

248 Following Jesus

(Note: This blog entry is based on the text "Following Jesus", originally shared on January 18, 2023. It was the 248th video for our YouTube Channel, Streams of Living Water (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCB7KnYS1bpHKAL2OseQWCnw>), co-produced with my wife, Rev. Sally Welch.)

Have you ever been a team captain, taking turns picking the players for your side? What if you were an employer, what kind of person would you be looking for? How do you decide who to vote for? Jesus doesn't seem to look for any of the qualities that we would choose when he selects his disciples. Today, we're going to find out who Jesus is looking for. It might be you.

We're still getting rain in Southern California. I set out every container I could find to save some for dry spells.

We pray for those who live in the burn areas or are struggling to fix leaks or are otherwise negatively affected. But, for most of us, the rain is welcome after years of drought.

However, officials tell us that we have only moved from an "extreme drought" to a "severe drought", and that it will take several years of wet winters to get out of drought conditions.

When I hear that I think, "Come on! Can't you just let us enjoy this rain while we have it?" 😊 **This** is a blessing!

God ended three hundred years of prophetic drought with the appearance of John the Baptist. There had been no word from God through a prophet for all that time. And then almost immediately John points to Jesus as the sacrificial lamb of God, and then John gets thrown in jail and taken out of the picture! But that's another story for another day.

St. Matthew tells us that the imprisonment of John was a turning point for Jesus.

Jesus moved. He changed his place of residence to fulfill a prophecy. And if that prophecy sounds familiar, it's because we just heard it on Christmas Eve! We see it starting in **Matthew 4:12**,

¹²Now 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.”

Jesus, the light of the world, has dawned, bringing life to the world that has been sitting in darkness. It’s an epiphany!

And what message does Jesus, the light of the world, bring to “the people who sat in darkness”, and “in the region and shadow of death”?

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” It’s time for a change!

We consider the meaning of The Magi during the season of Epiphany, the wise men who came to see the baby Jesus. They were the first non-Jews, or “gentiles” to encounter Him.

How could they not have been changed by that encounter?

In T.S. Eliot’s poem “The Journey of the Magi”, he writes as one of the wise men,

*“All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.”*

To encounter Christ is to be transformed. His age is not important. His being is. Everything is made new in Him, and he calls us to repent.

Repentance means to turn around, to receive an inner reorientation. We receive the gift to repent and to become a new creation in the living relationship with the one true living God, to turn away from “an alien people clutching their gods.”

That is exactly what happens when Jesus calls Simon, Andrew, and James and John to follow Him. It’s exactly what happens to us.

Watch how long it takes for those four fishermen to consider what to do with their lives once they have received the call from Jesus to follow him, continuing in **verse 18**,

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.

They clocked out "immediately." How could that happen?

Some of them had encountered Jesus before. Now Jesus was inviting them to respond. And they responded. Immediately.

When Apple Computer was getting started Steve Wozniak was the tech guy and Steve Jobs was the visionary/marketer guy. As the company began to grow, however, it became obvious that they were going to need a highly able CEO to run the business side of the company. Steve Jobs was focused on recruiting Jim Scully, the CEO of the Pepsi Corporation, one of the largest multi-national corporations in the world.

John Scully was reluctant to say yes to this little tech start-up. Until one day, Steve Jobs turned to him and said, "Do you want to sell sugar water for the rest of your life or come with me and change the world?"

That was convincing. He relented and helped grow Apple Computer into a major corporation and social transformer.

Jesus made no such promises to his disciples. But God did change the world through their faithfulness.

And they weren't recruited with a romantic appeal to a life filled with challenges, like the way young men were alleged to have been recruited to deliver mail for the Pony Express with the poster, "Wanted: Young, skinny, wiry fellows not over eighteen. Must be expert riders, willing to risk death daily. Orphans preferred."

But every one of the disciples would die because they followed Jesus. And God changed the world through them.

The invitation to follow Jesus is what we refer to as a "call". Our word "vocation" comes from the Latin word "vocare", which means "to call".

The Lutheran understanding of work is that we all have a vocation. It's our job.

The Lutheran understanding of work is that every job is what we do in answer to God's call.

Some people are called to be teachers. Some are called to be artists, or lawyers or nurses or electricians or businesspersons or homemakers, shoemakers, athletes, or pastors.

We live our Christianity in our daily lives by being good at what we do and, thereby, glorifying God.

The disciples were called to literally follow Jesus as their primary jobs for a particular reason. They glorified God by their obedience. Nothing else qualified them.

Of all the people God could have called, he did not choose the rich and powerful, the well-known and respected, the popular or the influencers.

God called regular people. Their only distinguishing trait seems to be their willingness to say "yes". Remember the rich young ruler that Jesus called to follow Him? He said "no".

God has God's own standards. As has often been said, "God doesn't call the qualified. God qualifies the called." God often sees things in us that we don't.

When the prophet Samuel was sent to anoint the next king of Israel after Saul from among the sons of Jesse in Bethlehem, Samuel saw Eliab and thought for sure he was the one. But David wasn't there. Jesse hadn't even called his son David in from the fields. He thought he was too young, not King material, and he thought Samuel would feel the same.

Instead, we see in **1 Samuel 16:7**, speaking of Eliab,

But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."

Likewise, God calls us to change the world through Him who strengthens us.

We are, all of us, called to be disciples of Jesus Christ, whatever the form our particular vocation might take.

And even though few of us are called to fish for a living, we are all called to be fishers of people, to make disciples.

That means going to where the fish are. Sometimes that means being quiet, as in the title of a book on evangelism says, Out of Their Faces and Into Their Shoes. Sometimes

it means being patient. Sometimes it means enduring long stretches when nothing seems to be happening.

But what is always means is saying “yes” each day to living as the disciples of Jesus Christ.

And what did the disciples see when they followed Jesus? We see in the conclusion of our main Bible reading for today, in **Matthew 4:23**

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.

What does Jesus want his disciples to see?

Jesus taught and he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God.

He performed miracles, not as suspensions of the laws of nature, but as signs of what nature was intended to be from the beginning, pointing to the Creator and the Redeemer and the Sanctifier of all that is: God.

Jesus’ miracles are signs of the greatest miracle of all: the reconciliation of God and humanity at the cross, restoring the relationship with the one true living God for which we Created.

When the wise man in the poem says, “I should be glad of another death,” he is speaking of dying to his old life, dying to sin and rising to new life in Jesus Christ. Repentance. Baptism. Things in which we participate every day. And he speaks of the death of Jesus on the cross that makes our new life possible, so that we can say “yes” to Jesus’ invitation to us to **be** his disciples and “yes” to his command to us to **make** disciples.

Do you want to change the world?

Margaret Mead, the anthropologist, once said, “Never underestimate the power of a small group of committed people to change the world. In fact, it is the only thing that ever has.”

We aren’t any better than anyone else. But our God is greater than everything else.

Paul writes, in **Romans 5:6-8**,

⁶For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. ⁸But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

Jesus is looking for followers whose lives begin with the transformation that comes when we encounter Jesus. Jesus is looking for followers whose eternal life begins when we say "yes".

Jesus is looking for followers whose commitment comes in response to what Jesus has done for us on the cross.

Jesus is looking for you.