

Why Follow Jesus?

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast
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Matthew 4:12-25

Jesus grew up in Nazareth in Galilee. He was baptized by his cousin John in the Jordan River in Judea. Then he faced down the devil in the wilderness. And that was only the beginning.

When he heard that John had been arrested, Jesus went away to Galilee. But he left Nazareth and went to live in Capernaum, by the sea in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali, in order to fulfill what was said by the prophet Isaiah: *Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the nations: the people sitting in darkness saw a big light; a light has dawned upon those sitting in the shadowy region of death.* From then on Jesus began to make this announcement: “Change your ways! Because the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

Walking alongside the sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (the one called Peter) and his brother Andrew, casting their net into the sea, since they caught fish for a living. And he said to them, “Come along after me, and I’ll have you catching people.” And just like that they left their nets and followed him. Going on from there, he saw another pair of brothers, Zebedee’s son Jacob and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, getting their nets ready. And he called them. And just like that they left the boat and their father and followed him.

He went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, announcing the good news about the kingdom, and healing every disease and every sickness among the people. His reputation spread throughout [the province of] Syria. And people brought to him everyone who was sick with all sorts of diseases, afflicted with severe pain, oppressed by demons, moonstruck, unable to walk. And he healed them. And many crowds followed him — from Galilee, and the Decapolis, and Jerusalem, and Judea, and from across the Jordan.

Children’s Story

One day Sammy the Squirrel and his friends were playing deep in the woods. Sammy was a long way from home. But somehow he kept hearing his father’s voice.

When they crossed Broken Bone Brook, in the gurgling water Sammy could hear his dad saying, “Be careful.”

When they climbed trees at the top of Hickory Hill, in the breeze blowing through the treetops Sammy could hear his dad saying, “Look all around you! It’s a beautiful world.”

When they crawled on their bellies through Crazy Cow Cavern, in the silence Sammy could hear his dad whisper, “Listen to the quiet.”

And when they were hiking back on Tricky Troll Trail, over the distance Sammy heard his dad calling, “Sammy, time to come home!”

So Sammy went home after a long day with his friends, a long day far from home, a long day in which he heard his father’s voice in all sorts of ways.

I wonder how we might hear God’s voice.

Sermon

John the Baptist knew how to attract a crowd. Dress like a prophet. Act like a prophet. And sound like a prophet: “Give ’em hell, and give ’em hope.” Tell the people what they know they need to hear. And tell them what they want to hear. So John went out to the Judean wilderness, to the Jordan River. He

told people to change their ways, to turn their lives around, to turn their hearts around. That's what they needed to hear, and to do. And he told them why: the kingdom is at hand. That's what they wanted to hear. That's what they had been waiting to hear for hundreds of years.

John knew how to attract a crowd. At the same time, he also knew how to attract unwanted attention. Dress like a prophet. Act like a prophet. Sound like a prophet. And in your prophet's guise, level a withering criticism at someone with the power and the temperament to strike back. That's how John wound up in prison, his mission at an end, his message silenced.

Now it was Jesus' turn to attract a crowd. But first, he moved to a new location. John had the shallows of a river. Jesus would take the shore of a Galilean lake. Now, we don't know how Jesus dressed. In his case, there is no mention of camel hair and leather. And it seems as though Jesus ate and drank freely. There's no mention of his eating honey-dipped grasshoppers. So Jesus didn't adopt John's style. But he did adopt John's message, word for word, in fact. "Change your ways!" he said. "Because the kingdom of heaven has come near."

But there was no crowd. Not at first. He had four disciples who followed him. He had regular gigs in the synagogues of Galilee where he did the rabbi-thing, teaching. He had the prophet-thing, announcing the kingdom. And he also healed people. But there was no crowd. Not at first.

That all changed, though, once word got out. Jesus' reputation spread. It spread quickly. People had come to see and hear John from Jerusalem, from Judea, and from along the Jordan. People soon came to see Jesus from the province of Syria, which stretched to the north and east as far as the Euphrates River and the city of Damascus. They came from Galilee, an ethnically mixed Jewish territory. They came from the Decapolis, a prosperous confederation of cities south and east of the lake. They also came from Jerusalem and Judea, the center of gravity of all things Jewish. And they came from the administrative district on the east side of the Jordan River. Put simply, Jesus turned out to be a much bigger draw than John ever was. Why?

Jesus once asked a similar question about John. He asked people, "What did you go out to the wilderness to see? A swaying reed? A sharp-dressed man?" No, they went out to see a prophet. (There had been no prophets for ages!) They went out to see a prophet and something much more, something they hardly knew: a one-man highway crew, preparing a road for God. That's why people came to John.

