

Faithfulness in Place

Scriptures

Jer 3:19-4:4

Ps 130

1 Cor 7:17-24

Mark 1:14-20

Opening

Every time we cross over from Knox County into Blount County to visit Emily's parents, I take a quick glance up the hillside where Topside Road ends in Louisville. I see the pavilion on that church campground and straight away I can feel the stuffy July heat. I am 15 and my heart is pounding at the end of evening worship, compelled to make a decision I don't understand, yet I dare not refuse. I walk forward to a wooden prayer bench. I was not converting to the faith, I was responding to a call that remained unclear. I pray and wait. Nothing. I pray again and moments later I sense an intense call to obedience and abandonment to God. I know in my heart that means the work of a pastor.

I do not share this story with you to encourage you to seek such experiences. I'm eternally grateful for that humid July evening, and it's also for good reasons I now serve in a church where the weekly altar call is Holy Communion. My life in Christ has been shaped much more by waiting for the Lord, enduring the silence of God, than it has been a series of profound encounters.

I share this story with you because when I turn off of Topside Rd. now at the age of 42, I'm not thinking of the joy of those beginnings; I ponder how much was hidden from my

understanding in his calling. I didn't know anything about Anglicans in 1994. I certainly didn't see the crises that would come to the American church in my 20s, and I definitely didn't see the national strife that would shape much of my 30s to the present day. Had I perceived the difficulties ahead, I would have drowned in my questions, fears, and inadequacies. When God calls, the command is total: "Follow me."

The Fullness of Time and the Way of Repentance

When Jesus appears on the shores of Galilee, we hear that the fullness of time had come. Which means that the time had come for the four apostles to answer the call of discipleship first—Peter, Andrew, James and John.

Rightly so, we ponder the apostles' beginnings, the immediacy and costliness of their response. Nets are dropped, fathers and family left behind. Total trust, total allegiance to Jesus of Nazareth alone suffices for a faithful disciple.

We look to these apostles as exemplars of trust with these courageous beginnings. Yet discipleship is not a beginning moment. Discipleship is a way, a path—and a narrow path at that.

Without our first response we cannot begin the life of discipleship, but even a good, strong beginning does not a life of obedience make. This is not the only occasion Jesus issues the command "follow me." A year or so after this encounter on the beach, the command "follow me" takes a new shape—the shape of the cross. In the heart of pagan territory, Caesarea Phillipi, Jesus looks his disciples in the eye and says

“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” (Mark 8:34, ESV)

It was statements such as these that thinned the large crowds that had followed Jesus for some time. When Jesus returned to Peter’s hometown, many disciples turned back and stopped following Jesus. Then our Lord Jesus said to the twelve who answered his call first:

“Do you want to go away as well?” Simon Peter answered, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.” (John 6:66–69, ESV)

Yet we know there *will* come a moment where Peter wants to go away. It’s when he denies Jesus three times just before the Lord took up his cross. /

Even after Jesus is raised from the dead, the Lord still has a conversation with Peter about what it means to follow him. You may remember this story: Peter has returned to his fishing nets at the harbor of Galilee. They came up with nothing overnight. Then Jesus, whom they did not recognize, said to his followers whom he had trained for three years to be fishers of men, “Cast your net on the right side of the boat.” Then 153 fish filled their nets, they recognized this was the risen Jesus, and they ate breakfast with the Lord.

Then our Lord commanded Peter to care for his sheep in the same words he spoke on that beach 3 years prior. The Lord Jesus said to Peter:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go...**Follow me**” (John 21:18, ESV)

One expects a conclusion to that beach scene; it would bring the story full circle. But then Peter gets irritated. Another disciple starts walking with them, probably John, and Peter says, “Lord, what about this man?” To which Jesus replies “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!”/

The command to follow Jesus is not settled in a singular moment. **“Follow me” is a refrain, a repeating command our Lord speaks throughout our days.**

Discipleship is a continual ‘yes,’ a lifelong repentance of learning and unlearning; of failure and forgiveness; of mistakes and renewal. The first moment of obedience opens the way to further tests, further commands: “Follow me.” The closer you follow Jesus; the longer you follow Jesus, the more you realize there’s a new obedience to which you have been called.

