

“CHOOSING THE JOURNEY”

Matthew 4:18-25

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Do you find this story as surprising as I do? I'm not a risk-taker. I never considered going to a college far from home. In fact, going to college at all – a thing unknown in my family – was rather a leap. When this guy I knew a little bit from my college fellowship group asked me out, it took some effort not to just say, “no, thank you.” I never considered a career in sales or politics. When I became a minister, I knew I would not be a church planter or evangelist. I don't get excited about meeting a lot of new people. I don't gamble. I'm ok with a certain amount of flexibility, but I like to know what the plan is. You get the idea. So when I read the gospel accounts of these fishermen dropping everything to follow Jesus, I find this quite amazing. I can't imagine doing that.

I wonder what this tells us about these men, or about this moment in their lives. Was there something that made them ready for this life-changing invitation? Were they perhaps unsatisfied with a life of fishing? Maybe they were already on a spiritual search for a new path. Maybe it had more to do with socio-economic and cultural realities – being part of a people whose lives were constrained and burdened by the repressive power of the “pax romana.” Maybe the sense that something just had to change was building in them. They may well have experienced dissatisfaction with the leadership of their faith community. They would have known of various itinerant preachers who gathered followers and got people thinking about their lives in different ways. Maybe they were just waiting for the right one to come along.

Does the story tell us as much or more about Jesus? Was there something about Jesus that spoke to the dissatisfactions of these men, that seemed to answer their longing for some change in the trajectory of their lives? Did he exude a clarity of purpose or a passion or a holiness they wanted for themselves? Maybe there was just something different and compelling about him that they couldn't have explained. It's possible they might have considered that he could be the Messiah the prophets talked about... but that doesn't seem to be borne out by the way they react in some of the stories that follow. You could, I suppose, insist that because Jesus was Jesus, his call to these fishermen had such an irresistible power that they had no choice but to go along. But that doesn't seem to fit with the picture of Jesus we get from the rest of the gospels; nor does this story have that “feel.” The sense we get is of a willing choice to follow.

I'd have thought they'd have questions: “Follow you, where, exactly?” “Who are you, anyway?” “What does ‘fish for people’ mean?” But Matthew says that “immediately” they followed Jesus. Left their nets and their boats and their career and their families... to follow Jesus on a journey into a completely unknown future. They could have said no, but they chose the journey.

I will never stop finding this amazing. And their story, their choosing to follow, will always challenge all of us who call ourselves followers of Jesus with the realization of just what a huge, radical, life-altering leap of faith following Jesus entails.

We use that expression “following Jesus” so easily and casually, but what do we really mean when we talk about “following”? Literally, to follow, means to walk after or behind someone, to go where they go. Peter, Andrew, James, and John certainly did that... but we understand that it means a whole lot more. “I follow you,” can mean “I understand what you’re trying to say.” It can mean learning from someone. It can mean trying to emulate the one you follow. It can mean allying yourself to a leader or a movement or a school of thought or a way of life. Today we also use “follow” to mean keeping up with somebody’s voice or activity in the public sphere, as in “I follow her on Twitter.”

I like this way of talking about what it means to be Christian. It reminds us that faith is not merely agreeing with a certain set of beliefs, practicing particular rituals, or obeying rules. It’s a way of life lived in response to, in relation to *a person*.

When we say that we follow Jesus, we are acknowledging that the Christian life is not a fixed place but a journey. This builds in some expectation that the terrain and the weather are likely to change along the way, that it’ll go more smoothly sometimes than other times, that we might have to make detours, that we will get tired, need help, make new discoveries, learn stuff along the way.

We use the language of “following” more today than we did in the past, I think, but it’s by no means new to the history of the church, which was in its earliest days referred to as “the Way.”

