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Follow the Leader

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Psalm 94:12-22; Mark 1:14-20

In 1977 – so not very long ago at all – a four-part made-for-television movie was aired, called “Jesus of Nazareth.” It was directed by the famed Franco Zeffirelli and had a star-studded cast. Anne Bancroft played Mary Magdalene. Both Dustin Hoffman and Al Pacino were considered for portraying Jesus, but the producers ultimately decided they were too short. They thought Jesus should be over six feet tall, so they cast an actor named Robert Powell, not just because he was tall but because he had penetrating blue eyes. You know, like Jesus, I guess.

Those eyes proved to be important, because Zeffirelli, the director, instructed the actor to train himself not to blink

when he was on camera as Jesus engaging in dialogue or giving a public address. So Powell barely blinks during the entire film. The director thought that would lend a kind of messianic otherworldliness or mysterious spirituality to Jesus.

If you think that not blinking instead just makes Jesus appear creepy – like an alien wearing human skin – I think you're right. Maybe what makes for charismatic otherworldliness to one person feels like unhinged cult leader to me.

But the film's questionable strategy for depicting Jesus's magnetism and mysteriousness touches on a question that we all have to ask as we try to make sense of the Gospels and the stories that ground our faith: What attracted people to Jesus? What made them leave things behind and embrace who he was and what he represented?

And there's a similar question we have to ask ourselves today: What attracts us to him – to this person, this idea, this power, this love, who exists among us now in stories, memories, traditions, community, word, and Spirit, as well as in tangible forms of bread, wine, water, and acts of mercy?

Those are the questions that churches give their attention to during this short season of the Christian calendar we are now in – Epiphany, snuggled between the joy of Christmas and the gravity of Lent. How does the Messiah and the message he preached about “the kingdom of God – or, better, “the reign of God” – become known to the world?

As the Gospel of Mark tells it, Jesus takes the first step. Soon after he starts preaching his message in public, fewer than twenty verses into the Gospel of Mark, he approaches two different pairs of brothers – Simon and Andrew, James and John. All four are fishermen, and all

four of them follow him immediately, leaving their tackle and relatives behind. Too many films and visual art make it seem like there's something irresistible about Jesus in this scene, as if his charisma or maybe his unblinking stare overpowers everyone around him and they act as if they're in a trance. But hopefully we've ruled that out. Jesus wasn't floating twelve inches above the ground.

Sometimes we assume there must be something extraordinary about *the disciples*. Look how easily they follow! Look what they give up! They must be incredibly brave or insightful.

But – again – it's probably much more normal than that. They aren't spiritual superheroes. They're not naïve, either. They know the stories about other visionary Jewish figures who led ill-fated movements.

Moreover, this probably isn't the first time they've encountered him. Jesus has been around. Galilee isn't a

large region. Jesus has been preaching. The folks by the lakeshore probably already know him and what he's been talking about. They don't know where the story is going to lead, exactly, but they've heard enough to embrace the vision Jesus is starting to sketch with his words and his acts of mercy.

These first disciples *are* embracing something new, and they're making sacrifices to do it. But we shouldn't conclude at this point that they're abandoning *everything* in order to do it. It's not like Simon and Andrew will never fish again. It's not like James and John will never see their father again. They choose to follow someone who's already lit a spark inside of them, someone who's already opened their imaginations for a new kind of world.

To understand Jesus, and to understand what it means to get up and follow him, we also need to pause and reconsider what Jesus says: "Follow me, and I will make you *fishers of people*." It's an ambiguous thing, both in the

syntax and the image: “fishers of people.” In too many chapters of the church’s history this expression has fed imaginations of the church as an institution that uses bait and lures and hooks and nets to entice people or simply to scoop them up. Taken the wrong way, and fed by the arrogance and exploitation of Western colonialism, the expression risks transforming human beings into disembodied souls to be “won” or “claimed.” It has characterized missionary activity as traveling into hunting grounds seeking trophies to collect. It has been made to align too closely to the violence of cultural assimilation and the destructive fantasies of white supremacy. Too often it has enabled the Christian church to understand itself as the establishment with the answers instead of a community traveling a path of discovery and mercy.

Jesus isn’t calling them to raise an army. He’s promising to show them the way that leads to the cross.

He's not calling them to receive power. He's inviting them to find their place in the new world he imagines. I suspect they don't yet *fully* understand what he's talking about, and where he'll take them, but they know enough to be ready to embrace a change in how they perceive their future. Because they're curious enough to follow him.

Like any metaphor, "I will make you fishers of people" can be re-understood or taken in new ways. Like a prism in a sunbeam, we can rotate it and discover it casting new rays of light in new directions. Maybe "fishers of people" are people who fish *on behalf of* other people, people who fish *for the benefit of* other people – fishers whose labor goes toward feeding and improving the well-being of others. Later, after the sermon, we'll sing a hymn that captures that kind of spirit, with lyrics that pray this to God:

You need my hands, full of caring,
through my labors to give others rest.

There's a restlessness and dissatisfaction at the heart of the Christian gospel.

Christian faith contains within it a seed of an impatience that eventually blossoms into urgency.

What prompts Jesus to begin his ministry? What makes him start preaching about the reign of God? There are two causes. One is the Holy Spirit, who comes to Jesus at the beginning of Mark's Gospel, possesses him at his baptism, and then drives him out into the wilderness for testing and preparation. The second cause is named at the very beginning of our Gospel reading this morning, where it says, "Now, after John was arrested..."

That's when and why Jesus launches his ministry. John was arrested.

