

WESTWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH/FEBRUARY 7, 2010

FOLLOWING/MATTHEW 4:12-23

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I. THE TEXT

The lectionary this morning takes us to the early days of Jesus' ministry, the story of Jesus' choosing his disciples and calling them to a new way of doing life. Hear the word of God from Matthew 4, beginning with verse 12...

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. ¹³He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: ¹⁵"Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— ¹⁶the 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." ¹⁷From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

¹⁸As 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. ¹⁹And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." ²⁰Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹As 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. ²²Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

²³Jesus 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.

II. PRAYER: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts in this hour, be acceptable in thy sight, O God, our rock and our redeemer... Amen.

III. JESUS THE LIGHT

Jesus' cousin John the Baptist is now doing hard time... he has been imprisoned by Herod... his voice has been silenced. The time has come for Jesus to speak. Matthew uses an ancient sermon from the prophet Isaiah to set the stage for Jesus' entry onto the scene. Using Isaiah's words Matthew lets us know that something world-altering is afoot.

Isaiah preached – "the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light... for those who sat in the region and shadow of death, light has dawned."¹

It is a powerful image – sitting in darkness – dark places are rarely good ones. I have sleepless nights from time to time – nights when I look at the clock at 1am and 2:15 and 2:18 and 2:56, etc. etc. etc. Generally when I am awake through the night my mind is busy making mountains out of molehills, rehashing conversations, or trying to sort out what is confusing or troubling... in the dark, things generally go from bad to worse. My mind scrambles for solutions, but as I frequently counsel troubled souls: "No decision made after midnight is a good one." I long for morning when the light will come and things will look different – when what has confused and troubled me will see the light of day. Sunrise can dispel both darkness and despair.

Isaiah said, "it is possible to spend your whole life in a dark place... wandering, confused, troubled." Matthew says, in Jesus, the sun has come up, the light has come... there is an alternative to stumbling in darkness... his name is Jesus.

Jesus, the light, is a preacher, like John. Matthew tells us that Jesus picked up the sermon right where John left off. It's a two point sermon. Most often you have heard it translated, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." I like Eugene Peterson's paraphrase – "Change your life. God's kingdom is here."² And the rest of Matthew's gospel teaches the basics of what a changed life looks like and what on earth our lives have to do with the kingdom of God.

IV. THE CALL

What comes next is a story of changed lives. Jesus is walking along the beach of Lake Galilee and brothers Simon and Andrew are doing what they did every day – fish. We don't know if Jesus was looking specifically for them or, if as the text says, he simply saw them, but they were casting their nets out into the Lake – right in the middle of their normal, daily 9 to 5. Jesus makes them the oddest offer – "Follow me... I'll make a different kind of fisherman out of you. I'll show you how to catch men and women instead of perch and bass."³ Without skipping a beat Simon and Andrew drop their nets and head on down the beach a bit with Jesus who has already spotted another set of brothers. James and John are sitting out in a boat with their father Zebedee mending their nets so that they could get back to doing what **they** did every day – fish. Again the strange offer, "Follow me. I'll make a different kind of fisherman out of you." The next thing you know this little foursome has walked off into the sunset with Jesus – and Zebedee is left without his work force.

Now, in however high regard we might hold scripture, I think we have to admit – this is pretty odd. As a child I'd hear this story and I'd fret about it. I'd see Jesus walking along the beach, I'd hear Jesus words, "Change your life... follow me." And suddenly four men walk away from everything they know. I (and I'm sure I was not alone) would think, "That's what it takes to be a disciple? Then I am definitely not disciple material." Barbara Brown Taylor asks – if some stranger said, 'follow me' "Could you do it? If a clear call were to come to you tomorrow afternoon, could you get up from your chair and walk out the door, without taking your keys or turning off the lights? Could you abandon your grocery cart in front of the frozen food case at Win Dixie [Ralph's] and set off for parts unknown without stopping to call home?"⁴

Our polite answer would most likely be, "No thanks." Our silent response would be, "Are you nuts? I can't – and even if I could, I wouldn't want to." Four men who dash out of their everyday and women and men who spend their lives in far-off (and often dangerous) places have been the idealized role models for followers. Most of us are quick with our "no, thank-you." But we might feel differently if we unpack that word 'follow,' if we think a bit more carefully about this important story... about what it means to say "yes" to Jesus when he says, as he always does, "follow me."

V. WHAT IT IS NOT

When you join this or almost any Christian Church we ask you, "Do you intend to be Christ's disciple?" And you answer, "yes." We are a community of those who follow Jesus Christ. We are here – one way or another each of us has heard his voice. But not every one of us hears him saying to us "drop everything and go on the road." So then, what does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus Christ for us?

First, let me say what it does not mean. Following Jesus is not generally a matter of quitting your job, selling your home and leaving everything behind... there were a dozen or so early disciples and a number of tagalong types who when Jesus said "follow me" went on the road – everyone else stayed home. Yet they turned the world upside down. Yes, it meant leaving

the workplace for Simon, Andrew, James and John and eight others who would soon join them – it will mean that for some today – Jesus still asks people to pack their bags and head for Guatemala or seminary. Jesus still asks people today to quit their jobs... believe me, you'll know it when that sort of call comes. But that is not everyone's call, in fact for most the call is to bloom where we have been planted – to find ways to be faithful right where we are – to live Christianly, truthfully, grace-fully on God's behalf in the jobs and relationships and families we are in now. Jesus' call is not always away from everything we know. But neither is it a call to a soft life. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it, "Salvation is free, but discipleship will cost you your life." And facing the executioner he said, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."

