

Matthew 4:18-20
Follow Me
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I wonder if this question has ever come into your mind: what am I doing here? For what purpose? And how am I using my time? Maybe it's not something you're overly concerned about, perhaps you have a contented spirit. Or maybe you are a person who is prone to existential angst and you're like "actually I was just thinking that 3 minutes ago."

Every once and a while I will have someone ask me: "So what is it you do as a pastor? You preach, which is like writing a paper every single week, a paper that you then have to stand up and present before people that you know very well. That would be terrifying." Then I started down this thought spiral of what actually do I do. I spent a good deal of time praying about it, and reflecting and here's what I came up with: even more than the words I say in the sermon or the music that we choose to sing each week (though these are important), what I desire to do is everything in my ability to make it so someone in here would come to know Jesus, or know him more fully. And then in turn to choose to follow him either more closely, maybe even for the first time. This is what I long to do.

Whether you know it or not, or whether it has become a distant memory back in the recesses of your brain, what everyone of us is here in this room to do is grow and draw nearer to Jesus. More than the music that we sing, or the instruments that we use, more than style or structure or the lovely yellow carpet. We are here this morning to encounter Jesus. As I've thought about what my hope is for us this new year, it's this, that whether this is your first time hearing these stories from the Gospel of Matthew, or whether you've heard them so many times that you've stopped really hearing or listening, that we would encounter Jesus in these stories freshly.

Because, whether you are 8 years old or 80 every one of us is being invited in one way or another to encounter Jesus...and then to follow him. This morning we are going to look at the next series of verses from Matthew 4. Last week we heard the story of Jesus' encounter of temptation in the wilderness. He, like us, is someone who faced tremendous temptation in all areas of life—and so he can not only relate to us in our struggles, but is fully able to give us power and strength in our times of weakness. Before that we read of Jesus' baptism where he, as the king of kings entered into the muck and mud of that river with a bunch of sinners as a way of identifying with us in the muck and mud of our lives. But he does so in such a way that he lifts us out and tells us that we are his beloved. Today we hear the story of Jesus' invitation to a group of men to leave what they are doing and follow him.

I invite you to stand with me as we listen this morning to two verses from Matthew 4, 18-20.

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. ¹⁹ And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." ²⁰ Immediately they left their nets and followed him.

This scene where Jesus is interacting with people is completely ordinary, and at the same time completely extraordinary. What we see here first is an itinerant preacher, a traveling teacher or rabbi who has come to a group of prospective students and issued an invitation to follow him and become students in the school that he is going to lead. This was not at all uncommon in the first century for rabbis to travel around and invite people to follow them and become their students. Ancient Jewish literature says a lot about these types of teachers. In this way, this story is very ordinary.

But in another respect, the way that Matthew lays out this story is entirely extraordinary. What we have here is something entirely backward. Let me ask you, is there anyone in here who recently or at one time had a son or daughter be admitted to college? In this day when a little boy would come to synagogue and learn the basics of the first 5 books of the bible—the Torah. And in these Torah classes there might be students who stand out as having particular gifts for reading and interpreting. When this ordinary instruction stopped, those who excelled would be singled out for advanced study, and they would begin to go to the temple precincts, and they would listen to the Rabbis teach. And as they listened they might ask a leading question of the Rabbi, in order to rise above the others. What they were doing was building a resume. And as they got older and showed promise they would have their moms drive them to Office Max where they would get the heavyweight, cream colored sheepskin with envelopes to match and they would put together a resume.

Then they would approach the rabbi with their credentials seeking to study under and make this rabbi proud. Then after submitting his materials to the rabbi he would go back and hope, that maybe...possibly that rabbi would accept him and say the words he longed so desperately to hear, "follow me."

Do you see how strange our story is? There is no pedigree, there are no impressive resumes, there are no students who show the potential to make their teacher look good. Not at all. Jesus doesn't wait for people to come to him, he goes to them.

The way we tend to think about how things work with God is exactly the same way it is with prospective rabbis, but it's actually not. It's actually exactly the opposite.

Many of us think that a small few are interested in religious things. Most of us are interested in other things: business, sports, science, HGTV. But a few of us are interested in religion, and so they decide they'll go on search for God and if they try hard enough and prove they're worthy of God's company, if they've got what it takes, well then maybe God will invite them to be a part of God's special team—the Minnesota Twins (just kidding). That's actually not at all what it's like with God. This story shows us how very different it is with God. He doesn't wait for us to come to him, he's coming to find us. He doesn't wait until we come to a religious assembly or in a moment of quiet contemplation or existential angst. Jesus comes to us in the midst of our ordinary pursuits when we're trying to catch fish, or overseeing the classroom, or parenting the children, or tinkering in our workshop, or filling out a TPS report in the office space in which we work.

He comes to us in the places where we are. This is the first thing we need to hear from this passage: **God is searching for people long before we are searching for him.**

Do you remember the time when God first encountered you, when you first felt the sense of his presence with you calling to you in some way? Maybe you can't remember, or maybe its clear as day,

or maybe it's going on right now in your life. Whatever and whenever it is, I encourage you to try and bring that moment to the front of your mind and reflect upon it.

For me it took place on a youth retreat when I was in middle school. I didn't go with the thought in mind that I was going to have an encounter with God. Do you know what thought I did have in my mind? I think there are going to be some cute girls there. But in the midst of my feeble attempts to impress those cute girls with my feats of agility and strength on the basketball court, or with my razor sharp 7th grade wit something else happened. Through the songs that were sung and the speaker who spoke so tenderly and passionately about this man Jesus who had a mission to share love and grace with the world just as we were gathered at the shore of Lake Mudhen encountering this man on this retreat where we were fishing and boating and gathered together. Jesus encountered a group of regular people, and he said to them "Follow me, I have a mission for you."

