

## Following Jesus

You're all here because of one fact.

Whether you know it or not...

Whether it's conscious or unconscious...

Whether you remember it happening or are sure it never did...

You are all here because Jesus has called you and you have responded.

Just as he does to the disciples today, as they are sitting in their boats, minding their nets, minding their business — that same Jesus has called you and because you have been called you are here.

The Christian life is different from every other sort of life.

The Christian life is not, in its essence, a philosophy or a series of doctrines or a learning of right beliefs; nor is the Christian life some kind of new and improved method of how to succeed in life; it is instead an invitation to be in relationship with the very one who calls us out of our boats, the one who calls us out of our business as usual.

If you listen to the televangelists you might think that responding to this call of relationship with Jesus means that only good times lie ahead.

So many these days seem to see God as a ticket to all of the things that we want in life that are not God.

But responding to Jesus doesn't mean your troubles are over.

In fact, it may mean that your troubles are just beginning.

That's because God doesn't call us to a happy life and God doesn't call us to a trouble-free life, but rather, God calls us to a life as God's employee.

Think about that job title for a moment.

God's employee!

That's why you are here today, because, just like those fishermen who used to work for their dad, they, like you, like me, we all have a new boss!

And while this boss doesn't promise a minimum wage or retirement benefits, he does promise a life of deep living, a life of adventure and a life, when all is said and done, of peace.

And God does this by taking us each, with our unique talents and abilities, and begins by using what we already possess to make in-roads into the ever present, ever increasing kingdom of God, that is invading our planet and our lives.

All right, perhaps that all sounds quite vague and too generalized.

Let's bring it closer to home.

Closer to home as in the God who creates and sustains all that is coming to us as a vulnerable, crying, child.

The universal becomes specific, the great unknowable becomes a human being, in a particular place and time, born to particular folks with particular needs.

God comes to us how we are, where we are, and as we are and in the reality of our ordinary lives, pitches his tent and lives among us.

The cosmic joins the mundane.

When the editor of the St. Petersburg Times decided, on a Christmas Day some years ago, to honor Christmas by only printing good news on the front page, he in fact missed the point of God becoming human.

God doesn't become human only on our good days, only to enter that in our lives which is hunky dory.

God enters human life in all of its good and bad, in all of its glory and rottenness, in all of its joy and its pain, and pitches his tent and lives among us.

When Jesus says: "I am the way, the truth and the life" Jesus isn't talking about signing up with the right team — meaning, if you're not on his roster, you're toast.

What Jesus is driving at when he says "I am the way, the truth and the life" is that if we want to know God, get to know Jesus, because it's not his philosophy or doctrine or creed that's key, it's his life.

And what about that life?

It is a life spent in the service of others.

It is a life that reaches into division and heals it.

It is a life that seeks outcasts, and invites them out to lunch.

Throwing our lot in with this life is what it means to be an employee of God.

Seeing Jesus in the least among us is a result of the new eyes and new ears we get fitted with as employees of God.

And yet, because the cosmic and the mundane have met and kissed, the tasks we take up as employees of God, in all the ordinariness of these tasks, also have cosmic significance, cosmic ramifications.

There's the story of the seminarian who went to work at the soup kitchen and clinic run by Jesuit priests that served the houseless.

They worked from dawn to dark, seven days a week.

After one particularly exhausting day, the seminarian stood by the priest as the front door was being closed for the night.

Just then, a ragged man appeared, needing to come in.

"Jesus Christ," the seminarian muttered under his breath.

"Could be, could be," came the reply from the priest.

Being God's employee is not only about outward work, it's about interior work as well.

It means being willing to participate in the healing of our own wounds, to look deeply, often with the help of others, at that within us, due to childhood scars or emotional trauma and to enter into the dark parts of our lives, holding tight to the God who loves us, so that we might, in wandering about in our own darkness, come face to face with the God who is always with us, even in the darkness.

The God who makes all that is out of nothing, is most often found when we sit in the midst of our own nothingness — for out of nothingness, God can and does make something new.

It's what Paul is getting at when he's confronted today with a congregation that's more full of itself than with God.

He's reminding them that God's power is exactly where we hate to look: there, on the cross; enduring nothingness with the hope of transformation.

This is the mystery of the season we are in for these two months, this season of Epiphany.

Jesus invites us to come along, not two thousand years ago, but now, today, on God's magnificent task of remaking creation, remaking the world, remaking all of humanity.

It's not done in big steps nor in particularly obvious ways.

And you can't be blamed if, after reading the Sunday paper, you wonder if it's happening at all.

And yet, here we are, in a St. Elizabeth's that is experiencing a new life, a place that is truly evolving into a community of prayer for all people.

Here we are, just last Monday, joining folks of every color and creed and ethnicity and gender marching and singing and banging drums and smiling as the Martin Luther King Jr parade continues to inspire, to breath new life into our coat of many colors community.

Sometimes it's hard to believe that the God of all that is would give two hoots for what is here on this earth.

Sometimes we go back to worshipping a God who just set the whole mess in motion, then walked away, leaving us to our own devices.

But in Jesus, we confront the God — or more correctly — God confronts us — as the God who will not take our "no" for an answer.

We are confronted by the God who insists on intruding into our lives, not just in the big picture, but now, today, personally and communally.

Coming to grips with the fact that God is not only with us, but that God is FOR us is not an easy thing to do.

J.B. Phillips tells this story, showing that it just isn't we who have trouble with the whole idea of the God who is not only with us, but the God who is for us too.

"A senior angel is showing a very young angel around the splendors of the universe.

They view whirling galaxies and blazing suns, and then flit across the infinite distances of space until at last they enter one particular galaxy of 500 billion stars.

As the two of them draw near the star which we call our sun and its circling planets, the senior angel points to a small and rather insignificant sphere turning very slowly on its axis.

It looks as dull as a dirty tennis ball to the little angel, whose mind is filled with the size and glory of all he'd seen.

'I want you to watch that one particularly,' said the senior angel, pointing with his finger.

'Well, it looks very small and rather dirty to me,' said the little angel.

'What's special about that one?'

He listens in stunned disbelief as the senior angel tells him that this planet, small and insignificant and not overly clean, is the renowned Visited Planet.

'Do you mean that our great and glorious Prince went down in person to this fifth rate little ball? Why should He do a thing like that?'

The little angel's face wrinkled in disgust.

'Do you mean to tell me,' he said, 'that He stooped so low as to become one of these creeping, crawling creatures on that floating ball?'

'I do, and I don't think He would like you to call them 'creeping, crawling creatures' in that tone of voice.

For strange as it may seem to us, He loves them.

He went down to visit them to lift them up to become like Him.

The little angel looked blank.

It was beyond his comprehension."

Jesus comes to us in our ordinary lives and calls us from whatever boats we are in, whether our boat has us sitting in front of a computer screen or cutting down trees or retired on a fixed income.

Jesus meets us in our ordinary lives so that he can do extraordinary things with these ordinary lives.

I'll leave you with this.

The old missionary working in India gave a Bible to a well-educated Hindu man.

A few weeks later, the man returned the Bible, complaining, "This is not a religious book. It hardly mentions the gods; it's filled with stories of ordinary and even bad people!" Willimon, Incarnation, 73.

Of course our Hindu friend is exactly right.

Jesus meets us where we are, how we are, and as we are.

And if Jesus can invite ordinary folks like Peter, Andrew, Mary and John, well, what about you?

+amen

