

## “The Follow Me Moment”

Sometimes it feels to me as though the Bible is just plain weird. The people are all wearing clothes made from old living room curtains. They speak in strange, Elizabethan English and their words don't quite sync up with their lip movements. They observe strange customs and care about things that are entirely foreign to us. In other words, sometimes when I'm reading the Bible I can't shake the image of every terrible Bible movie I've ever seen... which would be almost all of them.

And probably the strangest thing about these people is that they seem to expect God to keep showing up in miraculous ways. Well of course they do: it's a book about God, for heaven's sake! But it is as though God were a part of their daily reality in a way that's totally different from the way we think and talk about our lives. There's a big disconnect between our experience and the Bible... sometimes.

But at other times the Bible can seem disarmingly contemporary. There are stories about relationships that are eerily on target. That story Jesus tells about the two sons, the sort of Goofus and Gallant story, one of them is prodigal and the other is kind of tightly wound—don't we *know* those guys? Or I'll be reading along in the psalms (something I don't do nearly as often as you might think I do) and it will seem as though whoever wrote what I'm reading has read my mind... or at least my diary. And then there are the biblical teachings that just seem timeless, like the Golden Rule, and I think to myself, “You know, if we could just actually try to *live* that way, the world would be a really different place. I think Jesus is onto something here.”

So sometimes the Bible seems the product of another universe and at other times it is spot on. And sometimes, as in this morning's lesson from Matthew, it is both of those things at the same time. It makes me want to say, a la Lewis Black, “What?! Are you kidding me?” And then it makes me want to say, “How did you know?”

Jesus calls his first disciples; and from their point of view, that call comes completely out of the blue. This is unnerving. Do you mean to tell me that Jesus just appears, utters one sentence and these people leave everything? Simon and Andrew are flamenco dancers—they cast the nets—no, they are fishermen and they cast their nets into the lake. Jesus says, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people,” and “immediately” they left their nets and followed him. Get the mental image here: they don't even bother to pull the nets back in! Gone!

Moving along the lakeshore Jesus comes upon James and John with their father, Zebedee, and the three of them are sitting in their boat (presumably in shallow water after a day's fishing) and they're mending their nets. Jesus “called them” (it doesn't tell us what words he used) and, “Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.” You finish up, Dad, we're outa here.

“Immediately”: there’s that word again. We find it a lot in the Gospel of Mark; it’s Mark’s idea of a transition. But Matthew doesn’t use it so much. Even when Matthew is sticking pretty close to Mark—and it seems pretty clear Matthew had Mark’s gospel at hand as he was writing—usually Matthew rounds off the rough edges of Mark’s perfunctory literary style, dressing things up a little bit. But here, twice, he stays with this word, “immediately.” So I repeat, are you kidding me? Is this one of those weird Bible things?

People want to “fix” this, and so they invent solutions to a problem that exists in our minds but not in the text. Surely, we tell ourselves, Jesus had encountered these fishermen earlier. They were all from Galilee—Jesus from Nazareth and the four fishermen from Capernaum. Maybe their high schools debated each other, or maybe they met at an all state music festival, or maybe they remembered Jesus from when he ran cross country and took that short cut across the lake. Maybe they had friended him on facebook, or at least visited his website and read a few sermons.

No. We’re making all this up. So far in Matthew Jesus has been baptized by John the Baptist and tempted in the wilderness. Then he hears that John has been arrested, and so Jesus takes up the mantle. He begins to preach, using exactly the same words John used: “Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven has come near.”<sup>1</sup> There is no indication that Jesus did a feasibility study or had a caucus organization in place. We want to fill in a lot of stuff that isn’t here because otherwise we’re left to consider an uncomfortable possibility, namely, that the Bible is telling us that sometimes at least God works this way: in a suddenly, out of the blue, where-in-the-world-did-this-come-from sort of way.

And if that’s what this text is telling us—that sometimes when we least expect it and when we feel completely unprepared, Jesus just shows up and says “Follow me” in a way that is utterly compelling— then is this one of those times when the Bible is just being the Bible, or is this one of those times when the Bible is describing a reality we know?