A New Calling, Even with a Terminal Diagnosis

New obedience was required for a young pastor upon learning that he had been diagnosed with cancer with not many years to live. When he went to see his bishop, he was *not* sent to the sidelines. No, the bishop upon learning of this pastor’s diagnosis responded, “Well then I will be sending you to the Amazon.” Not for some obscure treatment in the jungle, but for missionary work among the peoples of the Amazon. In the Amazon, the pastor came alive. He *really* lived, finding new purpose in his calling, even as his body was declining. At the end of his life, the pastor returned to his bishop and thanked him for sending him to the Amazon.¹

The Christian philosopher Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy said, “the abundance of time is not quite the same thing as the fullness of time. Most people who have plenty of time never fill it to the full. They throw it away.”²

Blessed is the soul who knows when the fullness of time has come. When Christ calls you to a specific work, or place, or task; when the call of discipleship means suffering and bearing your cross, time has reached fullness for you. If you refuse his call to discipleship, time’s fullness bears down on your soul. Fleeing the call of God, deliberating your options,

¹Notker Wolf, *The Art of Leadership*, 126.

²Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, *Out of Revolution*, 14.

scrutinizing an unknown future—this makes the soul heavy and weary. / It's so draining to deny the fullness of time, to refuse the call of discipleship.

But the soul who surrenders to Jesus' personal summons, that one discovers the mystery of obedience: Jesus' yoke is easy and his burden is light.

Abandoned to God

I imagine you may be wondering right about now: "how do I know if I'm doing what God calls me to do?" A few thoughts on that question.

First of all, this question comes from a good desire—to be faithful to God and obedient to his call.

But there are cultural influences on your soul regarding this question, too. We live in a culture of restlessness and spiritual wanderlust. We joke about the fear of missing out. There is, of course, a deep truth in that joke. But the fear of missing out is not a holy fear. It's born from a culture of narcissism and grandiosity. There is only one thing to be feared and that is sin and rebellion.

So, understand that discerning God's personal calling in a culture of wanderlust looks very different. Wanderlust does not just mean a strong desire for world travel. Wanderlust in our time means spiritual restlessness with an ambition for excitement; for notoriety more than faithfulness. Change for changes' sake is not a sign of obedience. Constant change becomes the pattern for restless souls: changing jobs, changing churches, and Lord, have mercy—changing families.

Our ancestors believed spiritual wanderlust was a sin for these very reasons. I read somewhere recently that the phrase "change the world" wasn't part of our common vocabulary until the past 150 years or so. The saints we honor were not trying to change the world; they were answering the personal call of Christ.

If you are unsure of God's calling upon you, then wait on the Lord. When the Holy Spirit leads you to a place of waiting or listening, there is peace, not anxiety. If the question of

calling continually produces anxiety or fear, it could be a sign that you have not accepted God's calling *right where you are*. Or it may be that you have not yet surrendered your unknown future to Christ. Contentment and peace are signs of the Holy Spirit, not continual fretting, not continual second-guessing your life decisions. /

Above my desk I have John Wesley's covenant prayer that he prayed every new year. Wesley's prayer shows me the way of contentment and surrender:

I am no longer my own but yours.
Put me to what you will,
rank me with whom you will;
put me to doing,
put me to suffering;
let me be employed for you,
or laid aside for you,
exalted for you,
or brought low for you;
let me be full,
let me be empty,
let me have all things,
let me have nothing:
I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things
to your pleasure and disposal.
Glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
you are mine and I am yours.

Holiness in Place

The spirit of that prayer with their contrasting conditions helps me understand the different shapes Jesus' call can take. For the four fishermen of Galilee, the call meant they had to depart home and family; for the Christians in Corinth, faithfulness meant staying put.

The key verb for the disciples was “follow” which got their feet moving; the key verb for the Corinthians was “remain” which meant following Christ at home. “Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called” Paul instructed.³

The condition of our calling, the demands of our calling, the honor of our calling—none of these things “count for anything” as Paul says. What counts is “keeping the commandments.”

