

“Getting Behind Jesus”

Sermon: Year B, Lent 2

Text: Mark 8:31–38, Genesis 17:1–7, 15–16

Preached: February 25, 2018 at Immanuel Lutheran Church

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord Jesus Christ, who calls us to get behind him.
AMEN

My dad was a very aggressive walker. I think I got that from him. One of my earliest memories as a little boy is racing to keep up with my father as he strode along ahead of me. My little legs were spinning three or four times to his single stride, and still he was ahead of me. It was frustrating, and I would plead with him to slow down so I could catch up. He always seemed to need to hurry, no matter where it was that he was headed. As a child, it seemed an impossibly fast pace, and even as an adult, my dad walked quickly, plunging headlong toward where he was going.

I was reminded of that when I had my first session with a child I was mentoring through the Kids' Hope program my previous congregation was involved in. We had gone to get his lunch from the school cafeteria, and then we headed toward the library where we could sit and talk. I knew where I wanted to go, and I was eager to meet and learn about this child, but I knew time was very short, and so I launched myself toward the destination, and got halfway down the hall before I realized he wasn't right beside me. I turned, and there he was, several paces behind, trying to balance his lunch tray, and struggling to keep up with me. I had become my father. I paused to let him catch up, then consciously moderated my pace so he could stay with me. Even so, though, I kept just a bit ahead of him, because I knew where I wanted us to go, and because there was a certain urgency to keep moving so we could take advantage of the time we had together.

Following is not always easy, is it? And that's true for a lot of reasons. It can be hard to follow someone because we have limitations...in effect, our “legs are too short,” and it takes a huge amount of energy and effort to keep up. Sometimes it's hard to follow someone because we lose sight of them. (Never try following me in a car, by the way. You will find yourself sitting at a stoplight watching my taillights disappearing in the distance.) Sometimes it's hard to follow because we get distracted, and turn to look at other things. Sometimes it's hard to follow because we prefer to proceed at our own pace, or prefer to choose our own route. Sometimes it's hard to follow because we don't entirely trust the person we're following, or because we think we know a better route. Sometimes it's hard to follow because we think we're the one who should be leading, and not vice versa. We have our own agendas, and we think we know best.

Today's gospel says a lot about following. There's the obvious line, where Jesus says, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, and take up their cross and follow me.” But also embedded in the story are other references to following. When Jesus says to Simon Peter, “Get behind me, Satan!” he's not saying “Get out of my sight!” No, actually what he's saying there is “Get in back of me...get back to following me.” Once again, our translations obscure something that is very, very obvious in the Greek, the language in which the gospel of Mark was written down. The phrase here is *opiso mou*, literally, “behind me,” and it is *exactly* the same phrase that was used several weeks ago when we heard the beginning of Mark's Gospel, when Jesus was calling Peter and Andrew, James and John, to leave their nets behind, to stop what they're doing, and to follow him. *Opiso mou*. Get behind me. Follow me.

And so, Jesus' words to Simon Peter now are a repetition of his first call to him: Come, get behind me, come follow me. They are words that are already familiar. They're a reminder. Maybe a stern reminder, but they're the very same words of Jesus' invitation to Simon, now called Peter. So it's not the first time Peter has heard these words, and it won't be the last. Jesus does something really interesting here. Peter has taken Jesus aside, leaving the other disciples clustered together, and privately takes Jesus to task for saying that he, Jesus, is going to suffer and die. Peter thinks he knows better. After all, he was the one who, in the story we heard a couple of weeks back, had just gotten a gold star for correctly identifying Jesus as the Messiah, the Anointed One. So Peter has to be thinking he's hot stuff here, that he has Jesus all figured out...to the point that he dares to correct Jesus about what he's teaching them. Peter tries to take the role of leader, rather than the role of follower. He thinks he knows better...just as Satan, the Adversary, thought he knew better than God. That's why Jesus calls him that, because he's willfully refusing to trust that Jesus knows best.

