

Compass in the Fog

June 26, 2022 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Rev. Daniel Smith

Texts: Luke 9: 51-56

Every summer, a dear friend and I take a kayak-camping trip to one of the many islands off the coast of Maine. A few years back, we set course for an island farther off-shore than usual, maybe 5 or 6 miles out. Our boats packed with food, gear, and beer, we “put in” on a dry, only partly cloudy day. About halfway into the paddle, we found ourselves suddenly enveloped by one of the densest fogs we’d ever encountered. We couldn’t see land ahead or behind us. We’d worried about overshooting the island and losing our bearings. Gratefully, we both had compasses and a good idea of where our island was relative to others in the bay. So, we pressed on, through the fog, frequently expressing ourselves in expletives, and even more frequently checking our compasses and the laminated nautical charts we had strapped to the kayak’s deck. After a good hour and a half of open ocean paddling with nothing in sight but the gray-white mist and an occasional lobster buoy, the island’s 9 acres of spruce trees and rocky shores gradually came into view. Thank God!

I don’t know about you but these last few days have felt to me like our nation, our progressive movements, our hearts, and our hopes have been suddenly enveloped in a deep and very heavy fog. And let’s face it - we were already on stormy seas. Think about it. What have been for generations our trusted “islands of sanity,” to quote Margaret Wheatley, those institutions that have offered so many safe harbors and guard rails of equal protection, are seemingly fading and failing before our eyes. Think about this week’s January 6 hearings and the near-catastrophic corruption of those necessary barriers between the Justice Department and the White House, and the Big Lie continues to roll in and obscure the truth or think about the crumbling separation of church and state. Or after this week’s rulings on several matters, and especially the overturning of *Roe v Wade*, consider the enormous erosion of trust at the shorelines of our once esteemed Supreme Court. Meanwhile, millions of Americans, especially women, and Black, Brown, and poor women and families are left to face the indignity of forced pregnancy and to do so without a refuge in site for at least hundreds of miles.

Please do read our pastoral letter with historic and theological resources about why our denomination the UCC has taken strong pro-faith, pro-family, pro-choice stands for decades and why I know so many of us here today are utterly devastated by this news. For now, as my colleague Cody Sanders from Old Cambridge Baptist Church has said, “whatever you—or your uncle or cousins or siblings or neighbors—think about abortion, we can be sure that Friday marked a day upon which the lives of women became more precarious, a day when their wellbeing became imperiled, and a day on which the autonomy of women’s own bodies [grew] diminished. And as with most concerns of justice, the harm will be disproportionate based on race and class and, in this case, the state in which one lives.” Though we knew it was coming, the dismantling of *Roe* is still crashing upon many of us in waves of grief and disbelief. And it leaves us in a precarious wake with Justice Thomas already foreshadowing how the ruling may open the way to abolish other rights, including gay marriage and contraception.

Activists have been blaring the fog horns and warning signal for years, yet here we are, uncertain and afraid of what comes next. We need strength and courage for our fears. And, if you ask me, we could

use a good compass to show us the way through and forward. On our liturgical calendar, we are in the third week of the season after Pentecost, aka, Ordinary Time. If only! And yet our lectionary reading assigned for today shows up, as if on cue, with a vision of Jesus at a turning point in his ministry, and ready to chart a clear course through what he knows will be an exceedingly difficult yet new-life-giving journey ahead. Zooming out, Annie Dillard powerfully frames the arc of the gospel's broader narrative in this way:

“In Luke, Christ’s ministry enlarges in awfulness – from the sunny Galilean days of eating and drinking, preaching on lakesides, saying lovely things, choosing disciples, healing the sick... and raising the dead – enlarges in awfulness from this exuberant world, where all is possible, and God displays his power and love, to the dark messianic journey... He understands his destiny only gradually, through much prayer; he decides on it, foretells it, and sets his face to meet it. On the long journey to Jerusalem... he understands more and more. The narrative builds a long sober sense of crushing demand on Jesus the man, and the long sober sense of his gradually strengthening himself to see it, to cause it and to endure it.”¹

For more than a third of the gospel, Jesus’ ministry has been enlarging – in awfulness, in awesomeness, and in determination. Yet here in Chapter 9, verse 51 we find a hinge point that concentrates his growing strength in a specific direction. “When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to Jerusalem.” It’s no longer just a journey of faith. Now he knows there is a destination and God-given destiny of greater oneness with God’s love and future. He sets his face to Jerusalem, that is, he chooses and models for us the way to the cross, the resurrection, beyond as he is “taken up” in glory at the ascension. He sets his moral and spiritual compass on God’s loving purpose which will keep him moving forward, *through* horrific violence and death, and *into* a new and risen life of collective joy and liberation that awaits us all. He sets his face - as some translations modify it - “firmly,” “intently,” and “steadfastly.” And the phrase “set his face”?... It’s common in the Hebrew Bible. The great prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel all were said to have set their face towards some greater aim. In Isaiah, the prophet “set his face like flint” to any opposition. Luke is clearly trying to emphasize Jesus’s stone-faced determination and singlemindedness and the fact he can’t afford the time or energy to be distracted by lesser things. This leads me to lift up one more timely element of our passage.

