

This is sermon number four in a series of examining what it means for God to have been embodied in the person of Jesus. Today we’ll be looking into how Jesus was called to live his life, and how he issued a call to those who wanted to follow.

It is interesting, none of the gospels share with us when the man, Jesus, knew what constituted his mission. We don’t read any heart-to-hearts with his parents sharing what the angels told them. In chapter two of the gospel, Luke tells us that

42 When (Jesus) was 12 years old, (his family) went up to Jerusalem (for the Passover celebration) according to their custom. 43 After the festival was over, they were returning home, but the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents didn’t know it. 44 Supposing that he was among their band of travelers, they journeyed on for a full day while looking for him among their family and friends. 45 When they didn’t find Jesus, they returned to Jerusalem to look for him. 46 After three days **they found him in the temple. He was sitting among the teachers, listening to them and putting questions to them.** 47 Everyone who heard him was amazed by his understanding and his answers. 48 When his parents saw him, they were shocked.

His mother said, “Child, why have you treated us like this? Listen! Your father and I have been worried. We’ve been looking for you!”

49 Jesus replied, “Why were you looking for me? **Didn’t you know that it was necessary for me to be in my Father’s house?**” 50 But they didn’t understand what he said to them.

So, according to Luke, even as a child Jesus had a sense that he was called to dwell in the word of his “Father”. I LOVE this as building block #1 toward emulating our call after Jesus. He is immersing himself in scripture. And he’s not just blithely soaking in the lessons of the rabbis; he is questioning them. In our day and age, so much of scripture is handed to us as THE WORD OF GOD. We don’t give a lot of opportunities (or, maybe even permission), for people to ask questions - and challenge assumptions - about scripture. Jesus was already steeping himself in scripture in order to prepare to **apply it** as he lived his life. And not just live it in a status quo kind of way either! Jesus would actually end up rocking his world by giving new life to old teachings that had become stale. Perhaps our faith-lives can be enlivened as we explore just how unconventionally Jesus followed God’s word, and yet how true to the spirit of it he was.

All FOUR gospels tell the story of Jesus’ baptism. And how the voice of this heavenly Parent spoke a word of blessing upon Jesus; giving the official stamp of authenticity to what was about to follow.

The Synoptics (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) all tell stories of Jesus immediately being swept into the wilderness after his baptism. There he spent 40 days being tempted by Satan (Greek = *adversary (one who opposes another in purpose or act)*). Matthew and Luke go into detail about how the Adversary sought to tempt Jesus - offering him ultimate power and privilege, if only Jesus will worship the Adversary. With each of the three temptations, Jesus quotes the Hebrew Scriptures with the ultimate message that "One shall worship God alone."

Jesus' time in the wilderness mirrors our own - his 40 days are equivalent to our lives. We are tested and tried, with all manner of situations that could lead us away from God and making us to believe that we have dominion over our lives. Jesus' refrain is a siren call to us that no matter what occurs in our lives, God alone is sovereign and, in the words of Psalm 28, God alone is our strength and shield (v.7).

So, Point 1 in this sermon is just that. Jesus began his public ministry being invited to take advantage of his power and privilege, and instead, he humbly drew upon his humanity and **relied on God**. The gospels tell us that when the trial was over, angels waited upon him. We can rest assured that angels will come along (usually disguised as fellow humans ;)) and attend to us even in the midst of our vulnerabilities.

After his experience in the wilderness, Jesus understood that his most important duty was to help people understand just how important it was

to orient their lives toward God. And so he made it his mission to call people to change their hearts and lives! So that they could claim the kin-dom of heaven in their midst. (Mt 4:17) In Luke, Jesus illustrated the presence of the kin-dom when he taught in the synagogue, pulled out the scroll of Isaiah, and read to the people:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

20 He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the synagogue assistant, and sat down. Every eye in the synagogue was fixed on him. 21 He began to explain to them, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it." (Luke 4:19-21)

With his call defined, he set out to find people to apprentice with him. He spent time training these disciples in the way of the Kin-dom of God. And as he "preached the good news" myriads of others asked to follow his Way. And for each individual, Jesus called them to respond to his teaching or his healing in a different way. The stories and responses are interesting.

There's the blind man named Bartimeaus who called out to Jesus as he was walking past: "Son of David, have mercy on me." Jesus asked him, "What

do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said, "Teacher, I want to see."

52 Jesus said, "Go, your faith has healed you." At once he was able to see, and he began to follow Jesus on the way. (Mark 10)

Mark and Luke each have a series of three healings in which Jesus' call is different for each individual. (Mark 5 and Luke 8) In the first story, Jesus relieves a man who is possessed by a host of demons. Jesus casts the demons into a herd of pigs who run off into the sea. When the man, who is now in his right mind, returns to Jesus and asks to follow him, Jesus says, "Return home and tell the story of what God has done for you." So he went throughout the city proclaiming what Jesus had done for him.

He is then called to heal the daughter of a temple leader - the girl is perilously ill. On the way to her, he is pressed in by a crowd and is secretly touched by a woman

who had been bleeding for twelve years. 26 She had suffered a lot under the care of many doctors, and had spent everything she had without getting any better. In fact, she had gotten worse. 27 Because she had heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his clothes. 28 She was thinking, If I can just touch his clothes, I'll be healed. 29 Her bleeding stopped immediately, and she sensed in her body that her illness had been healed.

