

**"Follow the Leader..."**  
**A Sermon by the Rev. R. Scott Herr**  
**First Presbyterian, New Canaan, CT – January 21, 2024**

**PLEASE READ:**  
**Jonah 3:1-5, 10**  
**Mark 1:14-20**

How many of you remember the children's game, "Follow the Leader." It's simple really. The rules are, you have to imitate and copy the actions of the one who is the leader. Usually, kids play this by following one another in a line and kick their feet and clap their hands and hop and skip according to what the leader has done. If you don't follow the leader, the game stops.

The adult version of this game has but a veneer of sophistication. The stakes may be a little higher, but it's essentially the same game. We see someone else in a position of authority or leadership and we follow along, trying to be like them. Or we don't even see the leader and where the line is going, but to avoid appearing too different, we get in step and imitate what everyone else is doing. We buy the same kinds of things that everybody else is buying; we make the same plans to travel to the same places; we have similar aspirations and follow others right up the proverbial corporate ladder; we share the same political talking points, we wear the same style of clothes; we try to speak to one another as if we fit right in... you get the idea. Have *you* played the adult version of follow the leader lately?

Last week we looked at how John described Jesus' call to his first disciples. This morning Mark tells us that after Jesus' time of temptation in the wilderness, he came back to find that John was arrested. It was almost as though, at least from Mark's perspective, Jesus was to pick up from where John left off. There was a vacuum of leadership to be filled. There was political unrest in the air. The Romans had been occupying Palestine since General Pompey captured the region in 63 B.C. For almost one hundred years, the Jews were looking for a king who would liberate them from Roman domination. When John the Baptist saw Jesus, he knew God would bring salvation to his people through him. And Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the Gospel, the good news, saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the Gospel."

Now for the early Jewish hearer of this message no small confusion could arise. The kingdom of God was a technical term, if you will, that for most hearers of that day and age was synonymous with the Jewish kingdom like in the days of Solomon and David. It meant political power and prestige among nations. It meant an earthly rule under the protection and direction of the God of Israel. It meant the Jewish people would no longer have to endure the abuse and humiliation of the Roman occupying forces and their arrogant emissaries from Caesar's courts.

But Mark writes, Jesus comes "passing along by the Sea of Galilee, [and] he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net... for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fishers of men.'"

What did Jesus mean when he said to *believe* in the gospel and *follow* him - that he would make them fishers of (*anthrópon* in the Greek, or) people? If we are to follow this man called Jesus, to what end is He leading us?

From the very beginning, Jesus proclaims a strikingly different agenda from the political and economic revolution that his contemporaries were expecting. First of all, Jesus did not go to Jerusalem, the center of power in the region, to look for his transition team. He went to Galilee, and selected local fisherman as his followers. Here we gain some insight into who can follow this leader.

*Jesus is a leader for all people.* Anyone can follow Jesus. As we continue to read through the Gospels in the coming weeks, it will become clear that Jesus invited all kinds of people to follow him. Typically, he sought after those who were the extreme cases, the marginalized, the poor, the sick, the lame and the blind, the prostitutes, the tax collectors, the aged and forgotten people of his society. Jesus seemed to call out to those who were and continue to be ignored by the powers that be, pushed out of the "in" crowd, and used rather than served by the political movers and shakers of the world.

Jesus called Simon and Andrew to be fishers of people. And apparently, they had some vague understanding of what he meant, for Mark says that, "they immediately left their nets and followed him." But here is where we need to pause and reflect more deeply on the words, "follow him." This is not just subscribing to the news blog. It's not just signing on to a new agenda. It's not even committing to a 40-day change in your life plan. When someone "followed" their rabbi, they gave their whole lives to him. They lived together, ate and drank together, traveled together, served together. It was a whole life commitment. And this I think is a rather huge difference from many peoples' understanding of following Jesus today.

We are more connoisseurs of ideas; religious, political, sometimes philosophical critics. We maybe consider a new teaching of Jesus and are curious to learn more, but very few of us "immediately drop what we're doing and commit our lives, our work, our free time, out families, our resources to the teachings of Jesus and to his larger project of the Kingdom of God.

We are more like Jonah. You all know the story of Jonah. Unlike Simon and Andrew, who immediately left their nets and followed, Jonah immediately went

the opposite direction of where God was calling him to go. But God's pursuit is relentless. And God convinces Jonah to turn back, admittedly through the rather dramatic transportation method of the belly of a huge fish, which spits him out again on dry land and where the story is picked up in our lesson today.

