

Providence Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. David Pettit
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John 1: 29-42

Come, go, sit, get down, go get the ball, drop the ball, lay down, stay. And Fischer, our malamute puppy, turns his head a bit with one ear up so as to say, no idea what you are saying. The first week of puppy class, we did not bring our dogs. The focus of this first class was to train the trainers. Among the things our trainer Linda taught us is that dogs do not understand English, which was a helpful reminder. Therefore, throwing an assortment of words at a dog as if they are self-explanatory is not really productive. And whatever commands we want Fischer to learn have to be taught very consistently and clearly tied to a marked behavior, and we have to stop slinging words at the dog.

It made good sense. It also made me aware of how easy it is to confuse the dog, how we sometimes change the directive mid-stream, come, now sit down, stay, go get the ball, etc. Its best, we are learning, to focus on one command, one verb, one set of behaviors at a time. It also makes me think of our scriptural commands, which may leave us cocking our head in a similar fashion, asking wait, which is it that you want me to do.

In one breath Jesus says, “come to me and I will give you rest.” In another, “go into all the world and make disciples.” Come follow me and I will make you fishers of men, and also if you want to follow me be ready to deny yourself and take up your own cross. But also, be still and know that I am God. At one moment we are to follow the written law/scripture, and in another moment to sit quietly and listen for the still small voice. We are told that it is through faith that we are saved, but also we show that we are saved by our good works. Ask and it shall be given to you, but also, seek first the kingdom of God. Come, go, be still, work, rest, seek. Which is it?

And then I realized why Fischer’s confused expression looked familiar, it is the expression that a preacher sometimes sees from the pulpit. Not because you all don’t know English, as is the case with a dog. And while there may be a number of factors contributing to such perplexed faces, perhaps preachers too throw too many verbs around, even as the scriptures do. We get our verbs jumbled up, our commands stacked on top of each other and we are not sure which to do. After all, we can spend daily time in the scriptures, we can worship weekly, we can talk about vision statements and the future of our church, and yet in the end of the day feel a little immobilized.

Well, we wrapped up the season of advent and Christmas officially last week with Epiphany and de-greening of the church. And so, our commands and focus are shifting. In advent, we were all about watching, waiting, anticipating. At Christmas, we celebrated. But, in our gospel reading this morning, we are now called to behold the lamb of God, and to come and see.

John's gospel moves quickly through Christ's coming into the world, quickly through John the Baptist's role as forerunner, and by the 29th verse of his gospel account, the forerunner is pointing to the Word made flesh, pointing to the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. John directs his followers' attention to Jesus. "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" And they start to physically follow this person to see what he is up to.

John says go, go follow the one. Jesus says, come and see. It is the beginning of Jesus calling disciples who will follow him, participate in his ministry, and carry it on. And so, the main verb change is from anticipating to following.

Now another thing that Linda, our puppy trainer insists is that your puppy is only going to do what you ask, whether that is to sit or to come or lay down, *if* there is something in it for them. They will only follow your commands if they trust it will consistently lead to something good. So, through this business of clicking and treating we are trying to associate certain behaviors with positive rewards or results, and so the trainers have to be consistent, therefore not disrupting that connection, the connection between following the command and getting a positive result.

And while the early disciples are not puppies, per se, and many of us are not always confident that this total positive approach always works, it is interesting that Jesus' first question to these curious individuals is "What are you looking for?" There is a reason they are following, and they are only going to follow if there is something in it for them, and so Jesus' question is apt: "What are you looking for?" What is it? It makes sense. Are they really going to follow if they don't trust that it will lead to good for them and for the world?

And what if Jesus was to turn to you and ask the same question? "What are you looking for?" What kind of reward or result would cause you to keep following Christ's commands, that would build confidence in you that if you follow Christ's commands, that it will lead to positive results? Because if we don't trust the journey, are we really going to press into it further? Are we really going to take steps of faith if we don't trust that they will be rewarded?

Or is it possible, that you are not confident that a journey of following Christ, both in the sense of walking in relationship with Christ, and following his teachings, will lead to any clear benefit? And therefore, perhaps you prefer other verbs, like be still, or rest, or celebrate, or receive, or to be on guard.

