

Travel narratives

By [Bruce K. Modahl](#)

October 25, 2010

*For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page, which includes Modahl's current *Living by the Word* column as well as past magazine and blog content. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the *Century*.*

The gospel reading for October 31 comes toward the end of what most Lucan scholars call Luke's travel narrative. It begins ten chapters earlier at 9:51, where Luke tells us, "When the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem."

One would expect to follow Jesus' progress on a map—but the coordinates make no geographical sense. Luke's sense of direction has much in common with that of my wife's grandfather. The family prepared to make a trip from Florida to New Jersey for a family wedding. Grandpa Nelson asked his daughter and son-in-law if they couldn't "swing by Minnesota" on their way home. Follow that route and the GPS is going to be repeating often, "Recomputing."

For Grandpa Nelson, family overrode geography. For Luke, theology is the trump. We receive a clue about that theology at the beginning of the travel narrative.

In fact, one of the ways we know 9:51 starts a new part of Luke's Gospel is that just a few verses before we saw two larger-than-life flagmen waving us off in a new direction. Moses and Elijah appeared to Jesus at his transfiguration. Read it from Nestle's Greek text. Luke tells us they spoke with Jesus about "his exodus he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem."

That gives us reason to look for parallels between the travels undertaken by Jesus and company on their way to Jerusalem and those undertaken by the people of Israel on their way to the Promised Land. There was a great deal of wandering back and forth in their journey as well. Along the way they encountered hardships, some of their own making and some the making of others. God overcame those hardships.

Jesus encountered obstacles as he went about deploying God's kingly rule among us. Hardships blocking the way is the controlling image for my magazine column on this text. (This, by the way, is a recommendation from Richard Lischer's marvelous book *The End of Words*.) Jesus' exodus route retraces the final portion of that taken by the people of Israel, led by Joshua. Jesus and Joshua have the same name.

Jesus' travel narrative in Luke reaches a crescendo in Jerusalem, but there is good evidence that Luke does not see it ending there. After the resurrection, Jesus joins two disciples on the road to Emmaus. And in Luke's second volume, the book of Acts, Jesus tells the disciples that they will be his "witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth." Much of Acts is organized around Paul's missionary journeys, and we also discover that the church has attracted a nickname: the Way.

But the single most convincing piece of evidence is that, in spite of Jesus' resurrection and victory over death, Luke does not offer a they-lived-happily-ever-after ending. Other epic travel narratives end with evil defeated and everything resolved. Ulysses and Penelope are reunited in domestic bliss; the white witch is defeated; the

ring is destroyed in the fires of Mordor. Luke (and the other Gospels, for that matter) does not end with all loose ends tied up in a nice neat bow.

Why? Because we are still on the way. We still have to set our face as Jesus did, put on our game face, our determination and resolve as Luke's travel narrative seeks to draw us into the journey in which we take up our cross daily and fall in place behind Jesus.