In the church year, it seems we move very quickly from the Advent narratives and the Christmas story, the blessing of Simeon and the flight into Egypt, Jesus’ baptism at the River Jordan and time in the wilderness, then the season of Epiphany quickly gives way to the coming of Lent, and now Luke says, “He set his face for Jerusalem.” What a powerful image of determination, direction, clarity of purpose, with his eyes focused on what was ahead. Like a horse with blinders on, he sets his face for Jerusalem.

We made that journey from the Sea of Galilee and the sites of his teaching ministry due south to the city of Jerusalem. Today it is a drive of a couple of hours on a divided highway, but in Jesus’ day, it would have been a significant journey—probably on foot, taking days rather than hours. So Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem.

And along the way there were those who were interested, taking a look, saying, “Well, I’d kinda like to follow Jesus, but if he is headed for Jerusalem, I don’t know about that…”

“It’s a major trip, not easily accommodated in my busy schedule.”

“It’s a big commitment of my time and resources, and if you’re asking for my money, I’m not so sure.”

“Besides, he’s been running into some opposition, even up here in the Galilee. People wish he would tone it down a bit. There are folks who don’t like the fact that he is confronting some of the social and political realities of his day. They’d prefer he just stick to the sweet and tidy little parables about loaves and fishes, and lamps under a bushel, but not get to meddlin’ in the other stuff. ‘Just preach the Gospel,’ I guess they would say.”

Some things never change.

They know that if he has his face set for Jerusalem, he is heading into the eye of the storm. There, he will come up against both the religious establishment, of whom he has been pretty critical, and the political power of Rome. And they know it won’t be pretty. They know that if
Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem, it would ultimately mean the cross. In fact, he told them so. And if Jesus is headed for the cross, well, they’re not so sure they want to follow.

Call them “wanna-be disciples,” or call them “would-be disciples.” You can say their hearts are in the right place, but they are just not sure they want to go all the way with Jesus, not sure they want to follow where he is going, not sure they want to make that kind of commitment.

Back when I was in college, I remember going to visit a friend of mine who, to my surprise, made a hobby of oil painting. As he showed me around his studio, I said, “I had no idea you were an artist.” And he responded, “Oh, I’m not really an artist. I’m just a dabbler.” Wanna-be disciples, would-be disciples, maybe you could them “dabblers” instead of disciples.

This Lent we are using my brother’s book, A Disciple’s Path, to take a look at what it means for us in the United Methodist tradition to follow the path of discipleship, to follow Jesus on the way to the cross. Jesus invites them to the path of discipleship: “If anyone would come after me, let him take up his cross and follow me.”

1. Before they follow, Jesus says, “Count the cost.”

In Luke’s gospel, this conversation comes hot on the heels of the incredible feeding of the five thousand. We call it the feeding of the five thousand, but since they only counted men in those days, if you add in the women and children there could have been as many as ten thousand all together. And Jesus fed them with just five loaves and two small fishes. Imagine! Free McFish sandwiches for everyone! Maybe some of these folks were in the crowd at the picnic on the hillside. Maybe they were there because of the free food, the goodies, there for what they could get or gain. They loved Jesus as long as they were getting something from him. But to those who come to Jesus for what they think they can get out of it, for those who come just for the food, Jesus says, “Foxes have holes and birds have nests...I don’t even have a place to call home, a place to lay my head. Count the cost.” There’s a cross looming on the horizon and Jesus says, “If you are going to follow me, it will be on the way of the cross.”

I’m sorry to be the one to tell you, but Jesus never promised us a rose garden, never promised that the disciples would be carried through the skies on flowery beds of ease, never promised it would be easy. Instead he set his face toward Jerusalem and the journey toward the cross. So if you are thinking of taking up with Jesus, count the cost.

