

## He Comes as One Unknown

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on January 24, 2021

Friendship Presbyterian Church

*Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."*

*As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him. (Mark 1:14-20, NRSV)*

Have you ever gotten into something ... started walking down a path ... with a heart full of optimism and hope, maybe thinking that you knew what you were doing, that you understood the possibilities involved in your actions? But the truth, you would discover, was that you had *no idea*.

In hindsight, you might be kind to yourself: How *could* you have known what you would face, and what it would mean, and what it would cost? But you followed that call, and now you know that you lived into more than you ever bargained for. And from this place of hard-earned experience, you may ask yourself that if you *had* known *then* what you know *now*, would you still have taken that path?

In our gospel text this morning, we witness those first disciples at the very beginning of *their* story, their journey alongside a compelling teacher from Nazareth. He came as one unknown to a small fishing village called Capernaum on the shore of the sea of Galilee. He came preaching a message not unlike that of his incarcerated kinsman John the Baptist ... a message of repentance, of a total change of heart and mind, for as he said, the Kingdom of God is near.

We are told then of how, as he walked along the seashore, he encountered two brothers – Simon and Andrew – at work with their nets. "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people," he said. And *immediately* they dropped everything and followed him. Centuries of interpreters have been fascinated by this detail. Did they know Jesus from sometime before? Had Jesus been preaching in the area for some time, and had they been listening? Or did Jesus' reputation precede him to Capernaum, and the brothers somehow recognize him?

We don't really have definitive answers to these questions. But we do know Simon and Andrew's response was then repeated with the eagerness of their fellow fishermen James and John, who answered the same call soon after. *Immediately*, the text tells us, they too left their boats and their families, and followed him.

Did they ... *could* they ... have had any idea at the time what they were getting themselves into? Could they have had any clue as to who this man really was? How could they just leave everything – and *everyone* – else behind and follow him? Again, we don't really know, but perhaps all this talk of the *Kingdom* made them feel like they were getting in on the greatest investment in the world! Perhaps they felt they had just come face-to-face with the Messiah ... that mighty King of prophecy who would finally usher in the Kingdom of God come to earth, which would with invincible power drive out the hated Romans and establish God's reign of justice and peace. Who *wouldn't* want to get in on the ground floor of that?

I remember those days in my own life, at the end of my college years, when I first felt certain of the call to ministry ... to leave behind the nets of my own ideas of the future to follow Jesus into ordained service. Once I had accepted this call and began preparations, it was an unbelievably exhilarating time, full of hope for what I was going to see and do in *Jesus'* name, with God on my side!

Perhaps you weren't quite so full of yourself at the start(!), but what were *you* expecting when you first sought to follow Jesus in an intentional way – in part expressed by making church a significant part of your life? What did you expect to learn, to do, to see?

This part – attending church – is not, for most people, an obvious thing ... But *you're* here, tuning in online. Whether in person or virtually, church is a part of your discipleship – at least today! Why? Perhaps it's mostly for the sense of community. Perhaps it's just that this place feels like home. Perhaps you're looking for peace and inspiration after a tough week and are preparing to face another. But however exactly we put it, we could say that at a deeper level we are hoping against hope that the church *might actually help us to know Jesus* ... through worship, prayer, study, and mission ... and that we are hoping to find in him what we truly need, what we most earnestly desire.

Surely this is the *ultimate* reason we bother to gather week after week – in the midst of so many other demands on our time and attention – and from a certain point-of-view, speak odd words and do strange things. Jesus is the subject of our liturgy, the star of our stories, often the addressee of our prayers, the host of our table. We come each week with his name on our lips, to hear his words, to eat and drink in remembrance of him, to serve him by serving others. He is at the center of all we're doing here. We all know that we *need* something in life, and somehow we've organized our life together around the idea that in following Jesus we can find it.

