



THE FIRST TO FOLLOW

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 John 1:35-51
 Fourth Message
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As you sit here, worshipping God and proclaiming Jesus as your Lord, have you ever wondered how that came about? Each of us has a conversion story. We clearly remember when Jesus called us to follow him. We were searching for something and we found him. To put it more accurately, Jesus found us. The remarkable thing is that we responded to his invitation. Some of us have labored far more over trivial matters in life than our decision to follow Jesus. That's amazing, isn't it? Even if we responded early on in life, that too is truly an amazing and wonderful thing. Some of you may still be in the process of responding to his invitation. Perhaps today you will hear the Lord's voice more clearly and decide to follow him.

As we continue our studies in John's gospel, we will look at the first people who responded to Jesus' invitation to follow him.

Again the next day John was standing with two of his disciples, and he looked at Jesus as He walked, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus. And Jesus turned and saw them following, and said to them, "What do you seek?" They said to Him, "Rabbi (which translated means Teacher), where are You staying?" He said to them, "Come, and you will see." So they came and saw where He was staying; and they stayed with Him that day, for it was about the tenth hour. (John 1:35-39 NASB)

The other gospels record that the first disciples were fishing when Jesus called them to become fishers of men. In John's account, the disciples ask Jesus where he was living. It is likely that the events recorded here occurred prior to those set down in the synoptic gospels. Thus, when Jesus called these men to be fishers of men, it was not the first time they had encountered him.

John's story continues on the "next day," i.e. the day after John the Baptist gave witness to the delegation sent to question him by the religious leadership in Jerusalem. We have already noted that the series of days in this section form a new "creation week." Jesus didn't come to earth to do repair work on the human race. He is the Creator who was in the beginning. He is the one who speaks and creates something out of nothing. John's point is that this is the beginning of a new creation, a new family of God.

On this "next day," John the Baptist is with two of his disciples, Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter (verse 40), and an unnamed disciple. There is good reason to

surmise that this other disciple is John, "the beloved disciple." Gazing at Jesus, John the Baptist says to the two men accompanying him, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" This is the same phrase that we examined last week. John is always pointing to Jesus. He is giving further witness, and his witness is beginning to bear fruit, as his two disciples follow Jesus.

Jesus asks the men, "What do you seek?" Honoring Jesus with the title "teacher," they ask, "Where are you staying?" He invites them to come and see. They accompany him and stay with him that day, because it was the tenth hour, 4:00 p.m. Perhaps this is yet another day in this new creation week.

This opening encounter between Jesus and the first two disciples seems fairly straightforward. But beneath the surface there is a deeper layer of meaning. Let us examine four important phrases in the text.

1. "They followed Jesus"

The disciples' first response is to follow Jesus. On one level, this act of following in someone's footsteps appears to be neutral. But in John's gospel, the act of following means to follow as a disciple. "If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me" (John 12:26). The two disciples are taking the first steps towards genuine discipleship.

2. "What do you seek?"

If we were asked this question, we could answer it in a thousand ways. We could say we are looking for a job, for something to eat, or some place to visit. On a deeper level, however, we could say that we were seeking something to fulfill our innermost desires, something permanent: true life, happiness, success, or whatever. Depending on our hopes and dreams, our answer might be noble or mundane. Most of us grow up looking for purpose and meaning. We look for someone who can help us with the answers to life's dilemmas. Sometimes we don't even know what we are looking for until we find it. John's disciples were looking for the Messiah of Israel to deliver them from Rome. We too are looking for salvation in one form or another. Jesus forces us to articulate what we really want in life. What are we seeking?

3. "Where are you staying?"

The disciples' request to know where Jesus was staying could also be understood at two levels. They might just be asking where he was sleeping, or they could be looking for a quieter place to talk. However, this little word "staying" is very important, as we will see in

chapter 15. It means to remain or abide. "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24). "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me" (John 15:4). If we want to follow Jesus to learn where he abides, we will be forced to ask ourselves, Where do we abide? This is a matter of life and death. If we follow Jesus, we remain in the light, we abide in him and bear much fruit. If we do not follow him, we will die and abide alone. Where do you stay?

4. "Come, and you will see"

Jesus invites them to come and see. This begins the relationship between the two disciples and Jesus.

One of the two who heard John speak and followed Him, was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He found first his own brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which translated means Christ). He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon the son of John; you shall be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter). (1:40-42)

Andrew finds his brother Simon Peter, either that same day or the next day, and tells him he has found the Messiah, the O.T. equivalent of Christ or the Anointed One. John wants to make sure that his readers understand that. The term Messiah is applied to many figures in the O.T. It was used to denote the king of Israel and the high priest. On one occasion it was used of the patriarchs. In the book of Isaiah, Cyrus is messiah. The ritual of anointing consecrated Aaron the priest, David the king, and Elisha the prophet. Jesus will fulfill all of these roles.