Nor does following Jesus mean we all do the same thing. The call is the same, but how it plays out will differ person to person to person. We are created uniquely, with differing gifts and passions and life situations – our interests, our circumstances, our wiring are different – so we will follow Christ differently too. Presbyterian professors Hugh Kerr and John Mulder have written a book entitled *Conversions*. In the book, 50 men and women recount how they came to follow Christ. It meant all kinds of different things. Albert Schweitzer answered "Yes" to Christ's summons and ended up first as a scholar in Germany and then as a physician in Africa. Dag Hammarskjöld heard the call and went into politics. Dorothy Day answered "yes" and established *Houses of Hospitality* for the poor. John Woolman heard the call and took on the matter of slavery. C.S. Lewis used his intellect and writing skills as a teacher and Christian apologist.⁵ You see, there is a uniqueness, a particularity to Christ's call. The first four disciples were fishermen – and when Jesus said "follow me," they were still fisherman – their gifts and abilities for fishing would simply be redirected in service of the kingdom of God.

SO – we are to follow. In many ancient languages, to follow or go after is not simply to trail behind, but to obey, to fall in step with. It is not so much a matter of going somewhere new, but of being someone new; it is a matter of making the decisions Christ would make if he were in your shoes; simply put, of being a person of grace and truth here, and now. We need not leave home to follow Jesus.

VI. WHAT IT IS

Well, then, if discipleship is not always about dropping your nets and leaving home for seminary or the mission field, just what is it? We may not end up living in a distant country or having to eat unusual food or forsaking the familiar. The details of our discipleship will most likely differ, but the basics will not.

Borrowing some thoughts on discipleship from Eugene Bay, pastor of Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church,⁶ and adding a few of my own, "There are a few things you can pretty much count on happening if you are at all serious about following Jesus.

For one thing, you can expect to be challenged and changed. Life with Jesus simply does that. You can expect to be disturbed, to be shaken out of the comfortable ruts most of us get ourselves into and frankly prefer to stay in. You can expect to have to struggle with issues and questions that you could ignore if it were not for Jesus. Who is my neighbor and what are my obligations to him or her? My obligations to my enemies? What are my responsibilities as a prosperous Christian in a world of poverty? What about war? Whose money is it anyway? What is my responsibility for the planet... the poor? Do I take parenting seriously?

Disciples, followers of Jesus have found that they have had lots of things to think about, many things to wrestle with... things that others can ignore... things that truly matter as we walk our few short years on earth. And in thinking, wrestling through those questions with Jesus, we

change. Over time we take on his heart and his ways. Following Jesus leads to challenge and change.

Another thing you can count on happening if you are serious about following Jesus is that **you will be led into some kind of service.** Jesus will lead you away from pre-occupation with yourself and into concern for others. John Andrew Holmes (American physician and writer) wrote: “It is well to remember that the entire universe, with one trifling exception, is composed of others.” The Jesus who said “follow me” took a basin of water and a towel and washed his disciples’ feet – he touched the untouchable, fed the hungry, befriended sinners, loved the unlovely, prepared a meal for people he knew would let him down. Service takes many different forms – cooking for PATH, service on a Board or Committee, picking up trash when we *Heal the Bay*, teaching a Sunday School class, loving your family. Following Jesus leads to acts of love.

And finally, the footsteps of Jesus always lead through the gates of **a community of faith – a church.** Robert Hudnut, pastor and former mayor of Indianapolis put it this way, “There are many things one can do alone, but Christianity is not one of them.”

Jesus was not a solo practitioner; rather Jesus gathered a cluster of questionable characters and prayed that they would be one. We need brothers and sisters to encourage us, to hold us accountable, to inspire and help us think faith through and live it out. We gather here every Sunday morning to worship and to wrestle together with one basic question... “How then, shall we live?” Christians answer that question together – in community. Following Jesus leads us to companions on the way.

VII. SO FOLLOW

Jesus walks our way too, extending his odd offer – as he called to Simon and Andrew, James and John – “Follow. I’ll make a different kind of fisherman out of you.” So Jesus calls to us – “Follow, I’ll make a different sort of person out of you.” We are all in the same boat, but we are not all called to exactly the same place. Whether we wind up a some two thousand miles away in Guatemala or a hundred feet away in a Sunday School room; whether we change how we do our work or how we nurture our families, we have heard – we hear – the call. There is an alternative to stumbling in darkness... his name is Jesus. Jesus who calls to you and to me, “Change your life, God’s kingdom is here. Follow me.”

VIII. PRAYER: Lord, something world-altering is afoot – in you the light has come. May we be those who will drop all that holds us back, and follow you. And then, wherever, however, you may lead, empower us to live Christianly, truthfully, full of grace for you and your kingdom.

AMEN AND AMEN.

¹ Isaiah 9:2

² Eugene Peterson, *The Message*

³ Ibid.

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way*, p. 38

⁵ Hugh Kerr and John Mulder, *Conversions*

⁶ Eugene C. Bay sermon, *The Essence of the Christian Life*, Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church, January 27, 2002