The Holy Gospel according to Luke, the 9th chapter.

Glory to you, O Lord!

51When the days drew near for [Jesus] to be taken up, he 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.”

The gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ!

As many of you did, I expect, I grew up surrounded by the Muppets of Sesame Street. One of my favorite musical numbers from that TV show is “Put Down the Duckie.” Ernie comes to his jazz band rehearsal, but he has a problem. He tells his friend Hoots that he wants to play the saxophone, but keeps getting a strange squeaking sound. It turns out that Ernie needs to put down his favorite rubber duck. Celebrities everywhere agree with Ernie’s jazz mentor. He has to put down the duckie if he wants to play the saxophone.

30 some years later, I still think it’s one of the best stewardship sermons I’ve heard. We can’t hold everything all at the same time. To do what’s important to us, we have to put some other things down, at least for a while.

Jesus has a few things to say about what to put down and what to pick up, of course. In Luke 9, Jesus is a man on a mission. He has set his face toward Jerusalem, it says. We know that means that he’s heading not just toward a city, but toward his betrayal, suffering, and death so that he can rise again. This gives shape to everything we hear along the journey, everything Jesus does in those crucial days.

Let’s look at what Jesus tells people they have to put down. What do we have to leave behind to follow Jesus?

First up is vengeance. A village of Samaritans doesn’t welcome Jesus the way the disciples think they should have. James and John ask Jesus if they should call down fire to burn up the village. Jesus just rebukes them and keeps on going. I wish I knew the look on his face. The Lord of Life, who is about to sacrifice himself for all creation, is not going to smite a whole village full of people because they were rude. Come on now.

I don’t know that I’ve ever wanted to call down fire to burn up a whole neighborhood, but I can tell you that there are some drivers on 26 this week that might have earned it. If I were in charge. But I have to put that down, my anger, my frustration, my desire to be in control. Because that’s above my pay grade. My job is to stay safe and, if it’s possible, to let everyone else be safe, too. Or at least to mind my own business and move along to what God is calling me to next.

Someone else calls to Jesus that he wants to follow him, and Jesus tells him that he’ll have to give up his stable life. Jesus doesn’t have a home. He lives on the road, going where he needs to in order to proclaim the word.

What stability do we have to loosen our hold of so that we can cling to Jesus? Do we need to think about how we budget our money? Or is it our schedules that God needs more control over? Do we need to think about where or how we live? Stability looks like lots of things. For some of us, it’s living where we’ve always lived. For some of us, it’s continuing in the career we’ve always had. Maybe for you it’s hanging onto the friends you’ve known forever or always—or never—having a romantic partner. None of those things is good or bad all on their own, but any of them can become an idol. They can become a sticking place where following Jesus gets caught up on the things that we don’t think we can give up.

The third thing Jesus says might be the hardest for some of us to hear. Jesus calls someone to follow him, and the man says, “First let me go and bury my father.” Jesus says to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”

Let’s start with talking about what the man means. It’s likely that he isn’t talking about burying a father who has just died. If that were true, he’d be at home, mourning and preparing for the funeral. Instead, he probably means taking care of his aging parents until they die.

What is Jesus talking about, then? Why does he seem to argue that this man should ignore one of the Ten Commandments? Honoring fathers and mothers is something God has been pretty clear on, traditionally. But in that moment, in that time where Jesus’ earthly time is coming to a crisis point, the message is too urgent for anyone to delay. Jesus calls him to put down his family ties and pick up his megaphone right now, today.

Lastly, we hear about a would-be follower who just wants to say goodbye to his family. Jesus says, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

That’s a lot to leave behind. Family, work, home, stability, a sense of control. Do they do it? We don’t know.

I want to tell you that Jesus doesn’t mean this, that God isn’t going to ask you to leave your family behind. But I can’t quite say that. What I can tell you is that this is a particular situation. The days are growing short for Jesus’ presence on earth. These followers are offered a chance that you and I will never have, to walk closely enough with Jesus that we get covered in the dust from his sandals. They could have eaten with him, laughed with him, learned from him face to face. They could have been one of those to experience the Holy Spirit on Pentecost and be sent to speak in a new language. That chance would only come for them one time.

I can also tell you that Jesus calls us into the various roles and relationships of our lives. Jesus calls us into our families, both the ones we’re born with and the ones we create over a lifetime. Jesus calls us to care for one another, day in and day out. Jesus calls some of us to be the leaders in a particular place at a particular time and calls others of us to lives that call many places home over the years.

That doesn’t get us out of the call to proclaim the good news. It means that we follow Jesus right here, right now, in whatever circumstances we find ourselves in.

If you’re a student, be the student God calls you to be. Follow Jesus’ voice as you choose your classes and gather wisdom as well as knowledge.

If you’re retired, follow Jesus in your retirement. Are you called to volunteering? Caring for family members? Taking some sabbath time to listen to God in a new way?

If you have free time and energy, use it to spread the kingdom of God.

If you have just enough energy to brush your teeth before you pass out at night, talk with Jesus while you fold your laundry and unload the dishwasher.

We can serve God by caring for the people around us, whether they’re toddlers, or coworkers, or cashiers. This week, I’ve seen people follow God by caring for grieving friends and offering up breast milk to strangers with hungry babies. I’ve seen solidarity with those traumatized by acts of racial violence and I’ve seen people campaigning for justice in the world. We follow Jesus by living free kingdom lives in the world that God has made, even when the rest of the world lives chained to sin and brokenness.

The good news is the very reason that we would be willing to put down the things in our lives that are important to us. The good news is Jesus. He has suffered, died, and risen, so that we can be with God forever. Jesus calls us forward, not into a life of drudgery and chaos, but into the beautiful kingdom of God. Jesus calls us to a world where goodness, kindness, and gentleness are the way we all operate, where everyone has what they need, and our egos are second to our love for one another. This is what we proclaim. This is how we live. This is what we move forward into.

Today is another moment, another chance to hear follow Jesus. Will we put down the duckie and pick up the saxophone? Or will we keep clinging to all the things in our hands so tightly that we can’t move forward in faith?