

2024 01 14 – Follow Me

Scripture: John 1:35-51 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Our scripture reading today begins with John the Baptizer in his usual spot in the wilderness, near the Jordan River. Seeing Jesus, John said to the two disciples standing with him, “Look! There’s the Lamb of God!” I’m not sure why the author of the Gospel of John chose this particular phrase. “Lamb of God” is not a title that is used by the other gospel writers. It’s certainly not one of my favourite descriptions of Jesus. It seems to focus on the idea of Jesus as a sacrificial lamb who died for our sins. As I’ve stated in other sermons I don’t believe in a God that would require that type of sacrifice. I believe in a God of love and mercy, not a God of wrath and judgement.

Yes, Jesus was eventually arrested and died a horrible death on a cross. But he died because he chose to live a life that threatened the powerful people of his day. He chose to live a life that focused on the Good News of God’s love and God’s reign of peace and justice. Jesus preached a message of hope for the hungry, the poor, and the imprisoned. He was not a lamb, but rather a Messiah, one who was anointed by God to lead his people to freedom. This was the Jesus that John the baptizer had been describing to his disciples.

When John’s two disciples realized who had just walked by, they started to follow Jesus. Realizing he was being followed, Jesus turned and spoke to them and they said, “Rabbi where are you staying?” Jesus invited them to “Come and See.” They ended up spending the rest of the day with their new teacher. One of these disciples was Andrew and, as soon as he could, Andrew went and

brought his brother, Simon to meet Jesus. From this beginning, these two brothers ended up following Jesus throughout his entire ministry.

This story is, of course, a little different than what we read in the other gospels. They talk about Jesus calling Andrew and Simon Peter from their fishing boats on the Sea of Galilee. In some ways this story from the Gospel of John makes more sense, because Andrew and his brother Simon actually had a chance to meet and talk with Jesus before they made a decision to follow him and be his disciples.

The next morning, Philip met Jesus just as the Rabbi was leaving to return to Galilee. Jesus said to him, "Follow me." Philip then sought out Nathaniel. It seems that Philip was instantly convinced of Jesus' identity, but Nathaniel took slightly longer to come around. Nathaniel questioned whether anyone important could come from such a small insignificant village as Nazareth. But the fact that Jesus seemed to know him, to understand him, even before they met, was enough to convince Nathaniel that Jesus was the Messiah, that he had a deep connection with the Holy Mystery, with the God of Love. Both Nathaniel and Philip followed Jesus and became his disciples.

How does someone make that decision to follow Jesus? According to this story, Andrew was already a disciple of John the Baptist and there's a good chance that Simon, Philip and Nathaniel were as well since Jesus met them in the wilderness by the Jordan. To be in that location means that they were at least seekers, looking for meaning in their lives.

What would it take for you to make that decision? What would it take for you to make changes in your life so that you could follow Jesus? Some of you have already made that decision, others are maybe just considering it. Would you need the encouragement of a spiritual leader, like John's disciples did? Would you need some time to create a personal relationship with Jesus, like Andrew? Would you need the recommendation of a family member, like Simon Peter had? Would you need proof of Jesus' connection with God, like Nathaniel did? What would or did it take for you to find the courage to commit yourself to Jesus' work of peace and justice in the world?

I'm going to share with you a story that I read this week on the Internet. It was an excerpt from a book called *Blue Like Jazz* written by a man named Donald Miller. Miller talks about going to a concert where the singer told a story about a friend who was a Navy SEAL. This was the story:

The folksinger said his friend was performing a covert operation, freeing hostages from a building in some dark part of the world. His friend's team flew in by helicopter, made their way to the compound and stormed into the room where the hostages had been imprisoned for months. The room, the folksinger said, was filthy and dark. The hostages were curled up in a corner, terrified. When the SEALs entered the room, they heard the gasps of the hostages. They stood at the door and called to the prisoners, telling them they were Americans. The SEALs asked the hostages to follow them, but the hostages wouldn't. They sat there on the floor and hid their

eyes in fear. They were not of healthy mind and didn't believe their rescuers were really Americans.

The SEALs stood there, not knowing what to do. They couldn't possibly carry everybody out. One of the SEALs, the folksinger's friend, got an idea. He put down his weapon, took off his helmet, and curled up tightly next to the other hostages, getting so close his body was touching some of theirs. He softened the look on his face and put his arms around them. He was trying to show them he was one of them. None of the prison guards would have done this. He stayed there for a little while until some of the hostages started to look at him, finally meeting his eyes. The Navy SEAL whispered that they were American and were there to rescue them. Will you follow us? he said. The hero stood to his feet and one of the hostages did the same, then another, until all of them were willing to go. The story ends with all the hostages safe on an American aircraft carrier.

<https://thisjourneyismyown.com/2010/03/22/following-jesus-the-best-illustration-ive-ever-read/>

I think, for many of us, our most meaningful encounters with the Holy Mystery, happen in those times when we are hurting. Like those hostages, we may be scared or finding it difficult to trust. Often the Sacred comes to us through our family, our friends and other people in our lives who we already know and love. Sometimes the Essence of Loves becomes known to us through the care and compassion of professionals or even strangers. Eventually we are able to make our own personal connection with the Sacred through prayer or meditation.

No matter how we make our own connection with the Holy Mystery, with Christ, it is that relationship that gives us the courage to make the changes, and possibly even the sacrifices required to truly follow Jesus. It is knowing that we are loved that gives us the strength and the desire to love others. May we all find our own path, our own calling, as we work together to build God's reign of peace and justice on this earth, as we learn what it means and what it takes to follow Jesus.