Billy and I like to watch television series on Netflix, especially during the winter when is too cold and dark in the evenings to do anything outdoors. The series we're just about finished watching, Murdoch Mysteries, has 96 episodes. We have been watching them for several months. Murdoch Mysteries is a Canadian series about a fictional detective

in 1900 or so Toronto. Most of the shows start with a murder, which Murdoch then solves, sometimes using unorthodox or new techniques that he has come up with,

including finger marks, a rudimentary lie detector and forensic evidence.

The detective meets interesting characters along the way, people like Thomas Edison, Henry Ford, Arthur Conan Doyle and a man who thinks he ***is*** the real Sherlock Holmes.

We've gotten caught up in other long-running shows: Foyle's War, Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries, George Gently and House of Cards. I think the reason shows like this are so fun to watch is that we get to know the characters over the period of a few seasons.

They become like guests we welcome into our living rooms and we begin to see them as people with distinct personalities that help us predict how they will act in certain situations. At the same time, none of these characters is particularly demanding

of our time or attention. We can watch or not watch as we please. With some of them we can skip ahead without losing too much of the plot and we can stop watching and pick up a new series at will.

Today, you and I are beginning a series that is different from the ones I just talked about. This is a 19-episode series that begins and ends in the book of Luke. A phrase in the first verse of today's gospel tells us the theme of the series: “He set his face to go to Jerusalem.” As we hear the biblical accounts that will make up the next eighteen weeks, we sense a growing urgency in Jesus' mission, an urgency that is established from the beginning. “He set his face to go to Jerusalem,” Luke wrote. Some scholars suggest a different translation: “He stiffened his face.” When I think of someone stiffening his face, I think of a clenched jaw, tightly closed lips, narrowed eyes. That's the face of someone who is determined to reach a goal, to follow through on a promise or a dream. It's the face we'll see a few weeks from now on Olympic athletes who come to compete in Brazil. All the months and years of training will culminate in one point in time and the opportunity to achieve their highest, maybe lifetime goals.

So Luke presents to us Jesus, who has stiffened his face to achieve a goal in the near future, a goal that is waiting for him in Jerusalem. Jesus pulls his disciples along on this mission because it is not one he intends on making on his own. Jesus calls his disciples to stay by his side no matter what comes, for this is no episodic series that one would want to turn on or off whenever she or he pleases. There is too much going for Jesus' disciples then or now to miss any of it.

So Jesus has set off for Jerusalem with his followers in tow. Jesus sends some of the men ahead, to find a place where the group can eat and rest. The men enter a Samaritan village but the people there do not let the men stay. James and John are furious, so they look for a way to punish the Samaritans for their lack of hospitality. They ask Jesus, “Do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and burn their town to the ground?” The disciples remember the example of Elijah, the one who rained down fire on the soldiers of Ahaziah when that king of Samaria did not receive Elijah and his God.

James and John are disappointed when Jesus responds to their question with a firm “no.”

We don't know why the Samaritans reject Jesus. It could be a long-held animosity toward the Jews or it could be that the Samaritans' rejection allows Jesus and his disciples to continue on their journey, one that is to increase in urgency the closer they get to Jerusalem.

The group continues on to Jerusalem. Along the way, they meet people who want to join them. This is where we start to understand the depth of commitment Jesus is asking of his disciples. “It may get tough,” Jesus tells one. “There may be times when we can't stop and rest but must keep our faces set toward Jerusalem.” “You don't have time to bury your father,” he tells another. “Don't look back,” Jesus tells another person. “All that matters to me and mine is what is ahead of us.”

End of episode one. What have we learned? We have learned that Jesus is determined to finish the mission God has set out for him, even though he knows that Jerusalem holds a violent ending for him. We have learned that Jesus is not interested in inflicting violence on anyone else. We have learned that Jesus pulls others along on his journey as he goes and that he doesn't want the half-hearted disciple but one who is “all in.” When we go back a few chapters in Luke, we find out more about Jesus, that he is all about healing and teaching others about God's love. Jesus is about feeding people and comforting them and welcoming those the world has rejected. Jesus is all about peace, even though he himself faces murder.

If you are like me, you have started to feel some tension building up inside you. The call to follow Jesus, to jump on the bandwagon and leave everything else behind is kind of impractical, isn't it? For we are people of mortgages and jobs and retirement plans and responsibilities to children and grandchildren. We like to put down roots. We like to surround ourselves with friends. How does what Jesus says pertain to us? I suppose it would look like chaos if we all sold our houses, took our children out of school, bought Volkswagon vans and followed Jesus. That's the life for some, to be sure, but not for all of us. Our ministry may very well be in this place with the people who are around us.

There is plenty to do here. Every day we have choices to make, choices that are rooted in the spirit of Jesus. We can choose to stay silent when we hear words of hate and prejudice or we can speak up. We can watch bullies push children and adults around or we can find ways to stand up to them. We can be advocates for peace – in our homes, in our community, even in our world. We can try to be healers rather than hurters. We can see ourselves for who we are: Jesus' modern-day disciples called to embark on an exciting journey that will bring us closer to Jesus and will show us how to be his hands and voice right here where we live and work and play.

It's a big deal – this journey that Jesus is on. That he trusts us enough to come with him is probably more a tribute to his ability to draw a gang of deeply flawed people into his vision than to our qualifications for the job. But now that Jesus has set his face to go to Jerusalem once more, why don't we set our faces to follow him?

Amen.

*Pentecost 6C*

*June 26, 2016*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*Luke 9:51-62*