



3rd Sunday after Epiphany
“Follow Me!”
January 23, 2011

Prayer: Bless this word proclaimed, and we who hear it O Lord, that You may be our light and our salvation, and we may not be afraid. Amen.

”How did you know?” the person asked innocently. “How did you know God wanted you to be a pastor?”

The reality is, I didn't – for some time. Others saw it, perhaps even heard it before I did. But me? Become a pastor? God, are you really sure about this?? I had my reasons, my excuses of why I didn't want to become a pastor. And yet, it was always an interesting topic of conversation, among classmates as seminary, even with people I encountered in the journey; *how did you know? //what led you to this point in life?*

For some, it was a clear conviction that this call was strong, urgent, guiding and leading into places unimagined and unexpected. For others, it took time to develop, to form, to become concrete, and even longer to realize that this life change was both possible and real. Occasionally, I would meet someone who would say something along the lines of “I think it's great what you're doing – that's something I've wanted to do, but I don't think I could do that at this point in my life.” To which my response was and will continue to be, “sure you can. Look how old Abraham was when God called him! One of the alumni from Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia **began** her seminary education when she was 79 years old. At 90, she's still in her first call.”

Unlike some of my friends who knew they wanted to be a pastor since they were children, I didn't. I did know, however, by the time I was in 8th grade I wanted to be a deaconess – a woman who serves her neighbor and God in a ministry of word and service. But being a pastor? Not what I had anticipated, expected, imagined.

There is a saying that I have seen in my life more times than I care to count. The saying is “If you want to hear God laugh, tell God your plans.” It seemed the more I said “no”, the more God was leading towards “yes”, until a variety of events came together. Once I said yes, life changed.

Saying that life changed, and saying ‘yes’ to the invitation “follow me” does not equal easy. The invitation to follow Jesus comes with a price – the price of following Jesus into places unknown, unexpected adventures, meeting and serving people one never anticipated meeting. It also comes with an even greater price of sacrificing everything.

The first disciples left everything to follow Jesus. In Matthew's account, we are reminded of Mark's urgency. The word "immediately" is used twice near the end of today's Gospel. There was a sense of urgency that the kingdom of heaven as Jesus proclaimed had come, here and now in the midst of the disciples. In the midst of that urgency, the disciples left everything to follow Jesus

Can we do that today? Being this radical in the call to follow Jesus demands much from us. It can leave us questioning, second guessing, wondering what we have gotten ourselves into.

The call to follow Jesus can be a call we hear over and throughout our lifetime. If we go back to the story of Samuel, three times the Lord called to Samuel. Three times, Samuel went to Eli thinking Eli had called him; each time, Eli sent Samuel back before Eli realized it was the Lord who was calling. Reuben Job, in "A Guide to Prayer for All Who Seek God" writes, "Hearing is an important step in saying yes to God's call. But once we hear, we must still decide whether we will go where invited or sent."

Hearing the invitation to follow Jesus can leave us stepping out in faith. It can also leave us shrinking back in fear. Before shrinking back in fear, let us return briefly to Psalm 27. The first verse of Psalm 27 begins, "The Lord is my light and my salvation, of whom shall I fear?" The Hebrew word for light is "or"; fear is "yare". (It does not look it on paper, but they are pronounced similar to each other.)

In the midst of adversity and difficulty, the psalmist speaks a prayer of confidence. The psalmist knows who his (or her) light and salvation is. Knowing this, the psalmist is not afraid of what lies ahead or behind. Instead, the psalmist seeks to see the face of God, to experience God's presence in their life.

When we follow Jesus, we are not promised that we will be spared from difficulties and trials. When we follow Jesus, we have faith, and we can have fear. Yet it is faith that equips us to live with courage and hope despite and in the face of difficulties we may encounter.

Throughout the life of the Church, the invitation has been extended to "follow me" throughout the centuries. This invitation has taken many forms and responses. On Tuesday of this past week, the Church observed the beginning of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. The week begins with the confession of Peter, and ends this Tuesday with the conversion of Paul. Throughout the New Testament, Peter and Paul are constantly at odds with each other. While their disagreement started when Paul was persecuting the church, the bottom line for both of them was the message of Jesus Christ.

Like Peter and Paul, we too can easily get hung up on how people have come to know Christ, or even the best way to respond to this invitation. Because when Jesus says, "follow me", sometimes we think we're the only ones this invitation has been extended to. The reality is, the invitation to come, see, and follow Jesus is extended to each and every one of us in the waters of our baptism. How we live out this invitation to follow Jesus can be a different story. For one person, it may mean following Jesus in a life of service. For another, it may mean using one's

gift of compassion to help others. For still another, it may mean entering politics in the search for justice.

In Iona, Scotland, there is a Christian community that has emerged over the past twenty years. Those who makeup this community of faith come from different cultural and educational and economic backgrounds. Yet, as an ecumenical community, they work for peace and social justice, the rebuilding of community, and the renewal of worship. Several of the hymns from this community have been included in the Evangelical Lutheran Worship. One such hymn that speaks to the invitation of following Jesus is a hymn entitled, “Will You Come and Follow Me?”

*Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?
Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?
Will you let my love be shown, will you let my name be known,
Will you let my life be grown in you and you in me?*

*Will you leave yourself behind if I but call your name?
Will you care for cruel and kind and never be the same?
Will you risk the hostile stare, should your life attract or scare?
Will you let me answer prayer in you and you in me?*

*Will you let the blinded see if I but call your name?
Will you set the prisoners free and never be the same?
Will you kiss the leper clean, and do such as this unseen,
And admit to what I mean in you and you in me?*

*Will you love the you you hide if I but call your name?
Will you quell the fear inside and never be the same?
Will you use the faith you've found to reshape the world around,
Through my sight and touch and sound in you and you in me?*

*Lord, your summons echoes true when you but call my name.
Let me turn and follow you and never be the same.
In your company I'll go where your love and footsteps show.
Thus I'll move and live and grow in you and you in me.*

In a few minutes, we will sing “Listen! God is calling”. As we sing, I invite you to consider the question “where or what is God calling you into?” This is a question that might not have an easy response at this time. I invite you to sit with both the question and the answer – paying attention to your thoughts, and your heart – that as you do so, may you know also the confidence of the Lord being your light and your salvation now and in the days ahead.