**Who Are You Following?**

 January 26, 2020

[Scripture Focus: Matthew 4: 12 - 23]

SCRIPTURE

Let’s take a closer look at the Matthew text that Glynn read earlier. We’ll listen for God’s Word again. This morning, I’ll be reading from the Message…

When Jesus got word that John had been arrested, he returned to Galilee. He moved from his hometown, Nazareth, to the lakeside village Capernaum, nestled at the base of the Zebulun and Naphtali hills. This move completed Isaiah’s sermon: *Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, road to the sea, over Jordan, Galilee, crossroads for the nations. People sitting out their lives in the dark saw a huge light; Sitting in that dark, dark country of death, they watched the sun come up.*

This Isaiah-prophesied sermon came to life in Galilee the moment Jesus started preaching. He picked up where John left off: “*Change your life. God’s kingdom is here.*”

Walking along the beach of Lake Galilee, Jesus saw two brothers: Simon (later called Peter) and Andrew. They were fishing, throwing their nets into the lake. It was their regular work. Jesus said to them, “*Come with me. I’ll make a new kind of fisherman out of you. I’ll show you how to catch men and women instead of perch and bass.*” They didn’t ask questions, but simply dropped their nets and followed.

A short distance down the beach they came upon another pair of brothers, James and John, Zebedee’s sons. These two were sitting in a boat with their father, Zebedee, mending their fishnets. Jesus made the same offer to them, and they were just as quick to follow, abandoning boat and father.

From there he went all over Galilee. He used synagogues for meeting places and taught people the truth of God. God’s kingdom was his theme—that beginning right now they were under God’s government, a good government!

He also healed people of their diseases and of the bad effects of their bad lives. Word got around the entire Roman province of Syria. People brought anybody with an ailment, whether mental, emotional, or physical. Jesus healed them, one and all. More and more people came, the momentum gathering. Besides those from Galilee, crowds came from the “Ten Towns” across the lake, others up from Jerusalem and Judea, still others from across the Jordan.

Imagine for a moment, that you’re sitting at the Virginia Beach oceanfront, minding your own business (maybe enjoying a cool summer beverage or a great seafood meal), and a guy strolls by proclaiming “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Your first thought… Call 911? Don’t make eye contact - Look the other way? Seems like it’s getting ready to rain. I better get inside quickly (behind a locked door)! May not sound like someone that you’d want to follow.

**SO WHY IS THIS DECISION ABOUT WHO TO FOLLOW SO IMPORTANT?**

The disciples referenced in today’s text made the decision to stop what they were doing and to follow Jesus; to become a disciple of the Christ. What would any of us have done if Jesus strolled by and invited us on a journey to an unknown destination?

There are those of us who have the advantage of 20/20 hindsight who would say that we would have dropped whatever we were doing to follow the Messiah. But we’ve seen how the story ends. It’s like betting on last year’s Super Bowl! Wagering on the past is easy. Taking a chance on the unknown future… that’s a different story.

MOST OF US WOULD SAY THAT WE KNOW HOW THIS STORY ENDS.

If you really read the Bible, God shows us what will happen. We don’t have all of the details but Christians everywhere know the following to be true (from Michael Lindvall’s wonderful little book *What Did Jesus Do?*). We believe…

* Jesus is who he claimed he was. He’s the Anointed One; the Messiah; the Christ; the Lamb of God. He’s not just close to God. He’s divine. He is God.
* We know that what Jesus said is uniquely authoritative. His words are not just some idle chit-chat. His words are God’s words.
* Christians believe that God speaks through the Christ; not just his words but his actions. God spoke through the way that Jesus lived welcoming outcasts and sinners; his compassionate healing of the sick; his impatience with hypocrisy; and his willingness to give himself totally for others.
* Historic Christianity has understood the passion, death and resurrection of the Christ to be the definitive story of how God loves the world. It is stated plainly in John 3:16 (*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son*). I don’t think that anything better demonstrates the depth of God’s divine love for humanity than the passion and the cross.
* Finally, we don’t understand Jesus to simply be the founder of the Christian faith. He is a continuing, living presence in the world and in our lives.

SO, WHAT DOES ALL OF THIS MEAN TO US TODAY?

Clearly, there are those who are curious about Christianity. Maybe non-believers see the actions of some Christians and wonder how another person acts Christ-like (without even knowing what Christ-like really means). They just see that another person reacts differently in some situations.

They don’t seem to ignite instantly when agitated. Maybe there’s a non-anxious presence that doesn’t exist in most others. It’s almost like they have a confidence that they know what’s coming (and aren’t concerned about it).

There are also some of us who prefer to selectively see Jesus only as the kind rabbi who took children on his knee. Maybe we tend to edit out miracles that stymie the modern mind where we have no scientific evidence or video to prove anything. We neatly omit Jesus finding fault with the Pharisees when they act hypocritically (like we all do). Sometimes, we even erase from our memory the radical call that Jesus makes for all-or-nothing discipleship. But it’s there in the Bible. Check out Matthew 25 where the Christ comes back to judge and separates folks into lines of sheep and goats.

**SO WHO ARE YOU *REALLY* FOLLOWING?**

I’ve told you before about my experiences of trying to negotiate with God (you know “if you’ll get me out of this one, I promise that I’ll always put you first in the future”). It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to see that negotiating with God is like playing poker with someone who can see your hand.

My negotiation process usually ends when I have this epiphany that negotiation only really works when each party has something to gain (or loose). God knows my every need and my every thought. When I make a promise to Him that I likely can’t keep (knowing that my desires usually win out over God’s), I don’t really have anything to gain and neither does God. How can we negotiate?

**WHAT’S AT STAKE HERE?** *EVERYTHING!* Not just our earthly lives; not just our homes and our cars; not just meals and our hobbies but eternity (forever) is at stake. What’s important to us? Who or what are we willing to follow? I’m not just talking about Sunday mornings or Christmas or on Easter. Who are we willing to follow unconditionally (even when we don’t want to)?

One of my very favorite PPC small groups is the 9:45 Sunday morning discussion group that I meet with each week. The group includes Jane Pritchett, Ashley Schroeder and a core group of middle school young women (who I have grown to love) and a few male middle/high schoolers.

We’re supposed to be talking about “Big Questions” (like How do we know and trust God? and Who is your Lord?). Three weeks ago, we were looking at what it means to devote ourselves to the Church’s Teaching.

When planning, I assumed that this discussion could be covered in one week. However, on week two, the discussion turned to what happens when a school practices their response to school violence. There was lots of conversation about what to do if an active shooter entered the school. The group talked about teachers who were to lead students to safety. Suddenly, someone asked if I’d be willing to protect one of them with my life. Of course, I answered “yes” before later wondering to myself just who I would really sacrifice my life for…

I think that this is the basis of today’s question “Who are you following?” Who would you give up your life for? Without question, most of us would give up our lives for members of our families. Some may even be willing to give their lives to protect a stranger. But how many of us would give up our lives for the Triune God?

Who are we following (unconditionally)? Not just after you win the lottery but who would you follow even when you lost your job or a family member. Who has given up their life for you? The Christ; the Messiah; the Anointed One; the Lamb of God gave everything so that we could live eternally. So, who are you following? This is the most important question that you’ll ever answer. Who are you following? Amen.