

ST. JOHN'S CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

January 21, 2024 — 3RD SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY — YR. B

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Follow the Leader*”

Jonah 3:1-5, 10 (Jonah's preaching causes Ninevah to repent)
Psalm 62:6-14 (God is our rock and our refuge; we trust in Him)
1 Corinthians 7:29-31 (The present form of this world is passing away)
St. Mark 1:14-20 (Jesus calls Simon and Andrew to follow Him)

What do you call these word combinations? “A little pregnant; airline food; plastic silverware; jumbo shrimp; honest politician.” They're all *oxymorons*—terms which in their literal meanings are self-contradictory or absurd. For example, can you be a “little” pregnant? Airlines rarely serve meals anymore and when they do, can you call it “food”? If forks and spoons are made of plastic shouldn't they be called “plasticware”?

We use oxymorons all the time and don't usually give much thought to the literal meaning of those expressions. It's not a big deal when you're talking about airline food or plastic silverware, but if you should ever hear yourself say or think, “I'm just a casual disciple of Christ,” your hair (if you have any) should stand on end. Jesus makes it clear in today's Gospel there's no such thing as a casual or part-time disciple of His. So let's not be oxy ... morons!¹

Our Gospel reading from Mark picks up after John, who had baptized Jesus, had been arrested by Herod. This Herod was the nephew of the King Herod, who around the time of Jesus's birth, had killed all the baby boys of Bethlehem. Now, Jesus comes to Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of the Lord, saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the [good news]” (Mark 1:15). Here we see two things. First, this proclamation is the beginning of Jesus' ministry, and, as God the Father had said, people were to “Listen to Him.” Second, His message is about repentance and the kingdom of God, very similar to the preaching of John the Baptist, who had just been imprisoned by Herod. It would seem foolish to follow one who was proclaiming the same message that got John arrested. And to keep proclaiming the message that got John thrown in prison, one would either have to be fool or on a mission from God. To follow such a proclaimer as Jesus was dangerous.² Following might get you arrested, too.

Now Jesus is walking along the shore by the sea of Galilee, a busy place for fisherman and vendors. There, He sees Simon and Andrew, and says “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.” And they do—right away! They put down their nets and follow Him. Just down the beach there is another boat. Zebedee is in it with his two sons, James and John. They have finished fishing and are mending their nets. Jesus calls out to James and John, and they too, stop what they are doing to follow Him.

Can you imagine the charisma, the pull, the power and influence Christ must have had, to induce people to just drop everything and follow Him? Might He be asking the same thing of us if we are merely limping along as lukewarm Christians? Something to think about.

Simon, Andrew, James, and John left everything behind to follow Jesus. For there to be followers there has to be a leader—and only one. Two leaders would tangle and create friction between themselves. Followers without a leader are just lost together. So those who follow allow the leader to go first. If the leader decides to stop or go, turn left or turn right, the follower must do the same. He or she doesn't get to decide, can't just “do it my way.” Followers are not their own boss. They are not lone rangers. It is the leader who leads, who decides, and who is responsible. And following that leader means surrendering the right to make one's own decisions. It requires above all absolute *trust* in, and reliance on the dependability of, that leader.

Moreover, because the follower is behind the leader, the follower doesn't get to see what lies ahead. Only the leader knows what's coming. The follower simply walks in the path and footsteps of the leader. Unable to see ahead, followers can only keep their eyes on the leader.

Do any of you remember playing the “Follow the Leader” game, as children? The leader leads the group in any direction he or she wants, and tries to make up silly things for everyone to do just as they do. Skip, turn in

circles, summersault, crab walk, and so forth. If any player messes up or refuses to follow the leader's instructions they are "out." Not a member of the group any more, not a player.

What does this tell us about following Jesus? To be His follower, we must trust the decision-making to our leader, and trust the decisions that have been made. Because if followers stop trusting their leader, they will soon stop following. Following and trust are irrevocably tied together.

