples arrive though, they are not welcomed, an absolute slap in the face by hospitality conventions of the ancient near east. You see the Samaritans live from a different religious and cultural viewpoint from that of Jesus and his disciples who are all Jews. Jesus is on a mission to save all the world, and though the disciples can't yet grasp the depth of what that means they know he's up to something big and important and they need to get to Jerusalem to see it through. That mission has just become a great deal harder by an act of profound disrespect on the part of those unbelieving, untrusting Samaritans. The disciples know what must be done, it is the only way to command the respect of those who've denigrated them and their rabbi, it is the only way to call attention to the power of God at work in what they are being led to do by Jesus – they must call fire from heaven to consume the whole of the Samaritan village. They'll never disrespect Jesus again.

Some well-intended commentators have tried to paint a picture of the depth of enmity between Jews and Samaritans at the time by striking a parallel to two disparate groups in today's world. They've postulated something like a modern episode of 30 days. "It would be like us going to reside with Muslims," some have said, but that doesn't communicate well in this community as we find such a thing of no threat, as in-fact delightful. So others have said it would be more like us going to reside with those who've hijacked the term "Muslim" for violent purposes. It isn't that either though. Nor would it be like our going to reside with militant atheists. It's a far more difficult divide to manage than that. You see the Samaritans, to the outside observer, worship an awful lot like Jews. They make sacrifice, but at a different holy place. They see their origin coming through the same story as the Jews, but branching off not in a profoundly different direction, but in a *slightly* different direction. They follow the same ancient tradition, but arrive at different conclusions. Residing with the Samaritans isn't like residing among the religious other; it's like residing with Christians who disagree!

The disciples wanted to call fire from heaven to destroy those who they felt were a threat to the work of God they were being led into not because they were so profoundly different (though they would've thought so), but because they were so substantially similar. The division that sits close is often the most troubling division of them all. In fact, for those who celebrate diversity as I believe we do at FBC, it is quite easy to identify the big, historic, cultural differences around us and celebrate them as beautiful and created in the image of God. "I see you," I might say, "you are different, you are beautiful, I celebrate you." But when we are confronted with one who is actually quite close to us in history and tradition, but who diverges on a couple of small, key points the inner dialogue is different. "I see you, you are the same as me, you are doing what I am doing, but you are doing it wrong." That's more threatening. That runs the risk of me being associated with you. In order for the message I preach with my life, the work I hope to do, the identity I am cultivating to remain pure I must keep my distance and if possible I must make sure that everyone knows your way is the wrong way.

I had my chance last week to reside for a while with many who are so vastly similar to me, but very very different in some tiny, key ways. I was one of your representative delegates to the American Baptist Biennial Mission Summit in Virginia Beach along with Ivan Marable, Lynn McClellan, and Ken and Marcia McCarthy and Tasha Wilson was there in her capacity as a member of the Board of General Ministries. American Baptists pride themselves rightly on being a "big tent". Folks of all theological stripes call themselves American Baptist and we celebrate that, but when you actually get *inside* that big tent you begin to realize that it's still a tent and tents aren't all that big. You may be hoping that this is the part of the sermon where I pull out my guitar and sing *Kumbaya*, but I don't have guitar. There are people and churches within the ABC USA, *who go by the same name I go by*, who believe things and do things that I believe are damaging to the work of God's

redemptive love in the world and are damaging to the very people they purport to serve. I see no gain in pretending that isn't true or in glazing it with notions of cheap unity. In fact, if I'm going to be completely confessional: I asked Jesus if he would like me to call fire from heaven.

In the 21st century we don't really need fire from heaven, we have twitter – or some other social media or a chance to reprimand denominational officials in the hall of a convention center or some kind of massive protest and certainly there are times for those things in life, but when I asked Jesus if he wanted me to tweet or protest or make havoc or in some other way call fire from heaven he said, “no.”

I asked Jesus this question late one night when all the day's programs were through while I was enjoying a beverage that serves as one of those tiny, but important differences between Baptists. If you'd been sitting nearby you might not have recognized Jesus at the table with me. You might've guessed that I was sitting with Brian Henderson, pastor of FBC Denver and Acting Director of the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists, but Jesus was there too. It isn't a secret that despite some strides forward in recent years, American Baptists as a denomination have a long way to go before becoming a people welcoming and affirming of LGBTQIA persons. This is one of those differences that burns me up and makes me want to burn something down. When I asked Jesus if I could do something about all that you might've mistaken me for talking to Brian when I asked what's next strategically for AWAB, an independent organization committed to making Baptist spaces more inclusive. I meant, what are we going to do to force the issue. I wanted to know what big plans we have to create pressure for leadership. I thought I might hear about protest or communications campaigns or maybe rainbow streamers lining the halls of the Virginia Beach Convention Center. That's when Jesus said no. It sounded though, a lot like Brian saying, “I think it's time for us to just be present for a while. We don't really have any big plans for a push.” Honestly, it was a little shocking to me – not because Brian was so abrasive or forceful in his opinion or because he disagreed with me at all, quite the opposite. He is a kind, compassionate, and capable leader. He went on to remind me that it wasn't long ago that AWAB wasn't allowed to be a part of ABC gatherings at all and that the denomination now includes representatives of the LGBTQIA community in its leadership, its clergy, and its laity. He explained that American Baptists do have a long way to go, but the best course for now to achieve that is to give up our homes, let our families tend to themselves, and leave them behind.

Sorry, this conversation in which I'm talking to Brian Henderson, but also hearing from Jesus is getting a little confusing. *Jesus* said to those who wanted to follow him that they wouldn't have a comfortable place to lie their head and they would need to entirely reorient their lives from serving their households to serving the world. Luke told us he said that right after he told us that Jesus scolded his disciples for wanting to call fire from heaven. Together the message is clear, changing the world isn't about burning down the people or institutions you don't agree with (even when you're pretty sure God doesn't agree with them either), it's about living your life in such a radically self-giving way that others with whom you reside or travel or worship or go to a conference or share a Baptist Beverage with have no choice but to see in you the one who set his face toward Jerusalem. Brian agrees that the cause of inclusion is best served at this time not by burning down some part of the world, but by stubbornly, recklessly living into the world AWAB dreams of. That's what Luke calls, “setting [your] face to Jerusalem,” and one wonders what other causes it might serve well. Amen.