

Advent Lutheran Church
Counting the Cost
March 5, 2025
Luke 9:51-62

Over the course of my lifetime, I've worshipped in more than 100 churches and I've served 10. I've ministered in churches of all sizes affiliated with multiple denominations. In almost every congregation, Ash Wednesday was one of the most poorly attended services of the entire year with only 10% to 30% of the attendance of a typical Sunday morning. In other words, as many as 90% of these Christians intentionally avoided acknowledging their mortality.

I'm pleased that Advent and Adviento are different. We expect a good turnout for Ash Wednesday. Between our mid-day service, our evening services, and ashes to go, we anticipate attendance similar to a typical Sunday morning. As Lutherans we recognize the importance of Lent and understand that it begins now with repentance and ashes.

I thank God that you are here. And, I imagine that if you've been here for many years, you may have wondered if I read the right Gospel lesson. Historically Advent has used a lectionary called the Revised Common Lectionary, which provides a three-year rotating list of assigned readings. And, today's (tonight's) reading isn't on that list.

This is because we are trying something new in 2025. We have been using the Narrative Lectionary, which is a newer lectionary created by Lutherans. The 2025 Narrative Lectionary readings offer a page-by-page experience of the Gospel of Luke.

On Sunday we heard Luke's version of the Transfiguration. Today's (Tonight's) passage invites us – those gathered here and the other billion or so Christians around the world – to count the cost of discipleship. It is our invitation to enter the Lenten journey only after we understand what that means and how it may impact our everyday lives.

The truth is that a lot of good people consider following Jesus, but many decide they are not ready. In today's (tonight's) Gospel reading we encounter three who think they are ready, but who have not yet counted the full cost of their potential discipleship.

The first would-be follower claims to be ready to follow Jesus anywhere. He is ready to go wherever Jesus will go. But Jesus replies that such a commitment is much more intense than this man imagines. Immediately, it means leaving behind the comforts of home and living on the road without a budget for luxury accommodations or even substandard lodging. Later on, it will mean following Jesus where he will ultimately go – and we twenty-first century disciples know this means following Jesus all the way to the cross.

The second-would be follower claims to be ready to follow Jesus anytime – well, anytime except the present. He is ready to commit as soon as he can bury his father. In his culture this is his duty and obligation. Once he has done so, he will be ready to faithfully follow. But rather than bless this behavior, Jesus replies harshly. Jesus tells him to let the dead bury their own dead. While scholars disagree on exactly what Jesus is doing here, most agree that he is emphasizing the need to put the kingdom of God first. In other words, Jesus is saying if you are serious about becoming my disciple, you have to start now with wholehearted devotion.

The third would-be follower claims to be ready to follow Jesus. Since he lives in a world that doesn't yet have cell phones, he asks for permission to go home and tell his family the news. There is ample precedent for this behavior, after all, even Elijah allowed Elisha to say good-bye to his parents when he chose him to be his disciple.¹ But Jesus replies harshly once more. One modern translation has Jesus reply with these words: "No procrastination. No backward looks. You can't put God's kingdom off till tomorrow. Seize the day."²

To all three people Jesus basically says, "if you want to follow me, you must be all in. You must forego everything else and everyone

¹ | Kings 19:19-21

² Luke 9:62, The Message

else. You must put the kingdom of God first no matter the personal cost.”

This is a hard teaching. Perhaps it is why it appears none of these three people actually followed through and became disciples.

Today we also face tough questions. Are we ready to be his disciples and to accept Jesus’ terms or are we only willing to follow if it is on our terms? Are we really ready to seek first the kingdom – first, before everything and everyone else? Are we ready to subordinate our allegiances – to family and country – to our allegiance to Jesus?

This is a hard teaching. Jesus knows it. You know it. And, I know it.

Ash Wednesday brings us face to face with the reality that while we are made in God’s image, we are not God. We are frail humans who at best might go from dust to dust in 80 or 90 or 100 years.

Today we are invited to look at ourselves in the mirror and see ourselves as God sees us – as we really are. We are confronted with our mortality and we are called to repent of our selfishness and our sinfulness.

We do this not as those without hope. Instead, we do this reminded that in baptism we were marked as Christ’s own forever. And we do so knowing that we will soon be marked with the cross again – this time with ashes.

Siblings in Christ, now it is time to count the cost. Jesus is inviting us to follow him.

- Saying “yes” means trusting in God’s economy not in your bank account or 401(k) balance.
- Saying “yes” means that the Way of Jesus is more important than personal or professional aspirations or relationships.
- Saying “yes” means truly seeking first the kingdom of God.

Whoever you are and wherever you are on life’s journey, I invite you to count the cost and then to commit or recommit to following the Way of Jesus. Amen.