



Sermon, 3rd Sunday after Epiphany

January 26, 2020

David Gortner

St. Luke's, CDA

Isaiah 9:1-4, I Corinthians 10:1-8, Matthew 4:12-23

Let us pray.

Jesus, open us to hear your word, and to follow where you lead. Amen.

Follow me.

Follow me.

Immediately, they got up and followed.

They laid down everything, set all they knew aside, immediately – and followed.

That takes some compelling, forceful impact.

Wow, I don't think my kids have ever – EVER – responded that quickly to anything I say, or my wife says. Maybe I'm unusual that way...

I don't really see that kind of responsiveness in schools, colleges, or seminaries. Academics, well, see, we don't like being told things that sound like expectations or directions to go.

I don't see this kind of movement in nonprofits, or in business. People are slow to move, slow to change, slow to let go of familiar routines and tools and props.

And then there is political life. Well, maybe we have seen some forms of immediate and too-easy response in political history – nations that slowly, then quickly, fall in line behind a person or party that wields charisma and power, and then caves and acquiesces to the despot, the dictatorial power because "Follow me" takes on a new force and threat that if you don't follow me, there will be hell to pay...

But, Jesus calls and people respond. That invitation, that commanding and compelling invitation, so direct, so personal, just won't be refused.

Well, maybe Jesus said this to many, many more people who did not respond. Maybe some considered following but couldn't let go of what they were attached to – like the rich lawyer who couldn't accept Jesus' saying that he lacked one thing, to give up all that he had and follow him – like the one who was so attached to family that he couldn't just immediately follow without going and saying long, protracted good-byes to his family.

There is risk in taking up the invitation to follow Jesus.

Follow me.

Where?

For what?

What's your program? What are your goals?

Where will we land?

Jesus doesn't offer a campaign speech. He doesn't pledge promises of all they will achieve together. He doesn't paint a picture of a utopian society or new religion or life-altering policies. There are two words. "Follow me." Last week, there were three words in response to some followers' questions – "Come and see."

How many of you have seen Frozen II, the second Disney Frozen movie? We all know, there's nothing better than a sequel, right? Right...

But really, Frozen II is quite good as a second story, a continuation of the story. In the first movie, Elsa finds release from her self-imposed prison of fear and withdrawal – but only after her uncontrolled fear and desire to push the world away nearly creates ruin for everyone including her most beloved sister. In the very end, only then, when she faces loss of what she truly holds dear, does she tap into love freely and sorrowfully given, and to the healing tears of grief. And she finds that perfect love truly does cast out all fear.

Amazing, it's like what we find in scripture – in I John 4:18 – "There is no fear in love. But perfect love cast out all fear."

Elsa has changed, can now access love and can give of herself and her gifts without fear – and love and care – and even the sorrow of loss faced – helps tame her fear of her own power.

But now, in Frozen II, the sisters and everyone else are some years older. And Elsa finds herself hearing a call that wakens her, interrupts her thoughts, keeps compelling her to listen. It is a call to follow into an unknown land and space. And then, as the adventure unfolds, with her sister and other friends as unyielding companions on this uncertain journey, she follows this relentless calling and dives headlong into a fuller discovery her unknown strength and power. She sings a song – because, it’s Disney – that is right on target for what we see Andrew and Peter, James and John facing in today’s Gospel text. “Into the unknown.” Into the unknown.

Some of you here have made such leaps in your life. For some of you, it is what brought you to this region, this little growing city, this place in the world. It is what led you to choices and changes in your career, in new or renewed and healthy relationships, in how you have given yourselves to others in ways you never before expected or allowed yourself.

These are touches of those kinds of leaps of faith that Soren Kierkegaard spoke of, when he unpacked how Christian faith and life – and most profoundly, how believing and following Jesus – requires more than reasoning it all out rationally, gathering all the evidence, and making a rational choice.

Frankly, there are leaps of faith all through our lives, and we don’t really acknowledge how much faith we rely on just in our daily living. We get on a bus, and have faith that the bus is sound and the driver is going to take us on the route laid out and will keep us safe along the way. We get in a car, and cross a bridge not because we have sat and tested all the equations in our heads that went into calculating weight and force and torque and wind resilience and lift, not because we have interviewed in depth the engineers that designed the bridge or the contractors and workers that built the bridge or the inspectors that evaluate the bridge. We drive over the precipice on this thin strip of gravity-defying suspended material because we have faith. We act in faith, in trust.

So, Jesus says, “Follow me.”

Immediately, they got up and followed.

They laid down everything, set all they knew aside, immediately – and followed.

Maybe it doesn’t take as much as we think, to trust. But there is something that the disciples know in the voice, the body, the look of this One who invites and commands them. It’s like, they simply say, “Okay,” and put everything down and follow him.

You leave your shop just as it is, projects unfinished. You leave your book. You leave your pot as it is on the stove – well, maybe you turn the heat off. The disciples probably at least looped their boats to their docks on the shoreline. But... you leave it behind. I leave it behind. You get up. I get up. You follow.