Scott Chrostek, son of this congregation, is now pastor of Resurrection Downtown in the heart of Kansas City. In his book Pursuit he tells of a turning point in his own life, and it happened right here, in one of our church vans, in the midst of our youth ministry. In that moment and that strange place, Scott realized that God was leading him in a different direction. He writes:

I am not all that emotional, but driving a van overflowing with teenage strangers, listening to bad music at deafening levels, was enough to push me over the edge. With both hands on the wheel and tears running down my face, it didn’t make any sense. But inside I knew exactly what was going on. My foundations were trembling. I knew God was calling me to be a pastor. (Pursuit, page 65)
He gave up his MBA and a successful career in finance. He had it all, but in that moment he knew that the only way he would really be satisfied would be to follow Jesus on the path of discipleship. To those would-be, wanna-be disciples, Jesus says, “Count the cost.”

2. To those who hesitate, Jesus says, “Do it now.”

Another one of the would-be disciples said, “Let me go bury my father.” And in some ways, Jesus’ response seems insensitive and uncaring. He cuts him short and says, “Let the dead bury the dead.” Doesn’t Jesus care about a family in grief? Isn’t Jesus sensitive to the pain of death? But one of the commentators says we don’t even know if his father is dead yet. Depending on how you translate the verb, he could be saying, ‘I’ll follow after my father dies. After I’ve cared for everything else, at some point in the future, when my family obligations are different, when the kids are raised and I’ve taken care of my pension—someday, out there in the future, I will follow you.” And Jesus is saying, “There comes a time to make the decision. Fish or cut bait. Put up or shut up. Go big or go home. Do it now.” To those who would put it off, Jesus says, “There are some things that simply cannot wait. I’m on my way to Jerusalem. I don’t have time to waste. My days are numbered, and quite frankly, whether you know it or not, so are yours. If you are going to follow me, do it now.”

I just want you to know that I am so glad I made some of these decisions early in my life. Decisions about values, about how I would care for myself and how I would treat others. I am glad I made the decision to follow Jesus when I was young, because it really doesn’t get any easier.

There are choices that need to be made today. There are commitments which need to be carried out now. There are ministries that will either be fulfilled now or never; deeds of love and words of grace, acts of kindness and witness of conscience. Life moves on so quickly. Opportunities come and go. Today really is the only day we have, and this moment really is my life. If you are going to follow Jesus…

• If you are going to accept him into your life and claim him as your Savior, now is the time.
• If you are going to serve him in compassion and share his love in the world, today is the day.
• If there is a word of encouragement you have to offer to another, do it now.
• If there is a place where your resources and financial gifts can help to build God’s kingdom, for God’s sake, give it now.
• If there is a person near you who is in need of love, needing to know that they are of sacred worth, tell them now.

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, he is on his way to the cross, and if you are going to follow him on the disciple’s path, now is the time.

Shirley Cormicle died last week. Shirley’s name would not be familiar to you. In fact, very few will recognize it. She was not famous, not widely recognized, a little known servant of Christ. Shirley was a nurse by trade. Her husband died early, leaving her with three children to raise.
When I met her at Court Street Church in Flint, her kids were grown and on their own. One Sunday I preached on Abraham and Sarah, how God used them, even in their old age, to fulfill his purposes. Little did I know that sermon would change Shirley’s life. She said it dawned on her that she wasn’t too old to make a change. She left her career and went to Candler School of Theology, completed her seminary training, and in her mid-fifties took her first appointment as a pastor in our Conference. She only served two appointments, but the people she served were blessed and she discovered the fullness of God’s grace in her life.

Two weeks ago while we were in Israel, we stood on the ruins of the fortress at Caesarea, the very place where St. Paul made his last defense before being taken to Rome as a prisoner of the Roman Empire. One of the most poignant moments in all of St. Paul’s letters comes in the last letter he wrote from prison to young Timothy. In it he asks his young friend to bring him his cloak and some books, and he says simply, “Come before winter.” We don’t know that Timothy ever made that trip. We don’t know if he made it to his friend before he died. All we have is the urgent request: “Come before winter.” Do it now.

For Methodists of a certain age, there is one hymn that will forever mark our generation:

Are ye able? Still the Master whispers down eternity,
and heroic spirits answer, now as then in Galilee.
Lord, we are able. Our spirits are thine.
Remold them, make us, like thee divine.
Thy guiding radiance above us shall be
a beacon to God, to love and loyalty.
(United Methodist Hymnal, page 530)

Wanna-be disciples, would-be disciples?
Dabblers or disciples?
Count the cost.
Do it now.