

**Following Christ**  
November 25, 2007  
Isaiah 6:1-8, Matthew 4:18-22

Our Scriptures passages this morning share two very different call stories. The story of Isaiah's call reveals to us a story of grandeur and awe. We find God sitting on a throne surrounded by seraphs, creatures with six wings. There are shaking thresholds and smoke and fire. A live coal is taken from the altar and touched to Isaiah's mouth by one of the seraphs. And only then does God speak, saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And Isaiah replies, "Here am I; send me!" This is one of the extraordinary moments in the Biblical text.

In contrast Matthew's version of the call of the disciples comes to us in the midst of the most ordinary daily routine of life. The scene is set along the Sea of Galilee where Simon Peter and Andrew are casting a net into the sea . . . not for some grand adventure, not for a holiday delight. They are casting their nets into the sea because they are fishermen, and that's what fishermen do. There's no sign of holiness, no extraordinary details; just people at work on any given day . . . a lot like me and you. The extraordinary moment in this story comes when the disciples respond to Jesus' request, or perhaps the invitation was more a statement of fact than a mere request. "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." And here is where the story becomes extraordinary . . . the disciples *immediately* left their nets and followed Jesus. The same thing happens with James and his brother John . . . Jesus called them and *immediately* they left the boat and their father and followed Jesus.

They left everything to follow Jesus. Can this be the whole story? Does it seem to you that all the facts are included in either of these call stories? Surely more was said. Surely reasons and justifications offered. After all who would leave everything they knew and set off on an adventure into the unknown with nothing more than an invitation to "Follow me" or a declaration that you will be catching people? At least in Luke's gospel there is a miraculous catch of fish. But doesn't it seem that there is something more that isn't written in black and white? What is it about this man Jesus that makes people want to follow? After all, who do we follow when we follow Christ?

The four Gospel's tell different stories about Jesus. These stories offer us glimpses into Jesus' daily life with his disciples, they show how he interacted with friends and strangers alike, and they give examples of his message. These Gospel stories give us a complex and rich picture of Jesus teaching, healing and preaching. They speak of miracles. They talk of a shepherd, prophet, high priest and a king. They mention crowds from time to time; the feeding of the 4,000 and 5,000, the Sermon on the Mount. And yet as Leanne Van Dyk offers in her recent book entitled, *Believing in Jesus* Christ, "for the most part the Gospels focus on Jesus' interactions with individuals or small groups of people. The disciples, frequently bumbling and fearful. The women friends, portrayed as loyal. Nicodemus, filled with longings and questions. Jairus, the synagogue ruler sick with grief over a daughter who died. Mary and Martha and Lazarus, dear friends. The children. Zacchaeus. Assorted tax collectors and prostitutes. Blind people. Lame people. Crazy people. The Gospel portraits are sketched and filled in with these small encounters. What emerges is a portrait of a Jesus with compassion and determination, as well as a keen eye for hypocrisy, a passion for justice, and a willingness to take seriously every person who sought him out or wandered into his path." (p.13)

But is this who we follow . . . a determined, compassionate man? Sure it's always good to share stories about generous and wise human beings. And if this were all there was to Jesus . . ."it might be a story worth telling. But we know that there is more to this story. Far more is claimed about Jesus than his admirable social consciousness and the wit of his parables. The Christian faith confesses that this Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God, the Savior of the world, the hope of the nations." (p.13) The portrait we have of Jesus is a compilation of the four Gospel texts, the additional new testament documents plus our confessions, creeds and traditions written and created over 2,000 years.

The Christ we follow is at once a full human being and the incarnation of God on earth. Christians claim that Jesus lived a full human life just like his disciples, just like us. He ate, slept, laughed and cried. He felt pain. He suffered and then he died. Jesus was like us in every respect except one . . . his relationship with God was perfect. Jesus lived and died in perfect obedience to the one God of all creation. By his living and dying Jesus offered himself as a living sacrifice for all humanity . . . laying down his life that all life might be redeemed. This is the story of a God who becomes a vulnerable, weak human being so that all human life might be affirmed, protected and defended. As Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15:20f., "In fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ." This is the Christ we are called to follow . . . the one who died that we might live. The Christ we are called to follow

exemplifies, expresses, demonstrates the reconciling work of God in the world. Christ is the means by which we know that we are loved and forgiven by God to live life anew each day. This does not mean that God didn't love people before Jesus lived and died, but that through Jesus' life and death, the Gentiles are offered the avenue through which we could come to know of God's love.

And this message comes to us through the centuries by means of the church. In this post-modern age there are many people who believe that they can know who God is on their own. If they think the right thoughts or express the appropriate feelings or follow 10 or so easy steps, they will experience God in their lives. But the triune God is not an abstract notion to be experienced. This is not to say that individuals never encounter the divine. Rather individuals come to know the God of all creation by means of story, tradition and discipleship. We encounter the triune God by hearing and learning the stories of the Old and New Testaments, by allowing the word to inform, inspire and transform us. We also come to know our God by repeating our creeds and confessions.

When we repeat the words of the *Apostles' Creed*, we are sharing our faith with men and women through the centuries. Please join me in sharing the *Apostles' Creed* found in your bulletin:

I believe in God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth. And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; he descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.