But why did people from so many places, some of them making difficult trips — why did people come to Jesus? And why did they follow him?

People followed Jesus because he changed their lives. We like to think that people came to Jesus and followed him for lofty religious reasons.

At last, God's kingdom is coming!

At last, God is going to fix the mess the world is in!

At last, God is going to sweep away injustice!

At last, God is going to send the devil and his servants packing!

— including the Romans and their assorted Herods!

We like to think that people came to Jesus and followed him for lofty religious reasons. But that's not why.

People came to Jesus and followed him because he was making an immediate difference in their everyday lives. Individuals and their families and friends were overwhelmed, dealing with every kind of disease, every kind of ailment, every kind of physical and emotional pain, every kind of inexplicable psychological disorder. These troubles defined their existence. There was no escape from the burden. So when Jesus healed people and healed their loved ones, he made a difference. Where it was most needed, where it would be felt most, he made a difference. People's lives — lots of people! — were no longer

defined by one disease or another. They were free, free at last! That's why they followed Jesus. (That all the healing was a sign of the kingdom was largely beside the point.)

Why do we follow Jesus? Certainly not because of some immediate fix in our lives. Jesus doesn't reverse your mother's slow descent into dementia. You'll be dealing with that until she dies. Jesus doesn't suddenly rid you of the arthritic pain that wants to double you over. It will take a surgical team to make you right. Nor does Jesus unwind the emotional springs that are turning tighter and tighter inside you. But if you're lucky, your insurance will pay for counseling. So, no, we don't follow Jesus because he's fixed up our lives. Not that he doesn't do that for some people, even for many people. But we're honest enough to say that that has not been our experience.

Nor do we follow Jesus because of high-minded religious or theological concerns. We're still waiting for justice to roll down. While we wait, we try to do our part. But the dream is a long time in coming. And we're not following Jesus because of something he hasn't done yet. Nor are we following because we see the kingdom in other ways. What we see are evil empires and axes of evil that continue to flourish. What we see are hospitals, nursing homes, and cemeteries that do a steady business. What we see are jammed court dockets and overflowing prisons. Nor are we following Jesus because the Gospel and the truth about Jesus are triumphing all over the world. We're having trouble passing the faith on to our own younger generation. The uniqueness of Jesus and the Gospel is steadily undermined by religious pluralism. Jesus is either redefined as someone you wouldn't bother to follow, or he is reduced to a caricature with no capacity to evoke wonder. So, no, we don't follow Jesus because of high-minded religious or theological concerns. What we're waiting for has not been realized. And what we've realized is troublesome to our faith.

No, we follow Jesus for one reason. Because he called us. It really is as simple as that.

Jesus called Simon and Andrew. He called Jacob and John. They left their nets — they left everything — and followed him. Just like that. Can you imagine Peter going home that night and telling his wife and mother-in-law what he had done? “You quit your job for what?! Jesus? Who is Jesus? Is he going to put food on this table?” It sounded crazy. It was crazy. Except maybe to impulsive nineteen or twenty-two year olds. (How old were these men who stank of fish any way?) Crazy or not, Jesus called and they followed.

Jesus calls us, too. He calls you.

He calls through baptism. He says, “Embrace the God who has already embraced you.”

He calls on Sunday mornings. In a song, in a Bible passage, in a sermon — somehow Jesus speaks to you. You don't know how. But you know he's talking to you.

He calls you through life experiences. You work with someone who radiates unexpected peace. You can tell there's something different about her. So you ask her, and she tells you that she follows Jesus.

He calls by tugging at your heart. Somehow, when you're looking after your mother with her dementia — somehow Jesus gets through to you. He assures you that, while he won't take away the illness or the burden, he will walk with you on that sad journey.

He calls by the gentle, persistent wooing of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit shows up and speaks at the most unexpected times and in the most unexpected ways. Through a child who doesn't even talk yet. Through an old movie on TCM. Through a just-discovered grandfather's diary. Through a radiant sunset at the end of a long day. The list goes on and on.

In so many ways, Jesus calls. And we follow. We follow because he called us. It's as simple as that.

If Jesus does fix a great hurt in your life, then by all means, follow him.

If Jesus does answer the great religious and theological questions that have troubled you — and maybe half of humanity — then by all means, follow him.

And if he calls you — calls you once, calls you a thousand times; calls you clear as day, calls you in a subtle or hidden way; calls you to a difficult road or to an easy one — however he calls you, follow him. Follow him. Follow him. That's what he's calling you for.