That is what it means to follow Jesus, *to keep his commandments*. I need not fret over the location of my calling; my concern is singular—follow Jesus by keeping his commandments. Our Lord said, “If you love me, keep my commandments.”

This is the way of discipleship: keeping the commandments Jesus taught in the place where he has placed us. Remember the commandments to love God and love your neighbor. Remember the Sermon on the Mount, pursue those commands. They require our total effort.

Strive for holiness in the place where he has placed you, no matter how humble, obscure, or unknown. That’s what it means to follow Jesus.

The Church of Jesus Christ needs more saints like St Therese of Lisieux in our time—saints who quietly follow Jesus without notoriety. St Therese wrote to her sister,

Let us keep far from everything that shines, let’s love our littleness...then we will be poor in spirit and Jesus will come and look for us. However far away we are, he will transform us into flames of love.⁴

I happen to believe that little way of holiness *is* following Jesus in our time. I also happen to believe that this humble way of obedience is evangelical, too.

³1 Corinthians 7.20

⁴Quoted in Jacques Phillipe, *Interior Freedom* 103.

Jesus promised to his disciples that he “will make them become fishers of men.” Well, follow the story that Mark tells and you find that their training as evangelists was a 3 year apprenticeship in the commandments of Jesus. It was not training in methods of persuasion. It did not encourage personal charisma. *It was training in humility and holiness.* That is how the apostles became fishers of men. When you conform your life to the way of Jesus he “will transform us into flames of love.”

The Power of a Praying Babushka

We need not look far off to follow Jesus. We look within our homes and neighborhoods as the place to keep the commandments. We teach the commandments of Jesus to our children, grandchildren, and godchildren—to prepare the way for our descendants to answer the call to follow Jesus. This is another reason, among many others, why we uphold the sanctity of human life from conception to natural death. In the womb of a mother, a child grows who Jesus calls to be his beloved, faithful disciple. The future of the church, the future of discipleship begins by caring for our descendants from birth to death, no matter what the future brings.

In 1917, the Bolshevik Revolution swept through Russia and, with it, the mass murder of Russia’s clergy. Over 100,000 clergy were shot or sent to labor camps in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution. A Soviet leader approached the Archbishop of Moscow with a taunting question in these days, “What will the church do after the last grandmother dies?” The patriarch replied, “There will be another generation of grandmothers to take their place.”⁵

For 70 years Christians endured persecution in Soviet Russia. What was the secret of their endurance? The grandmothers, or ‘babushkas’. Praying babushkas. Babushkas are a force of nature in Russian culture. The patriarch’s reply regarding another generation of babushkas became prophetic.

⁵<https://www.oca.org/questions/priesthoodmonasticism/ordination-of-women>

A few years ago I saw a wonderful documentary called *The Babushkas of Chernobyl*. This film shares the story of about 100 women who returned to their homes after the nuclear disaster of Chernobyl. Their husbands had died and their homes were situated squarely within the Exclusion Zone, also known as the Dead Zone. They defied government and health warnings, returning home anyway with all the threats of radiation. A soldier came to evacuate them in 1986, but one babushka said to him, "Shoot us and dig the grave, otherwise we're staying."

They grew their own food, visited and cared for their friends, knitted images of Jesus, drank moonshine a little too often, and prepared to die where they were born. They had survived Stalin's famines, Nazi occupation, a nuclear disaster, and yet they remained.

There is no resident priest for these babushkas. But still they say their prayers regularly and once a year they receive holy communion at the Easter midnight mass. And when they greet one another on that holy night, they say, "Christ is risen!"

No one else was left. No one *remained* in the Dead Zone, the land scorched and ruined by an explosion of uranium. Who was left to say "Christ is risen" in the Dead Zone? The babushkas, that's who.

In all corners of the world, in all generations, to all races, Jesus bids us come and follow him. Yet you need not change the world, you need not cross the world over; all you need is a heart set on his commandments and you will draw men, women, and children to God whose Name is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.