There is only One to follow like this, in this life. There is only One to respond to this wholeheartedly.

And this is really important. We follow Jesus. That's it. We don't follow just some subset of people who followed the people who followed the people who remembered stories about people who followed Jesus. We follow Jesus.

This is important for us to remember. Because, it was an important thing that early Christians needed to be reminded of, too. As Paul is dealing in his letter with issues among the early Christians in the city of Corinth, one major issue is division and divided loyalties in that community. So Paul reminds them that it is Jesus to whom they belong, and no one else. There is no Paul, no Peter, no Apollos, no Mary, no Lydia – There is One who calls. For us today, there is no Pope, no Presiding Bishop or Archbishop of Canterbury – as much as I truly admire and give thanks for the three of these current folks – there is no Episcopal or Lutheran or Catholic or Evangelical or Pentecostal or Presbyterian or even Non-Denominational. Here, there is no David, no Ann, no John, no Susan, no Jill, no Glenda, no Bill, no Dianne. There is only Jesus. We follow Jesus. We belong to Jesus.

Of course, we each may hear and respond in slightly different ways, different keys, different intensities. But there is One Lord. There is One faith, there is One baptism. There is One God and Father of all.

Today is our annual meeting. We can give so much thanks to God for the renewed peace and mutual care and desire to build a house where love can dwell and a commitment to reach out to our community. This is happening here. We have much to rejoice in. And, we have a new, compelling future to journey into – into the unknown, together, following Jesus wherever he may lead us. No promises except that God will be with us, and that we will indeed have adventures as we seek and serve Christ in all persons, as we proclaim by word and example God's good news.

I want you to know that I seek to lead, and to invite you to follow, with a deep commitment that I want only for us to follow Jesus – to grow in deeper relationship with this One who is God-with-us, risen and glorious and close – to grow closer to one another as we follow Jesus together – to grow bolder as we stretch and get up and respond to Jesus to go and bless and serve and care for and bring good news to the world around us. I want these doors wide open, and this place and each of us ready to bring people to Come and See.

So, let us hear Jesus calling. Each one of us, individually. And, all of us, together, as a people united in this parish. Come. Follow me. Into the unknown. Into an open-ended adventure of bringing healing, release, nourishment and strength, comfort and care, and bold proclamation of God's reign into this world that is marred through all ages and places by the divided interests of Babel.

Let's be clear, it is no simple thing to follow Jesus. It means leaving the security of what you've known and relied on. It means some risk.

Those disciples, as we sang in the hymn, had it easy and straightforward before... "They cast their nets in Galilee, just off the hills of brown... such happy, simple fisherfolk, before the Lord came down."

As we turn to Jesus, turn in our lives to follow, and dare to take those steps forward on a new path, we will be led to places we would not have chosen for ourselves.

- To face the challenge of forgiving people we don't want to forgive
- To face our own selves and our own hidden secrets, and to ask for forgiveness
- To speak God's promises and the power of God's presence, wherever it needs to be heard and in whatever form it needs to be heard
- To face possible embarrassment of being misunderstood or misinterpreted
- To face resistance to God's grace – including when we open the door of God's grace to those whom others think are undeserving
- To face the mockery or refusal or rejection we imagine in our own minds (which usually far exceeds what we will typically experience)
- To give ourselves away for the sake of others and face the risk that our cup may be poured out and not filled again
- To find that the beautiful change and transformation offered by Christ and beginning to show in our lives might be resisted and rejected, even by those who are closest and dearest to us.

And so, that same hymn we sang closes with this verse: "The peace of God, it is no peace, but strife closed in the sod – yet, let us pray for but one thing, the marvelous peace of God."

God is calling you.
How will you answer?

God is calling the Church – in a new, emerging age of uncertainty. In this age as people turn away from religion and especially from the Christian faith.

- Even among Evangelicals, a marked decline and turning away
- Even in Africa, where there was for a time such growth, a slippage and a turning away in the general population in southern African nations
- Even here, across this country and across this inland Northwest, where people are divided one from another and attempt to follow all on their own as lone rangers but are in desperate need of a shared community of faith.

God is calling St. Luke's.

In this diocese, we have chosen an image for what we sense is God's calling to us as the Episcopal Church in this region of the inland Northwest – to join God in "Setting a table in the wilderness." This includes the calling that Jesus himself responded to – Finding freedom from the oppressor, Bringing and releasing joy, Letting the Light shine. Feeding the hungry, in all sorts of hunger.

What is it that this world needs now? This world of the seemingly secluded inland Northwest? What is it that this world, here, needs? What is the wilderness, here? What is the table we might spread?

This year, I want us to prepare this place and ourselves to reach out in new ways and open the doors afresh and wide – and to do this no later than in the Fall.

People, get ready.

Jesus says, Follow me. I will make you fish for people. Follow me. Come and see.

So – Let's go!

Isaiah 9:1-4

There will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness--on them light has shined.

You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder.

For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Matthew 4:12-23

When Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

"Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—
the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light,
and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned."

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.