But something funny can happen as we give ourselves to the path and follow. If you've been on it for a while, you know the internal struggle. As we actually *live* this path and not just imagine what it *should* be like, we may experience for ourselves what millennia of common Christian testimony has confirmed. As we surrender ourselves in worship, submit ourselves to the teaching of the gospel, humble ourselves in service, and pour out our hearts in love and prayer ... day after day, month after month, year after year ... we may move beyond a Christian life of

naïve expectations ... beyond a comfortable religion that baptizes and confirms all our natural inclinations ... unveiling a life that is more than we ever bargained for.

When I was a young Presbyterian boy, we had special hymnals – beside the old red hymnbook – that I recollect we only used during our annual Lay Renewal services. I always enjoyed reading the appendix of that hymnal because it included quite a number of special readings, some from scripture, but also from other sources. Even though very young, I remember always being especially moved by one of those readings – words that had been pinned to the body of an anonymous soldier who lay dead at Gettysburg in 1863. I didn't really understand them at the time, because to my young mind they seemed counter to everything I expected out of being a Christian. But they always moved me and stayed with me all the same:

*I asked God for strength, that I might achieve.  
I was made weak, that I might learn humbly to obey.  
I asked for health, that I might do greater things.  
I was given infirmity, that I might do better things.  
I asked for riches, that I might be happy.  
I was given poverty, that I might be wise.  
I asked for power that I might have the praise of men.  
I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God.  
I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life.  
I was given life, that I might enjoy all things.  
I got nothing that I asked for, but got everything I had hoped for.  
Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.  
I am, among all men, most richly blessed.*

I didn't understand these words at the time. That understanding would only come with experience. Standing where I do now, while I can't begin to compare my hardships with his, I *do* understand the distance between what I *thought* the Christian life was about and the life I have lived. It's leaned over time towards less triumph and more awareness of brokenness ... towards being less about me and more about God. The Apostle Paul's familiar words about God's grace being sufficient for him and God's power being made perfect through his weakness ... those words ring true to me today in ways they never could when I was younger.

For in following this path of discipleship, we are not given a self-help plan for our own aggrandizement, but enter into the forest of life's challenges and uncertainties, where we are weaned from most everything we always thought we knew and from our reliance on anything and everything other than God himself.

And as we live into this truth, we may find that we truly hear the word of the gospels themselves, which also bear witness to the real Jesus who is more than we ever bargained for: the one whose idea of *greatness* is being the servant of all ... the one whose prescription for life is to deny ourselves and take up our crosses and follow him ... to *lose our lives* in love and service and so to *save* them.

All this was jarring to those first disciples then, as they wandered from village to village, town to town, ultimately to go to Jerusalem. They expected something else ... *someone* else. And when this word is presented, unvarnished, it's jarring now, too. This life and this Jesus don't quite turn out to be as we thought. Singing Jesus' praises as the Son of God and as King of Kings is easy. Actually following him on a journey of self-surrender, of self-giving love, into the vineyard of the world's hurt, is something else entirely. We learn that our path is the path of the cross.

But as we walk this path, our lived experience and the words of scripture come together. Our sight sharpens and we slowly come to see him as he is. Before our eyes will not be the Jesus of convention or of our expectations ... Not a Jesus who would reinforce our own fears or prejudices ... Not a Jesus who would take away our struggles or spare us from the sufferings of others. Before us will be one who is richly and deeply human – one who calls us to join him on the way, not to escape this world, but to live ever more deeply into it, to live ever more deeply into our humanity.

A little over a century ago, the great humanitarian, physician, and missionary Dr. Albert Schweitzer left behind a life *full* of words, in the academy, and simply sought to find suffering and heal it. He had written brilliant works of theology, learned tomes on the historical Jesus, but left for Africa for something *real* – to follow, serve, and know the *living* Jesus ... not the speculative Jesus of academic debates, nor the other-worldly Jesus of creeds and councils ... but the Jesus who lives among us today and still calls us, just as he called those first disciples long ago.

And there, he found him. Later in life, he wrote of this in words still astonishing in their power:

*[Jesus] comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside. He came to those who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same words: "Follow me!" and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.*

To the Glory of God. Amen.