

***KEEP YOUR EYE ON THE PRIZE,  
Hold On***  
2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14 & Luke 9:51-62

Have you ever been out in farm country with mile after mile of corn or wheat field, stretching seemingly forever in a straight line? Did you ever wonder how the farmers got their lines so straight? Sure, sometimes the line follows a road, but just as often the lines are perpendicular to the road or in some other direction. It's not like in carpentry where you can first lay a plumb line. And even though the tractor has long since overtaken the ox or horse drawn plow, the principal is exactly the same. Once the farmer starts plowing that first row he has to keep his eye focused on the spot he's aiming toward on the other side of the field. If he keeps his eyes focused on that spot on the other side, well then his plow line will be good and straight. If he lets his attention waver then the line will bend and wave.

In today's Gospel Jesus said that *"No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God."*

Jesus' words are an allusion to the prophet Elisha in 1 Kings 19:19-21. Elisha was plowing in the field when Elijah threw his mantle over him, claiming him as his disciple. Elisha asked to first kiss his father and mother and then follow Elijah. And that's what Elisha did. Remembering that call of Elisha Jesus seems to be setting even stricter requirements for those who want to follow him.

In today's Old Testament lesson Elisha sets a pretty high standard of following his master, the great prophet Elijah. Ever since that call while he was out in the field plowing he had followed the great prophet as his servant. Now, somehow mysteriously he and the other prophets realize that Elijah is to be taken away by God. He knows not how, but he is sticking to Elijah like glue. When Elijah asks him what he may do for him before he is taken away Elisha boldly asks to be given a double portion of Elijah's spirit. Now that doesn't mean that Elisha is asking to have twice as much power as Elijah had; no he is asking for the inheritance of a first-born-son. In Hebrew inheritance laws the first-born-son receives a double portion of the inheritance. Elisha is asking to be Elijah's successor and to receive the same Spirit that Elijah had. Elijah tells him that if he can see Elijah as he is being taken away then it will be granted.

Only the heavenly horses and chariots of fire can separate Elijah from Elisha. He keeps his eyes on Elijah as he is lifted up to heaven in a whirlwind. But has he done enough? Has he kept his focus? Elisha believed he had. He took up Elijah's mantle and used it in same powerful way as Elijah, separating the waters of the Jordan River so that he could cross over it on dry land.

Elisha continued to follow Elijah's prophetic ministry. He took on two of the great tasks that God gave Elijah (as we read last week) on Mt. Horeb, to anoint Hazael as King over Aram in Damascus and to anoint Jehu as King over Israel. He took on Elijah's mantle, and followed faithfully as the prophet's heir.

In our Gospel lesson from Luke, Jesus has turned his face towards Jerusalem. Luke, organizes his gospel geographically. The majority of the gospel, from 9:51 – 19:27 follows the actions and sayings of Jesus on his way from Galilee to Jerusalem. Immediately before this Jesus was transfigured before Peter, James and John on the mountaintop, appearing with Moses the lawgiver and Elijah the great prophet. Perhaps that is why Luke included in this point of the Gospel Jesus' sayings about following him that allude to Elijah's call of Elisha.

Three vignettes are found in today's reading. In the first vignette the advance guard of disciples are not well received in a Samaritan village. Thinking of Elijah who called down fire from heaven to burn up two companies of Ahab's soldiers, the disciples ask if they should command fire to come down from heaven to burn up the town. Jesus rebukes them. What could be further from his mission to share good news with all who will receive it? James and John seem more attracted to their own self importance than to Jesus' mission.

In the second vignette someone promises to follow Jesus wherever he will go. Jesus points out that he himself is homeless. Following Jesus will mean leaving their homes and security. Jesus' followers must find their true home in him.

In the third vignette Jesus invites someone to follow him, but this person begs to first go and bury his father. "*Let the dead bury their own dead*, Jesus says, "*but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.*" Someone else promises to follow Jesus as soon as goodbyes are said to those at home, Jesus says "*no one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.*" In essence Jesus is saying that his mission takes precedence even over family obligations.

These three vignettes emphasize total commitment to following Jesus. They are hard sayings, for Jesus demands unwavering loyalty.

*Keep your Hand on the Plow, Hold On* is an old gospel hymn based on Jesus' words about no one being fit for the Kingdom of God who puts a hand on the plow and looks back. The hymn was revised slightly and used extensively in the civil rights movement of the late 50's and 60's. Mahalia Jackson sang it at the Newport Jazz festival in 1958. Bob Dylan recorded it on his debut album. Verses to the folk-hymn seem to be freely borrowed from other hymns and spirituals. This version is from Bruce Springsteen in *the Pete Seeger Sessions*:

*Keep Your Eyes On The Prize  
Paul and Silas bound in jail  
Had no money for to go their bail  
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on*

*Paul and Silas thought they was lost  
Dungeon shook and the chains come off*

*Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on*

*Freedom's name is mighty sweet  
And soon we're gonna meet  
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on*

*I got my hand on the gospel plow  
Won't take nothing for my journey now  
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on*

*Hold on, hold on  
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on.*

*Only chain that a man can stand  
Is that chain o'hand on hand  
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on*

*I'm gonna board that big greyhound  
Carry the love from town to town  
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on*

*chorus*

*Now the only thing I did was wrong  
Stayin' in the wilderness too long  
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on*

*The only thing we did was right  
Was the day we started to fight  
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on*

*chorus*

*Ain't been to heaven but I been told  
Streets up there are paved with gold  
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on*

*Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on.* I think that's exactly what Jesus is asking us to do in this Gospel passage. Every one of us has wavered. I don't know anyone who hasn't turned back. All of us suffer from some sort of Gospel attention deficit disorder. Even his chosen 12 wavered and failed him. Jesus' harsh words aren't meant to condemn us when we fall short; they are meant to inspire us to keep our eyes on the prize and hold on.

What are we holding on to? I think we're invited to hold on to the very thing that Jesus resolutely went to Jerusalem to accomplish. Jesus went to Jerusalem to die

for our sins. He went to Jerusalem to take our place. He went to Jerusalem to beat down Satan under his feet. He went to Jerusalem to set us free. He went to Jerusalem to conquer death. He went to Jerusalem in order to bring us abundant life, life that could bubble up like a living spring inside us. Jesus invites us to hold on to the promise and the hope of new and abundant life, forgiveness, love, healing, joy, peace. He invites us to hold on to the hope of life beyond the grave.

Jesus went to Jerusalem as a servant and he expects his followers to hold on to that life of serving others. He went to Jerusalem to reach out to the poor, the least and the lost. And he expects us to hold on to the needs of the poor, the least and the lost today. Jesus went to Jerusalem to fulfill his mission and he expects us to hold on to that mission of proclaiming the good news, of healing the sick and of claiming the world for his love.

*Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on!* Holding on may be as basic as trusting Jesus to bring you through somehow to a new day, especially when this day seems overwhelming. Holding on means no less looking at the bigger picture of Jesus' mission to the people of Stamford and the world. How can we as a parish church *hold on* to our mission of becoming a new humanity in Christ and serving the world in his name?

*Got my hand on the Gospel plow, won't take nothing for my journey now. Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on!*