

“Follow Me”

In the name of him whose word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but power to we who are being saved, dear friends in Christ: As noted earlier, the overarching theme of the Epiphany season is the revelation of Jesus Christ to the world. The Church in its wisdom directs us to look at him and acknowledge exactly who he is and what he's come to do. And so far this church year, what we've seen are others pointing to Jesus. At his birth it was angels directing the shepherds to go and see him. At the actual Epiphany, a star led the wise men to him. A couple weeks back when we celebrated the baptism of Jesus, it was the Father who pointed him out announcing, “This is my beloved Son”. And then last week we heard it from John the Baptist who pointed at Jesus and said, “Behold the Lamb of God”. John went on to explain that this was the whole reason for his own ministry, saying, “For his purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel.”

In today's Gospel we change actors. Now instead of others directing us to look at him, Jesus takes center stage and begins to reveal himself to us. He takes John's arrest as the signal to begin his own public ministry. John has run his course. He's done what he came to do. His mission is complete. Now it's time for Jesus to step into the lime light and take over.

It's worth noting that he doesn't begin his ministry at the same place where John did his thing. John had chosen a spot on the Jordan River in the desert valley just east of Jerusalem, which was the spiritual heart of the Jewish nation. Though it was in the wilderness, a good day's hike from Jerusalem would get you there. And so, John's audience was drawn mostly from Jerusalem and surrounding Judea; that is to say, from near the religious center – from where you would expect to find the most faithful and observant Jews.

Jesus by contrast goes way up north to a place that's about as far as you can get from the spiritual flagpole and still be in what was once part of the original Promised Land. Here there was much more mixing with foreign peoples, far more pagan influence, and where too the Jews who lived there were likely to be ... well, less Jewish in faith and practice. In other words, it's a place where the spiritual darkness was deep. This is where Jesus begins to shine the light of his truth. Matthew explains that this was to fulfill Isaiah's prophecy: “the people dwelling darkness have seen a great light”. And that's true. But I think the prophecy itself reflects the character of Jesus' ministry to seek and to save the lost, and how that no one however sinful or deceived is beyond his reaching out to. He wants all people to come to the knowledge of his truth and be saved.

And thus, his message is much the same as his forerunner, John the Baptist: “Repent! Recognize your guilt. Be ashamed. Fear the judgment of God. Hate what you are and have done. Turn from your sin in sorrow; for” (and this is where the preaching of Jesus is slightly different) “the kingdom of heaven is *at hand*.” John had proclaimed the coming kingdom. He said it was drawing near. Jesus declares that it *is* here. Where? Where Jesus is, of course, because he is the king. The kingdom of heaven is any place the voice of Jesus the king is being heard and received in faith. There his subjects are being formed. There they are being delivered from death and darkness to life and light. His is not a kingdom of this world with land and cities and borders. His is a kingdom of hearts, minds, and souls that acknowledge him as Savior and King.

His goal is to extend that kingdom through the preaching and teaching of others. He'll tell them later, "Who hears you, hears me". And so, it is that he calls his first disciples, the men he will send and through whom he will cause his kingdom grow. But first they have to be trained.

He chooses some unlikely candidates for the first disciples. I mean, if you want to form preachers and teachers of Scripture, the place to look would be among the young seminary students in Jerusalem. They were the guys sitting under the feet of the best Rabbis and Bible scholars, drinking deeply of God's Word every day, and devoting themselves to lives of religious service to God's people. But no, again Jesus shines his light upon those in the dark. Now, I don't mean to say that Peter, Andrew, James, and John were not faithful Jews. They were. As a matter of fact, they had responded to the call of John the Baptizer. They had all gone out to hear him preach. Confessing their sins, they received from him the baptism of repentance for forgiveness. There they had also been introduced to Jesus. They were among those to whom John had said, "Behold the Lamb of God".

But that was several weeks or months ago. Now they're back at work at their regular jobs. It's a business they are all partners in. They've got families that depend on them. And none of them has the slightest thought or inclination to become a full-time disciple of Jesus. In their minds (and in most people's for that matter) that's a job for someone interested in such things, like the seminary students mentioned earlier. It's for priests and Levites; not for regular, hardworking guys like them. Besides, they are comparatively rough men. Not only do they work hard, they play hard. They are likely frequent customers of a local tavern. When they're out on the boat, they brag and lie and tell raunchy jokes to each other. They're sailors and can all curse like sailors. When they're angry or upset, they do. They would count themselves among the least likely men on the planet to become disciples and later the apostles of the Messiah.