And that's when Jesus introduces some body language. Our translation obscures it, because it just says that Jesus turns and looks at his disciples, then begins rebuking Peter. But really what it says is that Jesus *turns around* and faces the other disciples before he even speaks to Peter. In other words, he literally turns his back on Peter as a demonstration of where Peter needs to be standing—in back of Jesus, ready to follow him wherever he leads. Jesus isn't telling Peter to get lost...he's telling him to find himself again, and to find himself in following the Master, rather than trying to make the Master follow him and his desires. And Jesus demonstrates with his body the position all of the disciples need to take.

Then Jesus turns to the crowd gathered around, and calls them, also, tells them to get in back of him, to follow. And he says it once again: *Opiso mou*. "Get behind me." Those are words that describe much more than simple location. They are words that describe the proper relationship between Jesus and those who desire to be his disciples. And that relationship is one of trust, a relationship that acknowledges that Jesus is the one who should be leading, because he knows where we need to go.

And where he leads is not to a cushy life of warm fuzzies and shining lights piercing the clouds as angelic voices sing. We can sometimes experience those things. But instead, where Jesus leads is down the road of sacrificial love, sacrificial giving for the good of others. He leads us down the path of the cross. As Bonhoeffer said, "When Christ calls [someone], he bids [that person] come and die." Jesus is not leading us so that we can have all of life's troubles taken away. No, he's leading us right through those troubles, leading us sometimes *into* troubles, all for the sake of the Good News of release for the captives, sight for the blind, food for the hungry, speaking truth to power. Because Jesus knows that God is not found in the grand and glorious and successful things as we humans consider them, but rather God is found in the lowly places, the humble places, and yes, even in the places of suffering and death. That is the Good News of the cross, that God is found right there with us in the midst of suffering, in the worst that can be experienced.

And Jesus tells us to get behind him and follow him right into those places of suffering, to follow him away from our love of ourselves, our love of our possessions, our love of power and control, our love of security and force, our worship of self-reliance, all those things our culture tells us are the highest values. He bids us to die to those things that control and define us. And he assures us that in following him down this path, in getting behind him on the way of the cross, we're really not losing ourselves. We define ourselves in the wrong ways, he says. Our life is not those things we think are so important. We're loving the wrong things.

Then Jesus speaks a paradox: Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for his sake, and for the sake of the Good News, will save their life—will rescue it, restore it to wholeness. And with that urgency we hear so often in the Gospel of Mark, that immediacy, Jesus leads them toward Jerusalem, toward the cross, leading them and demonstrating for them what sacrificial, life-giving love looks like. The curious Good News here is that true joy, true life, is found not in clinging to what we have and who we are, but in letting go of those things for the sake of the neighbor, for the good of the world, dying to some things in order that we might find true life both for ourselves and for others. It's the same call God issued to Sarai and Abram, to leave behind a comfortable urban existence and to head out to the desert to live as nomads, following God's leading in order to find blessing not only for themselves but for all of humanity. And just as Sarai and Abram were renamed Sarah and Abraham, just as Simon was renamed Peter, sometimes in the dying to ourselves we are given new identities, new names.

"But," we say, "it's so hard to follow! I can't possibly keep up with Jesus. My legs just aren't long enough! I lose sight of him. I don't know enough about the Bible. I'm not good enough. I do love my life too much to deny myself. I'm afraid of where he might lead me." And you know, we really don't know where he's going to lead us. But we do know this: We know Christ can be trusted. And the way of the cross teaches us that on the other side of dying is resurrection and new life. It all comes down to trusting, even when it seems laughable, even when it seems impossible that God could bring new life out of our letting go. And if you can't see Jesus at the moment, look around you at your brothers and sisters who are also trying to follow, and remember that you are not alone in this...we're all trying to follow, even when it's difficult.

No matter how imperfect our trust, no matter how many times Christ has to rebuke us and remind us to get back in back of him, following where we belong, we know that Christ can be trusted to lead us, that he will keep calling us back to follow, even when we've failed to do so, and that he is leading us to acts of self-giving love that call us away from ourselves, and out into the world that Christ loves so much. AMEN