At our staff meeting we were talking about this passage. Mary suggested the reason Jonah fled was *because* he believed God. I think most of us would say if you repent and believe, you will follow God's will. But in fact, Jonah believed that God really cared about the Ninevites, and so he took off in the opposite direction. Why? Because Jonah hated the Ninevites. They were Israel's enemy and so the last thing Jonah wanted was to preach God's Word to the Ninevites. But he did and they believed and the end of the story of Jonah is the prophet sitting under a withering tree angry that God cares even for the Ninevites.

It's what Eugene Peterson calls "the unpredictable plant," this vocation, this calling of God. We don't know where it's going to take us when we start out. We can be sure, though, that fishing for people means "catching" all people up in the love and justice of God. We can be sure that it is an invitation to pursue a better life and fairer world for all people, even those who we think are our enemies. And God wants us to be "all in." How we respond to God's call is a key moment of belief. Indeed, belief is not an idea that we possess, but a verb that we live out. Are we all in or just observers considering our options? Are we here for the tasting menu, or are we going for the full course?

I honestly have no idea what it was that compelled those first disciples to immediately follow Jesus. But I do know that every one of them (save Judas) gave their lives for the Kingdom of God, and they changed the world for good.

We have the benefit of hindsight, so we do know what this is about. We do know Jesus' agenda and the historic unfolding of his life, death and resurrection. We know how these ends, and the hope we have is that even in the worst case scenario, not even death can separate us from the love of God which is ours in Christ Jesus.

Two final observations. The first is that this is serious. The story of Jonah and his attempt to reject the call of God has consequences. It's not a children's story. In fact, I'll never forget going to the Sistine Chapel for the first time, painted by Michelangelo and now a famous museum for the public. Its original purpose was for spiritual meditation and reflection for the pope and cardinals and bishops, any of the church's leadership who happened to be visiting Rome. The famous judgment scene of Christ is painted on the alter wall. It's a sobering scene of Matthew 25 where Christ is the final judge. Whenever the priests there on retreat

would receive communion, the main scene was a reminder that there will be a judgment, and those who just said the words of “Lord, Lord...” were not necessarily those who were saved, but the ones who cared for the least of these.

But if that were not enough, if you look around the crown molding of that amazing sanctuary of the Sistine Chapel, you will notice that above all four walls are images of the prophets. And of all the prophets that are represented there, guess which prophet is front and center above the painting of the last judgment? Jonah! Placing Jonah in that prominent place was Michelangelo’s way of reminding the church’s leaders that you must be all in. Fully committed to following Christ. You can’t run from God’s calling and there are consequences for those who do.

Secondly, and here’s the kicker. Guess what Jonah’s name means? In Hebrew, Jonah means “dove.” Dove, of course, is the symbol of “peace.” Jonah was having a hard time living into his namesake. But that is the ultimate goal of giving our lives to God, of following Jesus, of committing ourselves to the Kingdom of God.

Wednesday night we learned that the Hebrew word for peace is not just an absence of violence, but wholeness, completeness. We reflected on how God’s desire is that we become whole, and that we become people who seek and work for the wholeness of all people. For example, a wall that has cracks in it or rocks missing becomes “Shalom” when it is rebuilt, when it is restored fully. To pursue peace means the hard work of healing our broken hearts, relationships, and pursuing the ministry of reconciliation among the nations. To have shalom with someone you’ve hurt does not require saying I’m sorry. It requires restorative justice, making it right. As Dr. King put it, “It is not enough to say 'We must not wage war.' It is necessary to love peace and sacrifice for it. We must concentrate not merely on the negative expulsion of war, but the positive affirmation of peace.”

One last thought... I was at the Community Baptist Church on Thursday night to introduce Monseigneur Kinally who was the speaker in the week-long celebration around the installation of the Rev. Gilbert Burgess who will be installed today at 3:00 p.m. I hope that if you are free, you will come and participate in the celebration. It will be a joyful and inspiring time. Anyway, just before the service Thursday night, the pastors involved in the service met to pray and go over the liturgy. Rev. Burgess had also invited Monseigneur Kinally to do the *Invitation To Christian Discipleship*, and so Father Rob asked what is that and what should I say? It turns out, the Invitation To Christian Discipleship is what some of us know as an “Altar Call.” If someone had not yet given their lives to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, the Invitation to Christian Discipleship was an opportunity to do so.

We laughed a bit nervously about how the Roman Catholics and Presbyterians don't do that. "We don't have that in our liturgy..."

But... in fact, friends, *every* Sunday is an invitation, a call to Christian Discipleship, an invitation to repent and believe in the gospel, a call to give your life and follow Jesus, to remember that this Jesus could require of us at any moment an *all or nothing commitment*, and there are consequences to how we respond. It's not a children's game. Jesus' voice echoes throughout the centuries calling us to repent and believe, for the Kingdom of God has come near. He calls us to follow here and now, to give our lives to his way of forgiveness, peace and self-giving love. It is something to think about, but to respond to immediately.

*In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.*