You see, not everyone in Israel is interested in sharing Christ’s journey or destination. Chapter 9 introduces a profound tension between Samaritans and Jews. Historically, they were like oil and water, like the Red Sox and Yankees, like today’s Dems and Republicans. They had different ideas about a lot of things, including where was the best place to encounter God. For the Jews, it was and is the Temple Mount, in Jerusalem. For the Samaritans, it was on another mountain top entirely, Mt Gerizim, in Nablus. This is why vs 53 says, the Samaritans “did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem.” They thought he was headed the wrong way! Spiritually, and geographically, their compasses were pointing in entirely different directions. In response to the Samaritan’s rejection of Jesus, his disciples furiously ask him if they should call on God to rain down fire and destroy the Samaritans. But Jesus immediately rebukes his followers — and then underscores the rebuke in the next chapter by telling them a parable about a Good Samaritan, knowing full well that for most Jews, the Samaritans were anything but. Far from destroying them, Jesus invites his followers to learn what they

¹ Annie Dillard, “Luke” in *Incarnation: Contemporary Writers on the New Testament*, ed. by Alfred Corn (Penguin Books, 1990).

can from them, yet all the while, his face is now set, and his eyes are on that bigger prize and picture of God's future and kin-dom which he is utterly convinced is drawing near!

It strikes me that this is just the kind of compass setting, direction, and determination we need for such a time as this! Can we be so clear about and faithful to our own God-given destinies and destinations so as to not get stuck in the fog of our fear and despair? And can we move forward in our sense of purpose without vilifying those who are working at cross purposes? With so much heat in our polarized world, as theologian Matt Boulton says: "We may be tempted to destroy (or merely defeat, demean, or otherwise dismiss) people of other religions or convictions or opinions or ways of looking at the world, but when we do, we effectively turn away from Jesus." Asking God to rain down fire on them and telling them to go to hell, no matter how pissed we are, is not the way of Jesus! Looking down on and belittling our adversaries, political, religious, and otherwise, demonizing and doubling down in distracting shouting matches against them is not the way of Jesus. Instead, how can we face moments of profound betrayal, of rejection of our deeply held values, and yet maintain that steadfast look ahead, and that trust in God's future, gradually strengthening ourselves to stay the course towards God's justice, joy, and collective liberation for all, as long as it takes? And would it be so awful to ask what we might learn from those with whom we disagree, be they Good Samaritans or Good Republicans!

Through the enlarging awfulness of these present days, we need Christ's equally enlarging audacity of hope (to borrow a phrase). We need his growing clarity of purpose, his undying courage, and compassion, his steadfast companionship. And we need his steady compass set on God's future, so we too can press on with the conviction that God's chosen island or mountain will yet come into view, that her safe harbors and her sanctuaries of justice and joy will yet reveal themselves through this present fog! There may be colossal setbacks, as Jesus and disciples surely endured, but not stepbacks. No. Today, as ever, with Jesus as our compass and guide, we need to sound out the Poor People's Campaign slogan "Forward together, not one step back!"

Before I close, I need to share a discovery I made yesterday while visiting the website of the National Alliance for Mental Illness, NAMI Massachusetts in prep for today. Turns out that one its key programs happen to be called the *Compass Helpline!* You can connect by phone or email for support in "navigating the mental healthcare system which can be complicated." Its mission is to "help individuals and families affected by mental health issues *find their way.*" It says, "however you reach out to Compass, expect...to interact with a real person "who's been there", expect empathy and validation, expect resources and next steps to fit your needs." What a gift, especially for such a time as this, when we know the needs are greater than ever and the system is such a bear to navigate, something our partners at GBIO are working on. We might take a page from NAMI, first in offering such 'real person' connection and empathy for those in need, and pathways of spiritual resources and permission for soul-nourishing self-care. In times like these, we are all going to need all of these things. And yet we might also wonder about what kind of broader such Compass, or organizing tool, we all need for navigating our increasingly treacherous and polarized political system. Imagine it, a helpline to get us all connected to the work on our way to God's future. The good news is that already, mass mobilizations are being planned, and trainings in non-violent resistance, and yes, strategies are in the works that are learning from Republican success these past decades, running candidates for town boards, school and election committees. Since Friday, I've heard of at least three Massachusetts-based get-out-the-vote and fundraising parties for justice-minded candidates in other states where voting and other rights are especially vulnerable. Take your pick of next steps and actions that you think are on course with God's future! We aren't there yet but a way out of no way is becoming clear. If nothing else, we know the

destination has already been set before us. So... let us set our faces to it, forward together, not one step back, with God our source and goal, our refuge and strength, our courage and compassion, our compass and our true destination!

Amen.

