

“Foxholes and Birdnests”

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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 make ready for him; ⁵³but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. ⁵⁴When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" ⁵⁵But 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." ⁶⁰But 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." ⁶²Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." (Luke 9:51-62)

The first step toward achieving something good is to turn and face the mountain to be climbed and telling ourselves that we will not look away from it until we reach the summit.

And that is exactly what is happening in this passage from Luke. From Luke's perspective, this is the pivot point in the gospel story, the turning point when everything we have learned about Jesus Christ... his birth and childhood, his baptism by John, his temptation in the wilderness, his calling of the disciples and his early ministry in Galilee.. all of this miraculous preparation and potential is finally directed toward the ultimate goal. This is the moment when Jesus turns and sets his face to go to Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the mountain, the ultimate challenge and achievement. And it is clear in this moment that Jesus will not divert his gaze from Jerusalem until he does what must be done. He will not look away from this mountain until he reaches the summit.

The rest of the passage illustrates his total focus and commitment. In three separate conversations, he makes three distinct statements, each of which invites his followers to embrace the same kind of focus and commitment. First, a follower on the road promises to follow Jesus wherever he goes. "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests," Jesus says, "but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

Another says, "I will follow, but first let me go and bury my father." "Let the dead bury their own dead," Jesus replies, "but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

And when a third says, "I want to follow, but let me first say farewell to those at my home," Jesus replies, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

Let's be honest, these responses seem a little harsh. Is it true that committing oneself to following Christ means that we will never have a safe, secure, dependable place to lay our heads? Isn't it too much to say that, if our father dies, we cannot even take the time to give him a decent burial? And if you are going away, is it wrong to take a moment to hug and kiss your family, or maybe let them know why we are leaving? Is this really the way it is, or are these comments exaggerated for effect?

Let's take these three statements, in turn, to try and figure out what they are saying to people like you and me who are being called as potential disciples of Christ. In these statements, Jesus is telling us what it really means to commit ourselves to faith, what it really costs to follow.



Take first the statement that foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to rest his head. The dens that foxes call home are burrows dug into the ground, usually between 3 and 10 feet deep. They provide shelter for sleeping and raising young, and a place to store food. They usually have multiple entrances for quick entry and, if needed, quick escape from predators who discover the den.¹

A foxhole also has a military connotation. The reference seems to have originated in World War I, when a 1918 U.S. Army summary report described the holes being dug by German soldiers as shelter from gunfire and weather. The Germans referred to these trenches as fox holes.²

The reference to a bird's nest invokes the same kind of image – a place where birds can feel safe to rest and care for their young. There is also a safety component. Just a few blocks up the road, behind the fire department, is a communications tower. The top of that tower has been claimed by a family of ospreys, who have built a substantial nest. The height puts the young out of reach of most predators looking for an egg breakfast, and the adult ospreys have a 360-degree view to spot danger coming from any direction.

What Jesus is clearly talking about here is our **desire for security**, a place of refuge that is safe and feels like home. Discipleship, Jesus says, requires us to abandon that desire, at least to some degree. Perhaps Jesus was reminiscing about his childhood home, a time when he felt safe and protected from danger by his parents and his community. But Jesus could no longer afford to prioritize home or safety, because his face was set on Jerusalem. True discipleship demands a similar level of commitment of us and exacts a similar cost from us.

His second response is to someone who was worried about **community obligations and expectations**. Every human society, with very few exceptions, has created some kind of ritual for burying the dead. These rituals are based in honor, reverence, respect, and tradition, and to refuse to follow them is considered, at the very least, in bad taste, if not outright shameful. But Jesus suggests that our calling to follow and honor God does not bow or bend even to these sacred obligations. Human things must take a back seat to divine things. If you want to follow me, Jesus says, there are more important priorities. This Jesus knew, because his face was set on Jerusalem.

The same is true of family ties. The last fellow to speak up on the road must have understood the urgency. He had heard what Jesus said about danger and the desire for safety, as well as what Jesus said about taking care of other obligations. "I'm with you," he says to Jesus, "let me just go and say goodbye to my household." And Jesus says, "Don't look back. Only ahead. There is a job to be done, and it takes priority over everything. No one who starts this job but looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." Jesus could say this with authenticity, because he had turned his back on all things save one, and his face was set toward Jerusalem.