But Jesus does so seem to enjoy upsetting the applecart. One fine morning as they are wrapping up a long night on the lake, getting that last cast or two of the net before heading in to sell their catch, they see Jesus walking along the shoreline. They can't imagine what he's up to. Maybe he wants to see what they caught so he can purchase the best and freshest of the fish before they hit the market. No, that's not it. Instead he breaks every convention by calling out, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."

They are words that none of them either expected or even desired to hear. It just wasn't on their radar. And yet immediately they drop what they are doing and comply. They leave their nets and follow. This remarkable behavior usually serves as a departure point for sermon on how you too need to be willing at a moment's notice to leave it all behind and follow Jesus with you whole heart, just like these four guys did. How virtuous and noble of them! But that would be to miss the point entirely. You see, they weren't particularly virtuous or noble; nor were they willing. The point is that the call of Jesus is powerful. Through his Word he makes the unwilling, willing. The same Word that called light into existence on the first day now shines his light on and in them. And they are compelled to follow him drawn by the light of his truth.

In the same way each of us was called into discipleship not through our willingness or virtue, but by the power of his Word. And whereas they were called to leave their vocations as fishermen to begin training for their new vocations as his apostles, we are for the most part called *in* our vocations to be his disciples. Sure, he still calls men into the pastoral office to serve his church as his spokesmen, to continue to preach his Word and thus make disciples. But most who are called as disciples serve in other ways: as farmers, managers, business

people, clerks and accountants, doctors and lawyers, teachers and builders—all useful vocations, to include our other vocations in our families as children, wives and husband, parents and grandparents, brothers and sisters, and so on. But no matter what else we have on our plates, our primary calling is to be a disciple of Jesus.

What does that mean? First and foremost, a disciple is one who is under discipline, not in the sense of being punished necessarily, but rather in the sense of learning knowledge and skills. A disciple of Jesus is a student of Jesus. It means that we listen to him. As Jesus said, “My sheep hear my voice.” And we know that it through the teaching of his Word that what’s unwilling in us – our dark, sinful nature – is being destroyed; and what’s willing in us – the new nature created to walk in the light – is being strengthened and renewed. So, as disciples, our first obligation is to listen to Jesus.

That’s where discipleship begins, anyway. There’s more to it, and to shed light on the subject we need to examine in a bit more detail Jesus’ call to discipleship. The words in today’s text that are translated “Follow me” are more literally and accurately “Come behind me” or “Come after me”. This suggests three things:

First, that we recognize he’s in charge. It may seem like a no brainer, him being the King and God and all that; but the very nature of our sinful rebellion against God is to put ourselves first. It’s my will that I want to prevail, not his. It’s my word of authority I want to stand and live by. It won’t work. Jesus must be first. A disciple not only listens to but also submits to his Word. And where your will is contrary to his, you need to repent.

Second, if a disciple is walking behind Jesus as he commands, then they’ll be following in his footsteps and learning from his example. If we see Jesus caring for the poor and needy, that’s what we’ll be doing. If we see him forgiving the sins of others – even his enemies, we’ll be doing that too. A disciple seeks to be like Jesus in word and deed.

Finally, and most importantly, coming after Jesus means keeping him between you and what lies ahead. In the near term, you don’t know where he’s going to lead. You don’t know what difficulties and challenges lay before you. He does. And if he leads you into them, then you can be sure that they are for your good. But don’t go it alone. Don’t try to face the challenges without him in front. Keep your trust in him who defends you from all harm and danger and he will lead you safely through.

In the long term, though, you do know where the path leads. It goes through life to death and then to judgment. And here again it’s absolutely vital to keep Jesus in front of you for he shields you with his own body. Without him in front, you are left to face the wrath and judgment of God on your own. It’s not a safe place to be. But from behind, you follow him who faced the wrath and judgment of God for you, who suffered and died for your sins on the cross, and who passed through death to life again. Keeping Jesus in front of you on that part of your journey ensures that you will pass *with him* through death to life eternal.

This is what means to be a disciple of Jesus: through his Word Jesus continually calls to each and every one of us, “Follow me”. And by his call, he grants us both the will and the ability to do it. Today and all that come after, let us gladly answer his call, giving all thanks and praise to him for making us his disciples and heirs of his kingdom. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!