I want to take a few moments to unpack what Jesus means when he says these words to us, follow me.

The Greek word Matthew uses here for follow is this word: *Akalutheo*. It's a compound word whose root word is the Greek noun *kelothas* road path journey. And in Greek when you put the letter "A" or Alpha on the front of a word it can change the meaning to mean the opposite, but it can also mean alongside. So in this case *Akalutheo* is an invitation to come along on the same path, to travel the same road.

When Jesus came to those disciples he said, I want you to go on this journey with me. There is a unique power available to you when you choose to walk through this life with Jesus. Jesus is coming with a gracious invitation, I want you to come and walk with me.

Now, did you see that immediately these disciples dropped what they were doing and followed Jesus. But they didn't just physically follow him, though they did. This word *akalutheo* also has metaphorical connotations as well, to follow can also mean to intellectually assent and be shaped by and it can mean morally, that our life and our actions and the way we conduct ourselves when we're standing in line at the grocery store, or sitting in traffic, or at home with our family, or anywhere we might represent Jesus publicly. In all of these ways, Jesus saying to us *Follow Me*, means he wants us to follow physically, intellectually, and morally. Our actions, our minds, and our decision-making processes come under his authority.

This is the time for us to be completely honest, who do we follow? And I know that there are many of you who will respond, "of course, I follow Jesus." But I want to dig deeper, I want to press you to think more critically, do I allow Jesus to shape my intellect and the things I think on? Or do I allow Jesus to shape my moral framework, how I view the world and my interactions in it? Because the truth is that following Jesus will inevitably bring you to a crossroads where a Jesus shaped worldview collides with a secular or worldly shaped worldview.

Is our view of what a flourishing world looks like purely an economic vision? Where as long as my 401k is doing well, and unemployment is low, or the stock market is up, I am willing to turn a blind eye let all manner of dishonesty and prejudice.

This morning many of you gathered during our formation and education hour to learn more about the legal aspects of our nation's immigration policy. Throughout the scriptures we read of God's

passionate and relentless concern for those who are exiles, foreigners, refugees. Will we allow our views of issues like this be guided by manufactured fear, un-biblical prejudice, and a scarcity mindset that believes that being generous and open handed to the other will somehow mean less for us?

Is our view of our own liberty with regards to our body a matter of my sovereign choice when it comes to how I use my body, what I put in it, or the choices I make with it? Or does even our personal liberty come under the authority of Jesus? This word that Jesus uses *akalutheo* says yes, when Jesus comes and bids us to follow him, he means all of our person.

The second part of what this means is what we see in verse 19, it's the promise of what Jesus is going to do. Jesus says, follow me, and I will make you fish for people. Jesus is drawing on the ancient prophetic tradition, and he's look especially to a prophet named Jeremiah. Jeremiah was a very young man, perhaps not much older than Grayson or Bryan. Do you know what Jeremiah was called, what his nickname was? The weeping prophet. Because he saw all sorts of people around him giving their lives to all sorts of things that were not good for them, that drew them away from God and that alienated them from one another. Jeremiah saw how awful their lives were and how it wasn't working for them and he tried very hard to get them to come back to him.

So much of the difficulty we face in this life comes because we are not close with God. That the more we live without God's presence, the more difficult and confusing and full of unanswered questions this life is.

In the 16th chapter of Jeremiah verses 14-16 he's looking at these people suffering around him because they are far from God. God says this very clearly to Jeremiah, I am going to bring these people back there will be a day when I bring them back to myself and I give them the land I promised to their ancestors. I will create for myself many fisherman and fisherwomen.

God says through this man Jeremiah that he is going to restore his people and the way he is going to do it is he is going to send people out in his name who will fish for people. Do you see what Jesus is saying here: he is saying to these disciples that he is going to be their fishing fleet. He is going to bring them to himself, not so they will bring people close to him, but so that he will bring people close to God through his people. The God who wants to bring many people, the world, back to himself, close and in a tender loving relationship, the God who wants to do this is using people like you and me to do this. Not just fancy preachers who stand up in front of groups of people in their cool jeans and graphic tees or in their elaborate robes and fancy dress, but God is using teachers and nurses, factory workers and project managers, stay at home parents and even, yes even, sometimes a preacher or two.

Why does he want to do this? LOVE. God is so deeply moved with affection and concern and love that he wants to bring everyone who is far from him back close to God. So how does he do this?

2 Challenges

1. To *akalutheo* – to follow him truly. To let him shape your mind and choices and way of being in the world. And as we do this it is possible that God will use you to bring people close to Jesus. For us as a church this is what we exist to do, to follow Jesus and to bring people close to him. Will you be open to the possibility of coming near to him and being open to the possibility of

2. For those of you who are not sure or are just now exploring this. Here's the challenge, will you be open in your heart to the possibility that choosing to come to him and listen to him might be really good for you. You don't have to all of a sudden change everything about your life (job, friends, music, interests, etc). You do need to choose to come each week and listen to what he might have to say and then go from this place willing to let his spirit move and change you from the inside out.

To all of us my invitation and challenge is that we would continue to come each week with hearts open to say "Yes, where you lead I will follow. Show me the way." Would you ask that and be open to that this week? If so, then let's close in prayer and ask that Jesus would help to do this. Let's pray.