Maybe Linda is correct in her positive approach to training, that we won't really follow into the unknown if we don't trust that it will lead to what we are hoping for, that it won't lead to some positive outcome. And one thing that makes the journey of following Christ a little more complicated than puppy training, perhaps, is that it is an unfolding journey, it is one that is not 100% clear at the outset.

As these early disciples engage with Jesus, they figure that they will invite him to their home to begin to get to know him, offering hospitality, which is how I read their question: "Rabbi, where are you staying?" And Jesus response is "come and see." Rather than having him come into their familiar space as a place to get to know each other, he invites them to follow and in following discover along the way. Come and See. This does seem to be a consistent factor in the calling of Jesus' disciples, that they are invited into a relationship with this teacher, but they are not given a super clear picture at the outset where it would lead. They would have to follow to find out.

But, I wonder, if it wasn't the relationship with the teacher that they were seeking. Maybe the answer to Jesus' question of "what are you looking for?" is to walk in step with a teacher, a guide. Maybe that is why they are compelled to follow. Or perhaps they trust that John the Baptist is right, that Jesus truly is the lamb of God, truly the one foretold, truly the one on whom the Spirit has rested, and so they are willing to follow, willing to trust the outcome.

Come and See. Andrew seems confident that following this one will lead to positive rewards or results, is confident that Jesus' commands are worth following. So, he goes and gets his brother, Simon, and tells him, "We have found the Messiah." And when Simon comes, this unfolding journey is forecasted, for Jesus sees Simon and already is forecasting what he will become, changing Simon's name, forecasting an emerging identity and trajectory.

I think of the poem and this sense of journeying, of moving past the known and comfortable, confident that the unfolding journey will lead to something whole, something truer, something better. "But I must listen to the call of my heart – / The call that won't let me live content / Following worn paths walked by countless others."

I can't look upon the forest
In the midst of spring,
Watch the birds rest atop
The branches at the break of dawn,
Or feel the wind breathe across my face
Without the taste of some eternal truth
Lingering on the tip of my tongue,

He evokes a sense of some more satisfying truth and self out there which is worth the seeking, the journeying.

There are many scriptural directives, different liturgical seasons in our worship cycles. We have different postures that are appropriate to different seasons of life. Sometimes we are called to be still and listen for that still small voice, other times to pack up and go, to take the gospel to others. Sometimes we wait, sometimes we strategize. But through all of this, perhaps the most consistent command, and maybe one Linda would call one of the foundational ones to teach and learn, is to follow. To trust the one who leads us and to follow the unfolding journey of learning and becoming. This is true for the Old Testament people, being called to follow the Lord and his chosen leaders, like Moses and Aaron, across the wilderness and to a good home. This is true for Jesus and his followers.

And so in this season where we move from anticipating the messiah to beholding the messiah and listening to his call to follow and listen, we might consider what it means for us to follow in our day to day life. We might consider whether we truly trust that following Christ will lead us to the things we desire, to the things we seek.

And as we seek to follow this Christ in our modern world, as we try to understand what it might look like to follow Christ in our day to day life, or in our corporate life of the church, I think of what Linda actually did say was the most important behavior to teach in our puppies. The most important behavior is eye contact. It is to get your dog to regularly and consistently check in with you, to look back, to see what you are doing or directing. And I think the same is true for us. The most important behavior we might learn is to constantly redirect our eyes back to the lamb of God, the word made flesh, the one on whom the Spirit has rested, the one who invites us to come and see. To learn a habit of checking in, of connecting, of watching to see what he is up to, and what he might be directing us to, and what benefits we might gain by doing so.

And all God's people said... Amen.

The Lamb of God

(Mt 3:13–17; Mk 1:9–11; Lk 3:21–22)

²⁹ The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰ This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’ ³¹ I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.” ³² And John testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. ³³ I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ ³⁴ And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.”

The First Disciples of Jesus

³⁵ The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, ³⁶ and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” ³⁷ The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. ³⁸ When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, “What are you looking for?” They said to him, “Rabbi” (which translated means Teacher), “where are you staying?” ³⁹ He said to them, “Come and see.” They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. ⁴⁰ One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. ⁴¹ He first found his brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which is translated Anointed). ⁴² He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, “You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas” (which is translated Peter).