Let me be more direct: have you ever heard Jesus say, “Follow me”?

Every Tuesday afternoon a number of the Plymouth clergy gather for a weekly Bible study focused on the preaching passage for the following weekend. Sometimes those conversations are powerfully memorable—usually when they get pretty personal—and last Tuesday was one of those times. None of us has ever really heard a voice, I don’t believe. But when we focused on this passage in a particular way... when we asked, “Have you ever had a ‘follow me’ moment?” it turned out that we all had, and most of us more than one.

A “follow me moment”: what does that mean? It is an instant in which we feel another future tugging at us. Some of us might describe it almost like a bolt of lightning in the sense that it is a moment of clarity in which we can see some element of the future whole. It is a summons to step through a door and into another chapter of

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<sup>1</sup> John’s preaching is recounted in Matthew 3:1 ff.

our lives. To use another image, it is a hinge of our personal history, a turning point. A follow me moment is a before-and-after moment, when we know that nothing will ever quite be the same. It may be the result of a long period of preparation, and certainly all that we are as a result of our whole lives up to that moment is present. But it still is experienced as something sudden and fleeting: a flash of insight, an instant of inspiration, a moment of realization.

There are lots of ways we can respond to these moments. We can embrace them. We can try to deny them, resist them, fight with them. But however we respond, either moving with them or running away from them, the agenda for our lives has changed, and the central issue becomes that summons.

All of us had had moments like that, and the longer we talked about it the more evident that was. A follow me moment is starkly memorable. I can tell you exactly where I was when these things have happened to me: the intersection of 35<sup>th</sup> and Grand, a particular spot on the sidewalk on Happy Hollow Boulevard in Omaha, a place in a parking lot, where I was standing while talking on the phone. Others had their own stories to tell.

Well of course we did, you may be thinking, because we're all ministers and ministers are weird just like the Bible is weird. At home we dress up in old living room curtains and speak out of sync in Elizabethan English, forsooth. Not so! I assure you that our weirdness takes a rich variety of forms... just as yours does.

And besides, these moments were not always around things you would necessarily think of as religious or calls to ministry. They were about a new future. And the more we talked about all these different experiences, the more eerily similar they seemed.

One story was about marriage; one was about divorce. One was about moving; another was about staying. But they were all about a new future in which elements of the past would continue, but in transformed ways: "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Simon and Andrew, James and John were fishermen; and they would continue to be fishermen... but completely different. And as we shared our stories we discovered that in every instance we were realizing that in order to fulfill who we truly are, we would have to change: to do something different... or differently. We had all felt this. You have, too.

Think of what Simon Peter's follow me moment would eventually mean for him. It meant leaving behind his life in Capernaum where he had at least a wife and mother-in-law living with him.<sup>2</sup> And his first follow me moment was followed by others: when he stepped out of the boat to follow Jesus walking on the water<sup>3</sup>; when Jesus said to him, "Upon this rock I will build my church"<sup>4</sup>; when Jesus told him,

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<sup>2</sup> Mark 1:29-31; Matthew 8:14-17.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 14:22-33.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 16:13-20.

“Before the cock crows you will deny me three times<sup>5</sup>,” and when the risen Christ would ask him, three times, by the shores of this same lake, “Do you love me?”<sup>6</sup>

One follow me moment leads to another. That’s because a follow me moment isn’t just a life change or a seminal event; it is an invitation to a deeper, truer relationship with God. It is not just an introduction to “whatever is next.” It is a summons to live our faith in a new context, to rediscover and reassert what and whom we serve and who and whose we are.

And that’s why the God language is so crucial: to realize that through these events God is touching our lives as God has touched the lives of everyone we know. To speak of them as follow me moments is not to lapse into strange Bible-speak; it is to make those moments more real to us, more tangible and accessible. And it makes us more aware of God’s presence at every moment.

“And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.’ Immediately they left their nets and followed him.” And that made all the difference.<sup>7</sup>

Amen

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 26:31-35.

<sup>6</sup> John 21:15-19.

<sup>7</sup> If this last sentence reminds you of Robert Frost’s wonderful poem, *The Road Not Taken*, I’m not disappointed.