It is difficult to know what Andrew had in mind when he said this. It probably did not include suffering and dying. As was the case with John earlier, Andrew speaks better than he knows. So Andrew brings Simon Peter to Jesus. Immediately Jesus changes his name to Cephas, which is Aramaic for rock or stone (the Greek word is Petros, or Peter in English).

Andrew and Peter teach us a number of important principles.

1. Andrew illustrates the most natural and biblical idea of witness, which is the personal encounter to bring people to Jesus.

The most effective witness is one on one, friend to friend, brother to brother. We do not need to know everything in order to be effective. All we have to do is tell people that we have found life and light. Our stories of encountering Jesus are important and powerful. At times our attempts at witnessing are more complicated than necessary. Do you know someone who needs to be found? Don't wait for the crusade. Tell him what you have discovered.

2. To follow Jesus means to encounter someone who already knows us.

Peter thinks he is meeting Jesus for the first time. But no. Jesus knows everything about him, his past and future. Andrew says he has found the Messiah, but it is the Messiah who has found him. When Jesus calls us he begins to transform us. Jesus is so that we can become. We are a new creation and we get a new name. "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, to him I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it" (Rev 2:17).

3. There are no insignificant followers of Jesus.

It is just as important to be an Andrew as it is to be a Peter. We don't know much about Andrew compared to Peter, and yet he is the one who brings Peter. In Acts, Ananias helps Saul become Paul. Throughout church history, great men and women have come to Christ by the quiet and faithful witness of someone who appears to be inconsequential. Maybe you are an Andrew and you feel like a seemingly insignificant figure in the kingdom of God. That is simply not true. The Andrews need to be encouraged because each of us is important.

The next day He purposed to go into Galilee, and He found Philip. And Jesus said to him, "Follow Me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, of the city of Andrew and Peter. (1:43-44)

We have arrived at another day in this new creation week. It's unclear whether it was Andrew or Jesus who wanted to go into Galilee. Probably it was Andrew, since Jesus does not usually initiate conversation in this section. This ties in with verse 41, which says that Andrew "first" went and found his own brother.

Next he finds Philip. (Philip, Peter, and Andrew all came from the same city, Bethsaida, on the north-east shore of the lake.) The synoptic gospels record that they lived in Capernaum, so they probably moved at some point. But again we see the effectiveness of a personal witness, and again we see Jesus' invitation to follow him. This is the invitation to be a disciple.

Finally, the story of Nathanael.

Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." (1:45)

Once again we see the pattern of individual witness as new followers of Jesus bear witness of him, and they in turn become disciples and repeat the process. Andrew finds Philip and Philip finds Nathanael.

Nathanael said to him, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." Jesus saw Nathanael coming to Him, and said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael said to Him, "How do You know me?" Jesus answered and said to him, "Before

Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." Nathanael answered Him, "Rabbi, You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel." Jesus answered and said to him, "Because I said to you that I saw you under the fig tree, do you believe? You will see greater things than these." And He said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." (1:46-51)

Nathanael is not included in any of the lists of disciples. If he was one of the twelve, then he might be Matthew, or more likely Bartholomew. In three of the four lists of apostles, Bartholomew is linked with Philip. Philip tells Nathanael that he has found the one of whom Moses and the Prophets wrote, i.e. the one who fulfills the O.T. scriptures, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph. "'Jesus,' he says, a name like any other name. 'From Nazareth,' he says, a place like any other place. Joseph's child."¹

Nathanael's skeptical response is, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" Nazareth, a rural village just down the road from Cana, was looked upon with disdain. It was a dead-end place. Nathanael is saying, "'Can anything that matters so much come out of anywhere that seems to matter so little?'"²

Refusing to be put off, Andrew simply tells Nathanael to come and see. This is the same response that Jesus gave to Andrew and the unnamed disciple earlier. Nathanael had been looking and waiting for something: for life, to know and to be known, to find and to be found. This is what we too are waiting for. Philip tells Nathanael that the one he is waiting for grew up down the road. Just come and see, he says.

Nathanael's encounter with Jesus sets off a wonderful dialogue pointing to the Jacob story in Genesis 25-28. "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!" says Jesus. Jacob ("heel-grabber"), was a deceitful man. He tricked his brother Esau out of his birthright and received Isaac's blessing. In Genesis 27, Isaac tells Esau: "'Your brother came deceitfully and has taken away your blessing.' Then he said, 'Is he not rightly named Jacob, for he has supplanted me these two times? He took away my birthright, and behold, now he has taken away my blessing'" (Gen 27:35-36).