When Jesus stopped and asked who had touched him.

33 The woman, full of fear and trembling, came forward. Knowing what had happened to her, she fell down in front of Jesus and told him the whole truth. 34 He responded, “Daughter, your faith has healed you; go in peace, healed from your disease.”

Jesus not only healed her, but, seemingly knowing the ordeal she had been through, bids her simply, yet profoundly, to “go in peace.” That is, to live her life freed from all that had been burdening her: the adverse medical care that had drained her of her resources; the stigma resulting of her bleeding issue - Jesus gave her life.

Back to the third story in this series, Jesus literally gave life back to the young girl of the religious leader. By the time he arrived at her house, the girl appeared to be dead. Jesus calmly went to her and bid her to “get up.” Which she did, not only alive, but fully restored to health. In this instance, Jesus “gave them strict orders that no one should know what had happened.” He calls them into silence. Of course, usually when he did that, the opposite would happen and people, out of their joy, would share the good news.

All of this sounds great, until we glean the impact of Jesus’ work. As he preaches and teaches and does so in nonconforming ways (like healing on

the Sabbath), Jesus is noticed by the powers-that-be, and it is clear that his path will lead to a clash. And his calls began to grow more challenging to those who wanted to follow him:

“The (Christ) must suffer many things and be rejected—by the elders, chief priests, and the legal experts—and be killed and be raised on the third day.”

23 Jesus said to everyone, “All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross daily, and follow me. 24 All who want to save their lives will lose them. But all who lose their lives because of me will save them. (Luke 9, underline added)

Whoa there, buddy. Nobody said anything about sacrificing our lives to this cause. We’re happy to preach the good news, and share God’s love, and stuff, but to be expected to risk jail time, loss of family, even death is going beyond the pale.

And yet, this is where we find ourselves within the story Robin read from Luke 9. A few verses earlier, the writer tells us, “As the time approached when Jesus was to be taken up into heaven, he determined to go to Jerusalem.” (v51) “Jerusalem” is a euphemistic term for “the place where Jesus would be rejected, killed, and raised on the third day.” There is a weighty feel to this introduction. So it makes sense that when someone comes up to Jesus and his disciples on the road and says, “I will follow you

wherever you go,” Jesus doesn’t joyfully say, “Well, fall in line pardner.” Instead he shares the depth of what following up on that request really means: (Luke 9)

58 Jesus replied, “Foxes have dens and the birds in the sky have nests, but the Human One has no place to lay his head.”

59 Then Jesus said to someone else, “Follow me.” He replied, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” 60 Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead. But you go and spread the news of God’s kingdom.”

61 Someone else said to Jesus, “I will follow you, Lord, but first let me say good-bye to those in my house.” 62 Jesus said to him, “No one who puts a hand on the plow and looks back is fit for God’s kingdom.”

Each of these three saying speak to the sacrifices that would need to be made in order to follow Jesus. Jesus even one-ups the prophets in the stringency of his call. His reference to laying a “hand on the plow” in the last scenario corresponds to the story of the prophet Elijah’s call to his apprentice Elisha. (1 Kings 19) When Elijah met the young prophet plowing his fields and called him to follow, the younger asked if he could say goodbye to his family. Elijah bid him to do so. Apparently, the younger did, and then to complete his task of putting his past behind him, he

slaughtered his ox-team, and had a farewell barbeque. And that was it, he was gone, fully investing in what his mentor called him to do.

It appears that Jesus isn't as generous as Elijah. Once the call has come, there is NO LOOKING BACK. Essentially, by following Jesus one is letting go of their past, letting go of security, and fully investing their very lives in the matter of--going back to Jesus in the temple--preaching good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, liberating the oppressed, and proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor. And accepting the repercussions that will be brought about because of such behavior.

One last story. We recall the certain ruler, as told about in Luke 19, who

asked Jesus, "Good Teacher, what must I do to obtain eternal life?" 19 Jesus replied, "...20 You know the commandments: Don't commit adultery. Don't murder. Don't steal. Don't give false testimony. Honor your father and mother." 21 Then the ruler said, "I've kept all of these things since I was a boy."

22 When Jesus heard this, he said, "There's one more thing. Sell everything you own and distribute the money to the poor. Then you will have treasure in heaven. And come, follow me." 23 When he heard these words, the man became sad because he was extremely rich.

Accepting the call to follow Jesus should not be done lightly. And yet, the irony is that the news that comes from Christ is **good news**. The truth that comes from Christ, sets people free! The Way of Christ may not make us *happy* - but it is filled with joy when we live into it, and discover others who have been liberated by it.

There's no bow to tie on this sermon - for the call to follow Jesus is challenging and it is ongoing. The solace we take into the journey is that God has been accompanying God's people forever - and God has responded to hardship and to ease faithfully. And this God will continue to do.

There's a hymn we love to sing that speaks to the call of responding to God's faithfulness. It is called "Here I Am, Lord." The liner note of GtG#69 says, "The stanzas need to be understood as representing the voice of God, while the refrain is the faithful human response to God's call. This becomes clearer if a leader or small group sings the stanzas, with the congregation joining on the refrain."

We are going to sing it that way today, with members of the ensemble singing the voice of God, and having us all in turn respond with "Here I Am, Lord, it is I Lord, I have heard you calling in the night. I will go, Lord, if you lead me, I will hold your people in my heart."