Now, what about those disciples? Jesus called His disciples to a life of faith in Him, and a life of faith in action. Notice how when He called, they came *right away*? But why? Remember, Jesus was proclaiming repentance and the kingdom of God, just as John had done. And we know where that got John—arrest, prison, and execution. The danger was the same for those who followed such a proclaimer.

A would-be follower had to decide: This Jesus was either a fool, or He was true and on a mission from God. Yet those fishermen came right away. They came because Christ called them, and His presence, His Word, the love, joy, and truth He exuded gave them faith—faith in Him. By that faith, they knew He was true. They knew He was not a fool, but on a mission from God.

And by that faith—that trust—they followed Him. They could not see what all lay ahead—if they had, they might have run the other way! But they trusted Jesus. In the past, they had to make decisions about fishing. Now Jesus would make the decisions about everything. And, as Simon Peter would later say to Him in John 6:68 (AMP): "Lord, to whom else shall we go? You alone have the words of eternal life; you are our only hope." No casual discipleship there!

What about us? You and me? Jesus has called us, St. John's Church. He has called us to a life of faith in Him, and a life of faith in action. Do we ever feel life is out of control? Yes. And it is. Especially these days. Life may be out of control, but it is in the control of Jesus Christ. He is leading us forward, and He knows what is ahead—also, our Lord knows what is best for us. He has called us simply to trust Him and follow Him.

What happens when we are not content to be followers, and try to be in control of our own lives? We end up taking detours and running into dead ends. How, then, do we follow Jesus? Not by *working harder* at following, but by *praying harder* to trust Him. And how do we trust Him? By faith. Faith which comes to us through His Word, and through the ministry and prayers of our fellow believers.

What will this year bring? Or what will tomorrow bring? What about our lives? We don't know. We can't see ahead. But we know One who can and who does. Jesus sees and knows—and has control over—what is to come. We need only follow. And to follow Christ, we don't have to see the future, we only need keep our eyes on our leader, Jesus. And we *do* see Him. We see Him by faith when we hear His Holy Word, and when we receive His Body and Blood at the Holy Eucharist. We see Him by faith when He hears and receives our prayers—especially when He answers them in ways that bring us relief, peace, hope, and joy.

Just as it was for Jesus' first disciples, it can be risky to follow Christ. Being an openly dedicated Christian can attract mockery or disdain. And in places other than the United States, outright persecution, torture, imprisonment and death.

Like those first disciples, we, too, follow Christ by faith—the faith we have received from the Apostles, the faith we have received from God by His Word. And by this faith we believe. We know that Jesus was and is on a mission from His Father. We know that He is true, trustworthy, reliable, and because He is God, He is love itself—and life more abundant. We cannot see the future. But we see our Savior. We can and do trust Christ with our lives now, and in His forever kingdom.

A close friend said to me this week, "I'm not looking forward to this year. It's going to be so strange." Possibly. But Jesus is there. He goes ahead of us, and He's in control of it all. We just have to *trust* Him. And together, we can help each other do that!

I'd like to close with Saint Richard, Bishop of Chichester's, 13th-century prayer:³

*Thanks be to Thee, my Lord Jesus Christ, For all the benefits Thou hast given me,
For all the pains and insults Thou hast borne for me. O most merciful Redeemer, friend and brother,
May I know Thee more clearly, Love Thee more dearly,
[and] Follow Thee more nearly. Amen.*

¹ Adapted from Daniel Habben, "Don't Be An Ozymore!" 26 June 2016. SermonCentral.com <<https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/don-t-be-an-ozymore-daniel-habben-sermon-on-discipleship-202702-18>> January 2024. Used with permission.

² Adapted from David Roth, "Faithful Followers," 24 January 2015. SermonCentral.com <<https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/followers-david-roth-sermon-on-call-of-the-disciples-191072?page=1&wc=900>> Used with permission.

³ Richard of Chichester, "Richard of Chichester" (25 October 2023) <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_of_Chichester> 17 January 2024.