

A Sermon  
Rev. W. Kevin Holder  
Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **Follow You Where?**

Matthew 4:12-25

Relocating is nothing new to Jesus. After he was born, his family fled Bethlehem and Herod's hostility, and arrived in Egypt. Eventually, after Herod's demise, Jesus' family returned to Israel. But with one of Herod's descendants in power, the family decided to resettle in Nazareth. In today's text from Matthew, there's a third move, as Jesus relocates to Capernaum. According to Matthew, these moves aren't just humans opting for a change of address. They're actually part of God's unfolding plan to redeem his people from their sins and to remake humankind. Understood in light of Scripture, all these moves are simply confirmation that God is now on the move.

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." That's the core of what Jesus preaches and teaches as he begins his public ministry. Remember where we've been leading up to today's Scripture passage. As one preacher has summarized it, "John has baptized him, God has identified him, the devil has tested him, and it's time now to be on the move."<sup>1</sup> And as Jesus launches his mission, he chooses the town of Capernaum, not primarily because of its size but because of its location. It sits on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, and is thus an active place of commerce, especially the business of fishing.

That's where Jesus starts casting his own net, gathering in those who will join him as leaders in this movement called the reign of God. Recall that during Jesus' testing, the devil had taken him to a place with an incredible view, where he could see "all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor" (3:8). Jesus was even offered the opportunity to take possession of all the earth's empires and dominions, if only he would go down on his knees and worship the devil. But Jesus' highest love and deepest loyalty belong to the Lord alone, the one who's really in charge of the world and its affairs. And now Jesus goes in search of others who will sign on to be his followers, the core of a community that will proclaim and practice the dominion of God.

Compared to all those kingdoms of this world, in all their splendor, that Jesus had already glimpsed, Capernaum and the region of Galilee must have seemed very unimpressive. But that's the way it came across to many people. In various respects, Galilee was the despised part of Israel. It was far away from Jerusalem and the temple. It was economically poor. It had a significant Gentile population that made it less appealing to many of the faithful. Yet this is where Jesus decides to set up his base of operation, essentially guaranteeing that those whom he calls to join him in his ministry will not be people of great social power or individual wealth. They'll not be the elite of ancient culture. Instead, they'll be ordinary people called to an extraordinary task.

People like you and me. People who have heard the Lord Jesus' summons to our place and our work in God's kingdom. "Follow me." There's something about that call that slices through all our doctrines, all our denominational distinctives, all our organizational structure, all our projects, and all our programs in the church. Our life as a congregation doesn't originate in our ideals or efforts. Our life as a community of disciples goes back to a God who mercifully shows up in this world as Jesus, and starts going around summoning us

by name, enlisting us in the redemptive work of his kingdom. As I emphasized last Sunday, what a marvel that a Savior like him wants to be with sinners like us. And what a marvel that as you, like Peter and Andrew, James and John, drop what you're doing and go with Jesus, and associate yourself with him, and stay on the path with him, you become more like him.

Remember that Jesus didn't require that they completely understand, upfront, in its entirety, what it would mean to fish for people. Nor does he require that of you. But he does require that you step out in faith and step onto a path where the meaning of "disciple" will unfold to you.

Todd Skinner was one of the world's most respected rock climbers. His greatest challenge was tackling Trango Tower, the world's highest freestanding spire, with a near-vertical drop. After years of preparation that included organizing a climbing team, planning logistics, and making a rugged cross-country trek to the site, Skinner and his group finally came face to face with Trango Tower. To the team members, some of the best bigwall climbers in the world, the challenge seemed too great. But Skinner realized that there was only one way forward. In his words, they had to "get on the wall" even if they weren't completely prepared. Skinner said,

The final danger in the preparation process of an expedition is the tendency to postpone leaving until every question has been answered, forgetting that the mountain is the only place the answers can definitively be found.... No matter how well prepared you are, how honed your climbing skills, how vast your expertise, you cannot climb the mountain if you don't get to it.<sup>2</sup>

After 60 days on the wall, Skinner and his teammates finally reached the summit. Though they had years of preparation and training, much of what they learned about climbing the tower was only learned after they "got on the wall." So it is for followers of Jesus, then and now. Most of what we learn about discipleship is learned after we "get on the wall." It all starts as the call of Jesus claims us and enables us to step out and go to it.

