

We do a lot of following in our lives. We follow the car in front of us when we drive to work or go to the store. And when we get to the store, we line up to get checked out, following the person in front of us. We watch TV to follow the weather reports, or our favorite sports teams, or to keep up with the latest world news. When we vote in an election, or fill out our income tax forms, we follow printed directions that are given to us. Throughout our lives, as we've been students in school, members of organizations, employees at work, and even as we are all citizens of this nation, we have leaders whose direction we have followed. Yes, we do a lot of following in our lives, and today we will take time to reflect on what it means to follow Jesus.

Our Gospel lesson from Matthew begins by telling us that John the Baptist had been put into prison. His criticism of King Herod's immoral behavior had landed him there. This event prompted Jesus to leave his hometown of Nazareth, and to go to the territory of Galilee, to the city of Capernaum, to make his home there. Jesus' decision to go there was strategic. The territory of Galilee, which was just west of the Sea of Galilee, was densely populated. It was an area that was surrounded by non-Jewish people and because the great roads of the world passed through it, and because the population of Galilee itself was mixed due to its history, the people of Galilee tended to be people who were open to new ideas in ways that no other part of Palestine was. Jesus understood this. He understood that Galilee was the place where his ministry could have the biggest initial impact. So it was here, according to Matthew, that Jesus began his ministry.

It was also Matthew's way to find OT writings which could be understood as a prophecy about each event in Jesus' life. And in the writings of Isaiah, Matthew finds such a prophecy. You see, in past history the northern parts of Palestine, including Galilee, had been overrun by the invading Assyrian armies. And so the prophecy that is quoted in v. 14-16 in our Scripture today was originally a prophecy that deliverance would some day come to these conquered territories. Matthew now also sees it as a prophecy foretelling the light and salvation--that Jesus would bring to this area in the present, as he writes: **“the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death, light has dawned.”**

The message Jesus preached to the people was simple and direct: **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”** In the Greek language, the word for *preaching* was a word that meant a proclamation coming directly from a king. Jesus' preaching was just like that. It had that kind of authority, not only because it was God's word to the people, but because Jesus embodied that message. He was the one who would bring forward the message of salvation with his very own life. Jesus' preaching began with the words that John the Baptist had also preached. **“Repent”—that is—Turn around. Reverse your direction.** Stop walking away from God and begin walking toward God. Why? Because the Lord is here, and the Lord has a life-changing gift for you, and he doesn't want you to miss it. And this is the gift: *The Lord wants to invite you into a close and everlasting relationship with him, because he created you and loves you.*”

Then one day as Jesus was walking by the Sea of Galilee, he calls two brothers, Simon Peter and Andrew, who are fishing. Then he calls two other brothers, James and John, who were mending their nets with their father, Zebedee. This is likely not their first encounter with Jesus, but this becomes their moment of commitment, because the Scriptures says that they *“immediately left behind what they were doing, and followed*

Jesus.” Our Scripture ends with describing Jesus’ ministry in Galilee, telling us that Jesus went about teaching and healing—addressing the people’s need for spiritual and physical wholeness.

When Jesus began his ministry in Galilee those whose hearts were open to the Scriptures and to the working of God’s Spirit in their lives were able to see Jesus as the One sent by God into the world. They could see this in his character and in what he said and did. And so when Jesus invited Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John to be his followers, their acceptance of this invitation came out of having a relationship with Jesus. Two of them had begun to follow Jesus because of the witness of John the Baptist, who had proclaimed Jesus as “the Lamb of God.” All of them knew they weren’t following a stranger, but a friend, yet more than a friend. And even though Jesus was someone whom they did not yet fully understand, they knew they could put their trust in him.

What can we say then, about the response of these four men to Jesus’ invitation to follow him? Three things: **First**, we can say that their response was immediate and complete. The word “immediately” is used to describe both sets of brothers’ responses. And not only was it immediate, but they left their nets and their boats, which were their working tools, and... they left family members. This expresses a high level of commitment. There was no dawdling, or half-heartedness.

Second, their response also took into account that following Jesus meant both letting go and taking on. It meant letting go of *fishing for fish* and taking on *fishing for people*--letting go of past work and taking on something new. It meant letting go of the unloving behaviors so often found in the world, and taking on Jesus’ ways. It meant being open to change and creating new space in their lives.

Third, following Jesus embodies the concept of obedience—being willing to do what our Lord asks. In the case of the disciples, this meant going into the world to tell others about the news of Jesus, the Savior. Yet, this wasn’t just about Jesus inviting them into a mission. It was also about Jesus giving them *the ability and strength* to do what he was asking: “**I will make you fish for people,**” Jesus said. Or more clearly, **I will teach you how to fish for people—I will enable you—empower you—to reach out to them with the good news of God’s love.** These men would not be going it alone; they’d be going in the power of our divine Lord Jesus. And the result of the disciples’ obedience to Jesus would be abundant blessings on their labors, and a sense of fulfillment in doing Jesus’ will.

Jesus calls us every day to follow him. He calls us to whole-hearted commitment. He calls us to recognize what we need to let go of and what we need to take on in order to follow him. And as he invites us to be willing to obey him, he also assures us that he will give us the strength and power to do whatever he is asking us to do. Amen.