

Third Sunday after the Epiphany, January 21-22, 2017
Grace Lutheran Church, Lancaster, Pa.
Isaiah 9:1-4; I Corinthians 1:10-18; Matt. 4:12-23

I remember a conversation with our pastor on a youth retreat a long time ago.
You've probably heard or read a sermon or a lesson with the same idea:
If Jesus walked through our door this morning,
Would you be prepared to recognize him? To Follow him?

As I recall we played with the realistic limits of those questions.
How could we know? Would he be dressed like the old pictures we had in church?
Would he be in disguised like a poor beggar? Or might he be a carpenter?

If we were convinced, perhaps we could follow him, we thought, around town
During summer vacation, but we'd have to come back home for school.
Some said that the weather would make a difference too,
As long as he was going south for the winter they'd stick with him.
We wondered what he'd be doing differently this time?
Would he try to start some organization to serve certain people?
Would he revise his parables with 1970s scenarios?
Would the prodigal son turn into a disco-loving hippie

It was a way of getting us talking about our choices...what were the limits
Of our vision of Jesus, what choices and challenges could we perceive
That would keep us from following him? What are the real options?

Simon and Andrew are the poorer fishermen, it seems. They didn't have a boat...
they were chucking their nets around in the shallow water near shore
when Jesus walks by.

Someone they had never seen in their lives strolls by, calls out "follow me" and they do,
leaving their families, their nets, their jobs, their homes.

James and John, we might conclude, had more to lose:
a larger business, Zebedee and Sons, Inc.,
a boat, hired hands, lots of nets to mend.

But either way, rich or poor, these two sets of fishermen
drop it all to follow the stranger Jesus.
It doesn't really sound like much of a choice, does it?
I mean, let's take this story seriously!
Let's dig around in it to try to understand, at least.

First of all, it usually it's disciples who would go looking for a teacher.
For a rabbi to go recruiting students?
Well, he obviously couldn't have much of a reputation.

A good rabbi waits for students to seek him out, and then picks only the very best,
the ones with real aptitude for theology, and study,
to be his students.

But Jesus walks out among the fisher folk, ordinary working people.
He has no set of interview questions.
And they go along with it. He calls, and they follow.

They weren't sitting around waiting for him.
He didn't go looking for them in any of the normal places
you might go looking for zealous religious types:
the local synagogue to pick off a few of the other rabbi's students,
or even the scene at the Jordan where everybody might have been
in more of a state to take such a challenge seriously.

The story describes no agonizing, no torn hearts, no weighing of pros and cons,
no longing glances back at the good old boat, or dear old Dad or Mom.
Something happening to them, something beyond their control.
It's not a story that sounds like anyone is weighing their options
Or making a choice at all.

If we listen to the language of the gospels, it actually sounds much more like a miracle.
Quite often Jesus says something, and it happens:
"Be made clean," Jesus said to the leper, and immediately he was made clean
"Get up and walk," Jesus said to the lame man,
and immediately he took his mat and went home.
"Go your faith has healed you," he said to the blind man,
and immediately he regained his sight.
"Follow me," he says, and immediately they left their nets and followed him.

As I hear it, that's what makes this story so distant from us.
You want me to give you some parameters; you want me to generalize
And say that following Jesus today means coming to church
And making healthy choices, and caring for the environment
And volunteering, and you want to know what the options are.

Certainly we do have choices to make...
part of being a good disciple is trying to be faithful in our choosing.
Did you hear about the lady in church who was digging around in her purse to find
Her offering, and a large TV remote control fell out. As he picked it up for her
The usher asked, "do you bring your TV remote to church every week?"
No she said, but my husband refused to come to church with me because
he loves football so much, and I figured this was cruelest way I could legally punish him.
Choices, relationships...it's all a part of following Jesus.

But this story is not so much about choices,
Not about the disciples choice, or ours. It's about God.
It's about the kingdom of heaven coming near and taking away those choices,
Or transforming them by making everything but itself irrelevant.

The pattern in the Bible is that when God wants us he will call us,
clearly, and unmistakably and loudly enough to be heard.
To follow will be a joy and a privilege, despite the hardship.

Jesus is risen, and that means that he is able to accomplish his purposes with us,
in ways that will surely be made known to us in days ahead,
just as surely as they may seem to be hidden from us now,
as we hear his call again.

For me to say much more would be to say more than I know or understand.

It's easy to be cynical; we've all heard people who say that they
have heard the call of God. Sometimes it's hard to tell,
it is so easy to use such words to cover any old agenda
with a gloss of divine approval.
It's easier to trust the deeds, of course, so we can always watch and see:
What are the people like who say they are following Jesus?
Is there compassion in their life? Do they spread peace or anxiety?
Is there a purpose to their life that brings energy and fulfillment?
Or is there confusion, and waffling, and unresolved frustration?
Do they wear their call on their sleeve, or are they humble enough
to talk about it, if they must, as a gift and a blessing?

I listen to people who talk so much about God that it seems clear they
Are just using the word God to cover up their own agenda.
I listen to other people who don't seem to talk about God at all
Yet it seems to me that God is using them and their gifts in amazing ways.

Who is following? I'll go out on a limb and venture this:
To follow we must be listening, with all our senses,
for which hearing is simply the best analogy.

We could also be seeing, or feeling, or understanding God's call,
The important thing is to be attentive, I think,
Paying attention to what is happening around us
What signals we are getting about who is hungry and thirsting
For something only God can give, and how might God want us
To share it, or point it out, or uncover it, or provide it?

He will not be thwarted by our resistance, by our failures, or by our faithlessness.
He calls, we become his, and immediately everything changes.
So the gospel tells us today.

Somebody told me once...Pastor, there's a fine line between a sermon and a hostage situation.
I try to respect that experience, and not keep you too long.

But I can't promise you Jesus won't capture you, and keep you in some way
Beyond your choosing, compelling you in some way to follow him.

May we find ourselves made faithful and forgiven by his presence,
may we find the darkness lifting, and a new day dawning,
and a calling to use our gifts, our time and talents as our offering to him,
as we discover ourselves in the presence of the one who says: Follow me.

Amen