

No turning back: Psalm 27; Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35

by [Jennifer M. Ginn](#) in the [February 24, 2004](#) issue

I have decided to follow Jesus,  
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No turning back, no turning back.

When my friends and I sang at church camp, we sang sincerely, often teary-eyed, seated on the ground with the cross illumined by candlelight in front of us. In those emotional moments, I imagined myself to be standing firm in the Lord as the Philippians were urged to do by Paul, who reminded them, “Our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.” In those moments, I was determined to set my face toward him. But my single-mindedness never lasted. It was mostly the allure of gossip or boys that sidetracked my determination then. I stopped so often along the way of following that I lost my way. Occasional flashbacks to those times and to the words of that song turned my attention to Jesus, but I have moved in fits and starts through adolescence and adulthood—sometimes toward, and often away from, singleness of purpose.

In chapter nine of Luke’s Gospel, Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem, where he will be arrested and condemned. He intends to travel with single-minded purpose. No turning back, no turning back. But along the way, even he stops to teach, to heal or to sit with those who love him. Today’s text finds him confronted by Pharisees who warn him to move on quickly because the fox is at the gate—Herod Antipas is after him. In their hearing he lays out his plans: “I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.” I’m on my way to Jerusalem, he says. It’s the end of the road for me.

The lament for Jerusalem that follows these words has been much discussed: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (Luke 13:34).

The problem is simple. Jesus has not yet been to Jerusalem, except as a boy of 12 when he stayed behind there and scared his parents half to death, and then once when he was escorted there by the devil during his wilderness temptation. Perhaps Jesus is speaking, as did the prophets before him, of God's desire to gather Jerusalem's children. Or, since all good Jews are children of Jerusalem, perhaps Jesus refers to his own attempts to gather them to himself all along the way. Maybe he is thinking of the lawyer who asked, "Who is my neighbor?" or of Martha, who exploded in a fit of jealousy—or of the Pharisee who invited him to dinner and got a lecture about being clean on the inside. He might be thinking of the disciples, nervous at his talk of conflict and division, or of the bent-over woman he healed on the sabbath. Some received his presence with thanksgiving and love, others with resentment, and still others with a puzzlement that gave way to anger. He has, in a sense, been gathering them all along the way to Jerusalem.

No turning back for Jesus. He knows where he's going and won't be detoured. He also knows what's coming for him—betrayal, death and resurrection. In fact, he tries three times before he reaches Jerusalem to let his disciples in on the story. But they don't get it. They stumble and meander along just like the rest of the brood he tries to gather. Still his patience holds. Still he loves the ones who will not be gathered under his wings. Knowing that his own death is certain, he continues to teach and heal and draw his children to him.

This image of the bird hiding its brood under its wings is a familiar one from the psalms (see Psalms 17, 36, 57, 61, 63), and it's unfortunate that the lectionary texts do not include a psalm that evokes this picture. Instead we hear that the Lord "will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will set me high on a rock." Close, but not quite the same.

Our comfort is the hope that our Lord will indeed gather us, whether beneath his tent or under his wings. Our hope is that the pattern of the Christ among the chicks on the way to Jerusalem will be his pattern among us as well. Though we often don't "stand firm" as Paul admonishes the Philippian believers to do, we long for Jesus to reach out and draw us to him in spite of ourselves. Try as we might, most of us will not walk in the single-minded path the old camp song promises in its final verse:

The cross before me, the world behind me,  
The cross before me, the world behind me,

The cross before me, the world behind me,  
No turning back, no turning back.

Lent challenges us to try. I know that even in Lent I won't be able to walk straight toward the cross. I've tried before. Only Christ could do that. As he gathered so many on his journey toward Jerusalem that first time, maybe he'll catch me along the way, too: to heal, to teach or just to sit for a while. That hope strengthens my resolve to focus on the cross, lest I miss his reaching.