Despite Nathanael's skepticism, unlike Jacob, he has no hidden motives. He comes to Jesus to examine for himself the claims he has heard about. "How do you know me?" he asks. Jesus replies that he saw him under a fig tree, which in rabbinic literature is associated with a place for meditation. Once again John emphasizes Jesus' supernatural knowledge. He sees and he knows men and women.

Nathaniel responds with an amazing claim, "Rabbi, You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel." Israel is called God's son in Exodus. David's seed and heir was God's son (2 Sam 7). "King of Israel" was a

term used for the Messiah. What is so intriguing is that Nathanael links together son and king. Jesus is the true Israel, the son that Israel did not become. Jesus is a king greater than David. Nathanael obviously spoke better than he knew.

Jesus responds by telling Nathanael that he will see greater things, and again points to the Jacob story. After Jacob deceived his brother, Esau was out for blood, so Jacob fled. On his way to Haran, he stayed the night in a certain place, a no-place, which had actually been the city of Luz. In a dream, Jacob saw the heavens open and a ladder reaching from earth to heaven, with angels ascending and descending. When Jacob awoke, he built an altar and named the place Bethel, house of God, because God was in that place. This was the place where God entered into a covenant with Jacob. So, who will become the house of God and make a way by which heaven and earth can meet? Jesus is the one. He is the new Jacob or Israel. Jesus is the house of God, the new Temple. Jesus, who comes from a no place, is the place where we come into the presence of God. Jacob dreamed about it, but Nathanael will see it realized.

In this conversation with Nathanael, Jesus introduces another title for himself: "the Son of Man," which now is added to Lamb of God, Son of God, King of Israel, and Messiah. In John, "Son of Man" is the title Jesus uses for himself. It refers to his humanity, but it is also a reference to Daniel 7, where the son of man, who is in God's image, restores God's people.

Let us reflect on the two invitations of Jesus, "Follow me," and "Come and see."

1. Jesus gives us an invitation to follow him, to become a disciple.

This entails more than we might think. The first two disciples follow Jesus. Jesus says to Philip, "Follow me." One of the last things Jesus tells Peter, recorded in chapter 21, is, "Follow me." This is the beginning of a journey that continues throughout our lives. Following doesn't mean going to the polling place, casting our vote and going home. We don't follow Jesus in the same way we follow the 49ers or the war in Iraq. Following Jesus means that we stay and remain with him. Following Jesus forces us to ask difficult questions. Who are we following? This Jesus is from the no-place city of Nazareth. "Why should we follow? How do we follow? Where do we follow him? What can we take along with us? What do we get for our pains? What will it cost us?"³

Following Jesus means embarking on a journey to unexpected places. These first followers of Jesus had no idea where they would end up. We don't either. There are no explanations or road maps. We can't take anything with us. It will cost us everything. Following Jesus will take us to places where we least want to go. We drag our feet much of the time, but these places will be where we need to go, and those who take the journey will say that they would not trade it for anything. We

don't have to wait for pure motives or a better character. We just have to leave and begin the journey. We become a new creation and receive a new name. We will get to know Joseph's son who comes from no-place but knows everything about us.

2. Jesus also gives us an invitation to come and see. This too might be more difficult than we think.

The encounter with Nathanael indicates that Jesus wants us to see his glory. He invites us to come and promises us that we will "see," the key word in the text. It occurs eleven times and is the English word for four different Greek words.

The passage is saying that the goal of discipleship is the ability to see: to see Jesus, to see the glory of God, to see the heavens opened, to see the presence of God in our lives and the lives of others. This is what your heart desires, to see the glory of God. You do not even know it, but that is what you want.

Here is the rub. Before we can "see" we must come and follow. We will never see the glory of God unless we are all the way "in." We can never see the glory of God if we are waiting to see before we commit. Someone says, "Show me first; then I will decide whether I will come or not." It doesn't work that way with Jesus. Only by coming and following will be able to find out who he is. Jesus says to each one of us, "Come, and you will see." There is no other way for us to know and to

be known but to come and see Jesus personally. "You do not come first to understand a person fully and then to love him, but love comes first, and then it is out of the love that understanding is born."⁴

When I married my wife I loved her, but I didn't know her. Only by committing to marriage did I come to see her and know her. If you are in a marriage and you are not all the way "in," fully committed, then you will not experience knowing and being known. You won't see the glory of marriage. If you are in a job but are not engaged, not fully "in," then you will not see God at work in that place. If we are not all the way "in," in our relationship with Jesus, we will not see what God has for us. But if we come and follow, then we will see greater things than Jacob saw in his dream. We will see the glory of God, Messiah, Son of God, Son of Man, King of Israel.

How is God asking you to follow him today?

1. Frederick Buechner, *A Room Called Remember* (San Francisco: Harper, 1984), 131.
2. Buechner, *A Room Called Remember*, 131.
3. Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat* (New York: HarperCollins, 1966), 98.
4. Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*, 98-99.

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