And what does this "it" look like? In other words, we get the gist of "Follow me," but we might reasonably ask, "Follow you where?" Our text doesn't give us complete and absolutely precise answers to that question, but it does point us in a general direction. It tells us that following Jesus will take us into the lives of people. People who need to know the good news of God's kingdom, who need to hear and see that God is present, moving and working to redeem, heal, and restore. Recall that in our text, Jesus' location in Capernaum is understood as fulfilling Isaiah's promise that "the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the shadow of death a light has dawned" (v. 16). So while following Jesus will include a broad range of daily destinations, it will especially mean your being led into lives and circumstances where light and life are needed. Wherever there's sickness, death, oppression, isolation, injustice, violence, deprivation, and hopelessness, you can count on Jesus to be headed in that direction, summoning you to follow. That's where he plans to be, and that's where he expects you to be.

Preacher Ernest Campbell says of our Lord, "Every time he comes across our way and bids us follow, he creates a crisis. And we can never be the same again. For when that command registers on our souls, we can choose to die to God and live to self, or to die to self and live to God."<sup>3</sup> Jesus' call to discipleship isn't a summons to self-preservation. It's a command to lay down our lives so that the reign of God becomes audible and visible to others.

One person has written:

When I was a kid in the mid-50s, Parker Brothers came out with a game for church families like ours. It was called "Going to Jerusalem." Your playing piece wasn't a top hat or Scottie dog, like in the "worldly" game of Monopoly. In "Going to Jerusalem," you got to be a real disciple. You were represented by a little plastic man with a robe, a beard, some sandals, and a staff.

In order to move across the board, you looked up answers to questions in the little black New Testament provided with the game. I remember that you always started in Bethlehem, and you made stops at the Mount of Olives, Bethsaida, Capernaum, the stormy sea, Nazareth, and Bethany. If you rolled the dice well, you went all the way to a triumphal entry into Jerusalem. But you never got to the Crucifixion or Resurrection. There were no demons or angry Pharisees. You only made your way through the nice stories. It was a safe adventure, perfectly suited for a Christian family on a Sunday afternoon walk with Jesus.

It never occurred to me, while leaning over the card table jiggling the dice in my hand, that traveling with Jesus wasn't meant for plastic disciples who looked up verses in a little black Bible. If you're going to walk with Jesus as his disciple in this world, you may need to change your expectations. After all, Jesus said, "Take up your cross, and follow me."<sup>4</sup>

Go back with me to the beginning of today's text. Matthew says that Jesus' ministry began after the arrest of John the Baptist, who had criticized the king for his immoral life. The word translated as "arrested" or "put in prison" can also be translated as "handed over" or "betrayed." It's the same word used to describe Jesus' destiny. So there's something about John's arrest that foreshadows Jesus' own fate. Matthew says that when Jesus heard about John's imprisonment, he "withdrew" to Galilee. This isn't out of cowardice or self-preservation, but perhaps as an indication that Jesus' way of exercising kingship would be very different from the present world's ways of violence and coercion. Unlike the reign of many earthly rulers, the reign of God brings light not darkness, life not death.

That's still the way Jesus is exercising his sovereignty in the world. And we his followers are his way of continuing his ministry to "people living in darkness" and "those living in the land of the shadow of death." That's why we need to be open and responsive to his daily call to go with him where he's going, and to do what he's doing.

There's a prayer that has been attributed to a Muslim who came to faith in Christ. It goes as follows:

O God, I am Mustafah the tailor, and I work at the shop of Muhammad. The whole day long I sit and pull the needle and the thread through the cloth. O God, you are the needle and I am the thread. I am attached to you and I follow you. When the thread tries to slip away from the needle, it becomes tangled and must be cut so it can be put back in the right place. O God, help me to follow you wherever you lead me. For I am really only Mustafah the tailor, and I work in the shop of Muhammad on the great square.<sup>5</sup>

Your ordinary life is exactly where Jesus shows up with an extraordinary call. "Follow me." Attach yourself to him this day, and go with him where he leads.

<sup>1</sup> Christopher Wright, speaking at a symposium at Wheaton College on October 7, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from David Sturt, *Great Work* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2014) 160-63.

<sup>3</sup> Ernest T. Campbell, "Follow Me." In *A Chorus of Witnesses: Model Sermons for Today's Preacher*, ed. Thomas G. Long and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 170.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2008/february/2022508.html>

<sup>5</sup> Pamela Joy Anderson, *You Are the Needle and I Am the Thread* (Bloomington: WestBow, 2014) xi.