Herod Antipas, the local tyrant over Galilee seized and incarcerated John the Baptizer. Why? What was his offense? John, like any prophet worth their salt, had been criticizing Herod, calling the king's integrity into question. So John's penchant for speaking truth to power becomes criminalized. Eventually it gets him executed. Herod's the king. He gets to do what he wants.

So Jesus starts healing people and sharing his ideas about the kind of world God wants. He preaches about a new "reign," a new state of affairs in which God's priorities will hold sway.

Jesus has had enough.

What made it possible for him to do that, to turn his exasperation into action? What gave him the will? I wonder what Jesus did, between the day he heard the awful report that John had been arrested and the day he first opened his mouth in Galilee to announce something

new. This is pure speculation, but he might have found comfort and courage in the familiar words of scripture, especially in the sweet reassurances of the psalms he probably learned in his home as a boy. He must have known where John would end up, and as he pondered his own movement that he planned to launch, I wonder whether Jesus prayed the words of Psalm 94 that was read for us:

God will not forsake God's people and will not
abandon God's heritage;
for justice will return to the righteous,
and all the upright in heart will follow it.

Who rises up for me against the wicked?
Who stands up for me against evildoers?

Can wicked rulers be allied with you,
those who contrive mischief by statute?
They band together against the life of the righteous
and condemn the innocent to death.

But the Lord has become my stronghold,
and my God the rock of my refuge.

Jesus is a trailblazer, but he's also a follower. He embarks on his ministry trusting in God to sustain him, no matter what comes.

When Jesus springs into action in Galilee, when he urges people to follow him, he's not saying, "James and John — *you, yes you!* — you've won the discipleship sweepstakes! Leave dad in the boat; his number didn't get drawn. Of all the people on earth, I've chosen you!" No. Instead, Jesus is saying, "*It's time!* Is anyone else here fed up? Is anyone else willing to believe that God wants something better? Is anyone else willing to see if 'the way things are' isn't 'the way things have to be'?"

That's what attracts them to him. That's why they follow him.

Don't skip over that word: *follow*.

That's all they do: follow. That's about all they really do in the whole of the story, until they run away when Jesus is arrested near the end, at least, that what most of the followers do. There's a group of his female followers who stick around for the crucifixion.

None of these followers instantly changes into perfect people. They don't know the answers. They can't tell you why bad things happen to good people. They can't explain the nuances of the Trinity to their children. They simply follow Jesus into a new season of discovery.

They don't ask Jesus questions like *Where are you going?* or *Who are you?* In fact, the rest of Mark's Gospel indicates they never really learn a lot of answers at all. They mostly make mistakes. Yet they follow him. Why?

Why do *you*?

The command Jesus gives most often to people is “follow.” Most often the way he describes what it means to be a disciple – or one of his circle – is to “follow.” It’s not “believe,” “know,” “understand,” or “fix things.” He wants people to participate. He makes the offer to all kinds of people – individuals and groups – “follow.”

That’s probably the most important word for us to remember, as we seek to encounter Jesus today, in 2024. “Follow.”

The Herods and troublers of our world seem so numerous and strong. Our ability to keep pace with Jesus wavers so much, it’s hard for us to know when it’s time to get up and follow him. Watch where he can be found in the Gospels. Watch to whom he goes. Watch what he does. Watch him pray. Watch him suffer. Watch him forgive.

In our long season of cultural polarization, we easily get “derailed by worrying too much about what [we] need to do or – even worse – what other Christians need to be doing. We sometimes envision discipleship as if it’s a portfolio we must build, showing our progress in a number of areas like worship attendance, service projects, financial stewardship, and Bible study. Those are all useful, but Jesus’s main imperative to people is ‘follow.’ It’s not ‘grow,’ ‘diversify,’ ‘shape up,’ or ‘work harder.’”¹

When Jesus says, “Follow me,” it’s an invitation, an expression of his grace and acceptance. Fortunately, we don’t do it alone.

The church’s true calling is to follow Jesus, not to explain him or control him. Baptism reminds us of that. Soon, we will welcome two baptizands into this ragtag collection of imperfect followers, stretching all the way back to people

¹ Matthew L. Skinner, *Matthew: The Gospel of Promised Blessings* (Abingdon Press, 2024), 69–70.

like Simon and Andrew, Mary and Martha, and all the way around the world to people who worshipped a few hours ago in our partner congregations in different nations. Before the baptisms, we'll recite a statement of faith, declaring what we "believe." The statement isn't a password to gain entry; it's wisdom that other Jesus-followers have passed down to us from their journeys and discoveries.

If statements are too much for you, just follow. Just keep watching. Keep showing up. That's all that followers are asked to do.

Maybe you sense it's time for deeper engagement as a follower. Again, we don't do it alone. Maybe it's time for you to devote the five weeks of Lent to exploring the Psalms as part of Westminster's Church in the Round program. Maybe it's time to find ways to donate your talents to one of our local community partners. Maybe it's

time to try out a small group, or to take deliberate steps in learning different patterns of praying.

It can be a humbling thing to follow. As a congregation, we're in an interval of re-discovering what that looks like for us. What does it mean to be called to follow Jesus as a community, especially one that has been blessed with resources and a desire to lead? What does it mean to be a telling presence that is also a listening presence? What does it mean to follow Jesus with a willingness to be surprised? What does it mean to follow Jesus and his example during a year that will probably grow more stressful for this country as the months pass along?

However we live into those questions as followers, we'll do so together.

I conclude with a prayer that might sustain us, as we re-commit ourselves to being a community that follows:

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.²

Thanks be to God.

² The prayer's author is unknown to me, although I've been told (by someone who should know) that it was written by Eric Milner-White. The prayer appears as "The Call of Abraham" in *Daily Prayer*, compiled by Eric Milner-White and G. W. Briggs (Penguin Books, 1959).