Elisha was steadfast. He walked with the prophet Elijah from Gilgal to Jordan with stops in between. In fact, there was an additional stop not mentioned this morning; some of the verses of this story are left out in the reading assigned for today. Elijah and Elisha walked from Gilgal to Bethel to Jericho to Jordan. This journey was a pilgrimage; all of these stops were significant in the spiritual lives of the Israelites. The prophet Elijah knew he was headed to his death and resurrection. At each stop, he told Elisha to stay; Elisha did not need to continue this spiritual journey; he did not need to be a companion to Elijah in his final hours. But, Elisha was steadfast. He would not abandon the prophet. He persisted. He said, “As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.” He was steadfast in his faith.

This lesson reminds me of the story of Ruth, which begins with Naomi, and her husband, Elimelech. They lived in Bethlehem in the country of Judah. A famine broke out, so they moved to the country of Moab. Naomi and Elimelech had two sons. Both of their sons married women from Moab: Orpah and Ruth. But, within ten years of the move, Naomi’s husband and both of her sons had died. So, she decided to return to her home in Judah. She told her daughters-in-law to stay in Moab, to return to their families. Orpah did, but Ruth refused. Ruth told Naomi (1:16), “Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge, your people shall be my people, and your God my God.” She was steadfast in her faith.

Let’s turn to our Gospel lesson which sheds light on being steadfast. Jesus warns us about steadfastness. He seems to be saying, “Hold on, take note, this isn’t so easy.” A follower says to Jesus, “I will follow you wherever you go,” and Jesus says, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air
have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” In other words, you say you want to follow me, but you may waiver when the conditions are not so comfortable. Another follower says to Jesus, “I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” Let’s go back for a moment to our prophets Elijah and Elisha. Elisha said the same thing to Elijah when he was called to discipleship by him. Elisha said (1 Kings 19:20): “Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you.” In the Gospel lesson, the person talking to Jesus says, “I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” Elisha was plowing a field when Elijah approached him. Now, Jesus is telling the people who are following him, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” It won’t be easy – there will be distractions. But, Elisha took up the mantle, and so can we. So can we, if we are attuned to what gets in the way.

It is so easy to get enmeshed and burdened with the concerns of the day. In my personal life, my sisters and I are dealing with all the emotion and logistics of moving our 88-year-old mom from Charlotte to San Francisco. She’s moving from more than 2,000 square feet to 350 square feet. We planned the move for early July for a number of reasons and then my mom fell and broke her leg in early May. Will she be recovered from surgery in time for the move? Can she manage the flight across country? Now the unit in California won’t be available for another month – where is it best for my Mom to live in the meantime? What furniture does she want to take with her? Will it all fit? What should we keep in the family? What should we give away? How does it all get moved? You know I could go on. Here at St. Paul’s, we are immersed in the emotion and logistics of staff changes. We are sad about the people who are leaving, we want to know how best to show our gratitude for the many gifts they have shared, we are questioning why all of these changes are happening at the same time, we are wondering how to welcome new
people. We get enmeshed; we feel burdened. And, it is important to remember that our burdens are being exacerbated right now by the culture we are living in, a culture that breeds distrust. All of our daily concerns come on top of the grief and bewilderment of living in a society where lying and name calling and greed consume the 24/7 news cycle. And, we are seeing in this country how this distrust is shaping behavior.

How do we remain steadfast? How do we stay attuned to what’s getting in the way? We pray. Listen to this prayer from the Compline service found in our Book of Common Prayer. This service is said at the end of the day; we end every Vestry meeting with Compline. Be present, O merciful God, and protect us through the hours of this night, so that we who are wearied by the changes and chances of this life may rest in your eternal changelessness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. God’s eternal changelessness. The mainspring of our lives, the cornerstone of our morality, signaling us through a nagging conscience or an aching heart…God is always loving us and calling us back into compassion and collaboration.

How do we remain steadfast? We keep perspective. We stop long enough to look around. 245 million Christians live in places where Christianity is illegal, forbidden, or punished…245 million (2019 World Watch Report). That puts life in our church community in perspective. Take a look, look as long as your heart can bare, at how the children being held at the southern border of our country are being treated. That puts all of life in perspective. Reality prioritizes life.

How do we remain steadfast? We serve. Bishop Hollingsworth, in his sermon at the recent Diaconal Ordinations, offered words applicable to how each one of us is called to live in this world. He said, “The diaconate brings hope, neither with chastening declarations nor with comforting platitudes, but by replacing helplessness with action on behalf of others, action that provides them with the companionship of Jesus and makes us bigger people, more humble, more
whole, and more holy.” Serving inculcates our need for each other. We are in this together. We are individuals only in how we contribute to the whole. Together we are the body of Christ fulfilling the reason for our existence: making Love manifest in the world. We must reject what divides and embrace what builds the body of Christ.

We will be imperfect. But, as long as our goal is to build the body of Christ, as long as we integrate prayer and service in our lives in the light of building the body of Christ, we will keep perspective, we will overcome divisiveness and distrust, we will ease burdens that enmesh and distract, we will love God and one another, steadfast in our faith. Amen.