This short creed captures the essence of who Jesus is and proclaims the major tenets of our theology. As a body of believers, we are affirming who we are in light of who God is in Christ. When we say the Apostles Creed or any other confession of the church, we are not necessarily declaring our own personal beliefs. But in this day where individual thoughts, beliefs and feelings often take precedence over long-lived traditions many people want to discard such statements as irrelevant or outdated. We have lost the importance of institutional practices and customs because they were not always used properly. Thus, we have thrown the baby out with the bath water. How can we possibly follow Christ if we do not know who Christ is?

William Willimon offers us an illustration of this point from his seminary days:

“Willimon recalls the day an Orthodox priest had been invited to lecture on the development of creeds. At the end of the lecture, one of the students asked Father Theodore what he should do when he finds it impossible to affirm certain tenets of the creed. The priest looked confused, “Well, you just say it. It's not that hard to master. With a little effort, most can learn it by heart.”

“No, you don't understand,” continued the student, “what am I to do when I have difficulty affirming parts of the creed—like the Virgin Birth?” The priest continued to look confused. “You just say it. Particularly when you have difficulty believing it, you just keep saying it. It will come to you eventually.” Exasperatedly, the student . . . pleaded, “How can I with integrity affirm a creed in which I do not believe?” “It's not your creed, young man!” said the priest. “It's our creed. Keep saying it, for heaven's sake! Eventually, it may come to you. For some, it takes longer than for others. How old are you? 23? Don't be so hard on yourself. There are lots of things that one doesn't know at 23. Eventually it may come to you. Even if it doesn't, don't worry. It's not your creed.”

Thank goodness it's not my personal creed or your personal creed. Thank goodness we don't have to figure out who Jesus Christ is on our own. We don't have to fall into the pit of post-modernism that tells us only our own personal reflections about the world and what we believe are worth repeating. We can with true humility know that being a disciple is not a one-man or one-woman gig. Being a disciple of Christ means that we are in relationship . . . with other people and with God. The story of God's revelation in the world wasn't dreamed up out of one person's imagination . . . it is the story of the ages. It's the story of Abraham and Sarah, David and Bethsheba, Isaiah and Esther, Mary and Joseph, Peter and Paul and so many others whose names sound familiar and foreign. The story we share as Christians is a story of covenants and community. It is a story bounded by faith and hope, longing and expectation, mercy and devotion. It is not an easy story that can be expressed in a few minutes, but it is a simple story which offers us the plain truth of the God who creates, redeems and sustains human life out of unconditional, unbounded love.

This story comes to us through our songs: “O Lord my God! When I in awesome wonder consider all the worlds Thy hands have made. I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder, Thy power throughout the universe displayed; Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee, How great Thou art, how great Thou art!” Or “Jesus Christ is risen today, Alleluia! Our triumphant holy day, Alleluia! Who did once, upon the cross, Alleluia! Suffer to redeem our loss, Alleluia!” It comes to us in Psalms and Scripture: “Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.” (Ps. 90) “This is the message we have heard from Jesus Christ and proclaim to you, that God is light and in God light is never absent. If we say that we are partners with God while we are walking without light, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as God is in the light, we are partners with one another, and the blood of Jesus, Child of God, cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive us our sin and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:5-9)

The story of who Christ is for us is developed through our Book of Confessions. In *The Brief Statement of Faith* our most recent addition we learn more about what we believe:

We trust in Jesus Christ, fully human, fully God. Jesus proclaimed the reign of God: preaching good news to the poor and release to the captives, teaching by word and deed and blessing the children, healing the sick and binding up the brokenhearted, eating with outcasts, forgiving sinners, and calling all to repent and believe the gospel. Unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition, Jesus was crucified, suffering the depths of human pain and giving his life for the sins of the world. God raised this Jesus from the dead, vindicating his sinless life, breaking the power of sin and evil, delivering us from death to life eternal.

And our story is shared by the men and women who have gone before us preaching the Gospel and sharing the good news through their lives of service and love. These men and women reach deep into our traditions and allow them to mold and shape their lives and then they share their understanding of who Christ is for us and for them. Catherine of Siena a 14<sup>th</sup> century Dominican nun shares her message of truth with us: “Eternal Father, you said, “Let us make humankind to our own image and likeness” (see Genesis 1:26). Thus you were willing to share with us your own greatness. You gave us the intellect to share your truth. You gave us the wisdom to share your goodness. And you gave us the free will to love that which is true and just.

Why did you do dignify us? It was because you looked upon us, and fell in love with us. It was love which first prompted you to create us; and it was love which caused you to share with us your truth and goodness. Yet your heart must break when you see us turn against you. You must weep when you see us abusing our intellect in pursuit of that which is false. You must cry with pain when we distort our wisdom in order to justify evil. But you never desert us. Out of the same love that caused you to create us, you have now sent your only Son to save us. Christ is your perfect image and likeness, and so through Christ we can be restored to your image and likeness.”

This is the Christ we are called to follow . . . the Christ who is made in the perfect image of God. . . . one who is at once fully human and fully divine . . . one who loved us so much that he lived and died for us that we might live again. May Christ continue to call and may we continue to follow. Amen.