As I said, it seems harsh, perhaps even unattainable. Can we conceive of this level of commitment? Can we see ourselves prioritizing faith over our homes, our personal safety, our jobs, our worldly obligations, our families? Is it even in us? For many of us, probably not. But that being said, I do not believe we can say that Jesus is just exaggerating for effect. Because what Jesus was talking about on that road is a warning that permeates the entire Bible, something that has defined the entire story of our human relationship with the God of heaven and earth. It is, in a word, idolatry.

Idolatry is a concept so critical, so vital, that it gets not just the first of the Ten Commandment but the first two of them. Do you want to know who I am? God asks. *"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; [and] you shall have no other gods*

¹ <https://www.wildlifeonline.me.uk/animals/article/red-fox-dens-earths-resting-sites>

² <https://www.etymonline.com/word/fox-hole>

before me.” That’s number one. And number two is inextricably linked: “You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God.”³

Idolatry is putting anything – anything we might have, anything we might want, anything we might conceive -- “in place of or alongside of the only true God.”⁴ Our minds probably go first to statues of wood or metal that were worshiped in ancient times, but those constitute but a drop in the vast ocean of what idolatry can be. As John Calvin once wrote, human nature “is a perpetual factory of idols.”⁵ We can and do make almost anything an idol. A family, a house, a lineage can be an idol. A job can be an idol. An obsession with safety or security can be an idol. A nation, political ideology, or economic system – all can be idols.

And I guarantee you that this current heresy of Christian Nationalism – the delusional idea that whatever America wants to do at home or abroad is somehow sanctioned and blessed by God – that is absolutely an idol. Christian Nationalism claims to be about God, but it really has nothing to do with God. It is a human vision of elitism, power, and control, and it is a lie. Anything that displaces God and replaces God with a worldly set of values and priorities is an idol – a faulty construction of human minds and hands.

That is what these seemingly harsh statements of Jesus are about. They are about priorities. Are we making God a priority, or are our priorities being determined by something else? Think about it in the concept of Jesus’ three statements on the road. What is a priority? (1) A priority is something we are willing to sacrifice a measure of safety in order to do... something we are willing to endure some measure of pain to do. (2) A priority elevates certain obligations above all others. And (3) a priority requires personal and familial sacrifices. A priority will sometimes take us away from family, with only the hope that they understand why.

Those who have participated in or have loved ones who have participated in Alcoholics Anonymous know that they follow a 12-step program of recovery. This is the mountain they must climb to get themselves to health and happiness. And Step 4 in this journey requires them to make “a searching and fearless moral inventory” of their lives. Recognizing that recovery begins with honesty, this step requires a person to take a long, hard, honest look at their character, the choices they have made, and the consequences of those choices. The search, they say, must be fearless, because it takes great courage to turn and face our failures and to be honest about our faults.

And this is exactly what you and I need to do when it comes to our own idolatries. We need to turn and face them head on, and we need to be brutally honest with ourselves about them. Because we all have them. We manufacture idols perpetually, and we follow them to our detriment. Recovery begins with honesty, and turning to face ourselves with searching, fearless inventory of our real priorities is a bold step in turning our own faces toward Jerusalem – in living life that is truly guided by the very best in us and in the world God created.

In this search, we will discover the foxholes and birdhouses we have created for ourselves. We will find the pits we have dug for ourselves, thinking they will keep us safe. We will recognize the ways we have removed ourselves and tucked ourselves away in the hope that dangers will not find us. We long for faith that is safe, but true faith does not play it safe. We want faith that does not demand much of us, but true faith is costly. We want faith that does not intrude on other obligations, but true faith demands tough choices and hard decisions. And we want to think that we

³ Exodus 20:2-5.

⁴ Question 95 of The Heidelberg Catechism, §4.095.

⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion, Vol. 1*, edited by John T. McNeill, translated by Ford Lewis Battles. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), Book 1.11.8. pp 108-09.

have all the time in the world, but true faith knows that we don't. Even so, we continue to make foxholes and bird houses for our faith. We continue to construct idols that are easier and less costly to follow.

When the days of his greatest moments of witness drew near, Jesus chose faith in God over all else and set his face toward Jerusalem. Then and now, he invites us to follow him and do the same. If authentic faith is something we want, if spiritual health is what we want, we need to remember that recovery begins with honesty. The first step toward achieving something good is turning to face the mountain to be climbed and telling ourselves that we will not look away until we reach the summit.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. ***Amen.***