Faith as a journey seems to have a new resonance in today’s world, where we are realizing that the church (and the world!) have changed and are continuing to change in ways that are raising all kinds of questions: What is church for? *Who* is church for? What do we need to talk about that we never talked about before? Does our ministry need to take some new forms? Do we need different ways to organize ourselves, different kinds of leadership, different allies? What old practices should we hold onto and what no longer serves a purpose? What is the role of technology in ministry? The pandemic and the other traumas of the past year have brought these issues to the forefront, for sure, but they have been simmering a long time.

We also know we have to reckon with the disillusionment of SO many people with the institutional church, for what I think we have to admit are a host of sound reasons: beliefs that seem rigid or irrelevant, sexism, very public misconduct and the lavish lifestyles of some clergy, the church’s history of colonialism and racism, frequent examples of hypocrisy, too much devotion to buildings and institutions. The enthusiasm of some parts of the church for conspiracy theories and ideologies of hate and exclusion haven’t helped. We are asking ourselves how – or IF – we can pursue a different path.

It’s never been more necessary to remember that what we are supposed to be about is following Jesus.

To follow Jesus, we have to pay attention to where he went and what he did and what he said and how he behaved and what mattered to him. How he lived and how he died. To know him, we have to know *about* him. That might seem like a ridiculously obvious thing to say, but in fact I have been noticing that a lot of what we say about Jesus actually provides us with little help in understanding how our lives might be shaped by Jesus' life.

Pay close attention to the ways people talk about Jesus and you'll soon notice a lot of expressions like that old bumper sticker that read "Jesus is my co-pilot" or the poem about Jesus walking beside us or carrying us when we couldn't go on. Our hymns and songs are full of praise for Jesus' name, and rejoicing in his love for us. I'm not saying those things are wrong; these personal visions of Jesus – even if they sometimes seem overly sentimental - can be really meaningful.

So can what I might call more "theological" language: Jesus is Savior, Redeemer, Son of God, Messiah, second person of the Trinity. "Very God from very God," one of the creeds says. "Intercessor, friend of sinners," says one of my favorite hymns. The "image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation," the Apostle Paul writes in Colossians. I believe theology is important, and we can get a lot out of delving into the many different ways Christians of the past and the present have tried to say who Jesus is.

But neither the personal/sentimental Jesus nor the Jesus of theology gives us much to go on when we're asking "what does following Jesus actually involve?" in the real world. In *my* life. In our congregation. In the larger church. In our relationships. In our struggles with decisions, issues, human suffering. For those questions, we have to go to the gospels, to the stories that give us a glimpse into the life of Jesus. The Jesus that James and John and Andrew and Peter dropped everything to follow.

And that's what we are aiming to do with our summer sermon series: look at stories of Jesus from the gospels with the eyes – with the questions – with the intention - of people who want to follow Jesus.

This isn't always straightforward: our questions, many of them, are different from the questions the first disciples or the gospel writers had. The historical distance is real. We can't really place ourselves right into the stories; nor can we just transplant Jesus from the pages of the gospels into our world of today. A little of what I've heard referred to as "holy imagination" is required (as well as some research and thoughtful study). But that's exactly what stories are intended to evoke, and the reason, probably, that the early church felt a need for not just the theological language of the epistles but for the "good news" in the form of stories about Jesus.

I originally intended for us to read just verses 18 through 22 of Matthew 4. But stopping with verse 22 seems to put all the emphasis on the risk, the uncertainty, the sacrifice, the leap of faith involved in following Jesus. Those last few verses, 23 through 25, lead our eyes and our minds and our fearful hearts beyond the things that might make us reluctant to choose the journey. It's true that it's never been easy to follow Jesus. But as those first disciples

discovered, it's also a journey of unfolding possibilities. Great things happen – things nobody would have predicted. Healing happens. Forgiveness abounds. People come because they have heard something interesting, and they stay because it turns out to be really good news, for them. A wildly diverse assortment of folks become companions on the journey. They discover what “following Jesus” means, not “up front,” but as the journey unfolds. That’s how it’s always been. That’s how we discover it, too. Amen.

Resource:

The Great Spiritual Migration, Brian McLaren.