**Accepting Jesus’ invitation to follow**

I remember when I started my journey into ministry, one of the frequent questions that I was asked was about my call story. The session asked, seminary asked, presbytery asked again and again and again… The first time, I was completely out of my depth. It wasn’t like I heard God’s voice thundering from the skies or anything like that. And how do you explain to someone that it was a feeling, deep inside that my life was about to change. That it was about people who saw something in me and asked whether I ever considered it. It was about those around me that affirmed that feeling inside of me.

There are plenty of those kind of stories in the Bible – not anything like my feeling, but God literary showing up or talking. There was Moses who saw a burning bush – hallucinating maybe? There was Samuel hearing God talking to him in the middle of the night – going a little nuts maybe? There was Ester, who heard from Mordecai that she was chosen to be queen for a “time” such as this. God called Mary, a teenage girl, to give birth to the Savior. God called Peter to be a rock upon which a church could be built. There was Paul who was struck with a bright light and fell off his horse on his way to Damascus to proclaim good news to the Gentiles… and we can go on and on.

A lot of ordinary folks think that this kind of story has nothing to do with them. It is only us preacher types, or priests and nuns who “gets a call”. But I beg to differ. Frederick Buechner, a theologian says: “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” We are created in the image of God, and I believe that we are all called to live into that image. The next four weeks we will explore this call to follow Jesus together, as Jesus invites us to “Come and See”, and what happens when we accept that invitation. How we continually practice adjusting our lives to live into loving God with all of our strength, heart, mind and soul and our neighbor like ourselves.

In our story today, four people encounter Jesus for the first time. Andrew, Peter, Philip and Nathanael, ordinary folk like you and me. They are not philosophers, rabbis, or politicians, but fishermen; working people. Some of them have heard about Jesus before from John, running around the desert in camelhair clothing, eating honey, telling people about the Messiah to come. And oh, were they hoping for this leader, this king, who would set them free from their suffering under the oppressive Roman Empire. Andrew, already a disciple of John, heard when he called Jesus the lamb of God. And sure, they dropped their nets, gave up everything to follow Jesus according to the other gospels, but John tells the story a little differently.

Andrew sees Jesus, when John points him, and decided to tag along. Jesus must have had that eerie feeling that someone was tailing him, so he turns around to ask: “What are you looking for?” That is such an awesome question!! What, indeed, are we looking for? I know it is not the car keys, or my glasses, although those sometimes find themselves in mysterious places. I think Andrew had a longing for something much deeper… something that he couldn’t quite put his finger on… something lifegiving and meaningful. It begs the question, what are we looking for? Why are we here this morning? Is it for fellowship? Is it because it was habit, or it is just the thing to do on Sundays? Or was it because your soul needs feeding, because you want to praise God, because this is where you find meaning? Why do we do yard sales, or blessing of the bikes or come to Maine for a mission trip? Is it maybe, just like Andrew, that we keep on looking for God… for where in the world he abides and how we can abide there with God? Is he hoping that this man who John was calling the Messiah could offer something different in his life?

Jesus’ answer was simple enough: “Come and see”. Because, in the end, to be a follower of Jesus in not an idea or a doctrine that we can memorize. It is a reality that we experience… a way of life that you can only know when you see it for yourself. Andrew was so excited about finding Jesus, or maybe about what he found in Jesus, that he went and found his brother, Simon. Simon, who Jesus will call Peter – the rock on which he will build God’s church.

I wonder when last we have been this excited about Jesus. When last have we been so excited about the church, the way we live our lives that we invited someone else to come and see? I do it so often with other things in my life, especially with Dawn. Did you see the moon tonight – come here and see!! Are we excited enough this morning to be here that we invited someone to come and find Jesus with us? Are we excited enough about McCleary House that we invite the community around us to come and participate in God’s work? Are we excited enough about being in Maine, about what we are doing here, seeing how God works in our lives and those serve that we invite others to come and join in the work? Do we know the love of Christ so well in our lives that we cannot help but go out and share this kingdom that God is establishing here and now?

For Philip, it was different. Jesus actually found him and invites him to follow. Sometimes it seems that God seeks us out directly and has a special call on our life – I guess that is how I got to be here, because I was certainly not looking for so much upheaval in my own life. And Philip did… and what he saw was once again, so exciting and different, that he runs of to Nathanael to share the good news.

Nathanael was more than a little skeptical. He just couldn’t believe that there was still good out there. He has seen the belly side of the Roman oppression, and just couldn’t believe that something out of Nazareth of all places could change that. And if that is you today, that is okay too. There are plenty in our society that are skeptical, me included. I find myself there often when I turn on the news or listen to stories of terminal illness and death and racism and hatred and children going to school hungry and people living on the streets when there is so much to go around. We all doubt at times, but hopefully we find our way to Jesus anyway, just as he finds his way to us. And sometimes, that is all we can hold onto, and decide to follow anyway.

One story, four disciples, each with a different experience, and a different reason to accept the invitation to follow Jesus. I hope that you can find yourself in one of these characters today, and still make the choice, no matter, to follow Jesus. Not just some random guy, but someone they heard about or saw in action. Not because they were forced, but because they were invited to come and see. Not because of Jesus’ great personality (although I bet it was), but because of what they saw and experience in taking that walking tour of God’s love and justice as it was taking shape and embodied in their lives.

Jesus taught them so much as they followed and learned. They saw love in action – healing, sharing, forgiveness, joy, friendship. Through his actions Jesus showed how to protect the weak and stand up for the oppressed, to feed the hungry and to care for the least of these. They saw the incarnate One showing the ultimate love of God when he suffered all the way to the cross and died so that we may have live.

You don’t have to be something special to receive Jesus’ invitation, and it certainly doesn’t have to be into some kind of ministry. We all have a role to play and gifts that we were given. We all have things that we are really good at, or that we care about a lot. And sure, some people do things on global scale, but many more of us do these things locally. Some are teachers forming the thought patterns of students. Some are firemen, caring enough to walk into dangerous situations to save people. Some are plumbers that keep our water running. Some are lawyers and some are doctors or nurses. Some are scientist who invent vaccinations… And in the end, all of these things make for a better world.

We all have different reasons for accepting this invitation. Whether it is because we longed for something deeper, or were found by Jesus, or invited by someone else, even if we come a little skeptical. But once we do, there is real life consequences. We cannot just live life for ourselves anymore. Accepting the invitation to follow Jesus, does not make one rich or famous. It may put you on the wrong side of a bad joke, leave you out of the in-crowd. It puts you face to face with the dark and oppressive places in the world to shine the light of God’s love. It takes you out of your comfort zone to stand up for justice, to love the prisoner, to be with the dying, to reach across divides and meet others where they are at. And there we find Jesus, and ourselves…

A rich donor was visiting Calcutta and met Mother Teresa. She pulled out her checkbook and said How can I help you in your work? Mother Teresa pressed the checkbook back into the woman’s purse, took her by the hand and said “Come and see.” She led the woman into an impoverished barrio, and found a hungry, frail child. “Care for her.” The woman took the child in her lap, wiped her brow, fed her. Transformative. Mother Teresa was right when she said When we care for a child, we are caring for Jesus. When we love the unloved, we are loving Jesus.

Jesus invites us to “come and see”… to experience God’s love. Jesus calls us to be fully alive—and in that living, to grow in faith, serve the church, and transform the world. May we all, everyday, accept the invitation to come and see, to meet Jesus in a fresh new way, and in our excitement, get others to join.