

One of our dearest members shared a little humor with me this week (I mean “a little” humor). *The secret to a good sermon is to have a good beginning and a good ending; and have the two as close together as possible!* I remember the first meeting I had with Shenango Presbytery’s Candidates Committee, which we now call the Committee on Preparation for Ministry. Although I can’t remember his name, the pastor from the Hungarian church in Sharon, PA looked me straight in the eyes and put to me a question that I had never been asked before. He said, “What or who is it that moves you? What is motivating you to seek ordination to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament at this time?”

That was an excellent question; one which I myself have asked inquirers and candidates as a member of Pittsburgh Presbytery’s Committee on Preparation for Ministry and I’ve asked students from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary as their field education supervisor. Although Matthew doesn’t say that anyone was asking him a similar question, verse 12 gives us a clue as to what motivated Jesus to begin his ministry at this time. “*When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he withdrew to Galilee.*” The immediate cause of this new beginning was the end of the public ministry of John the Baptist.

Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee. Matthew tells us where, how, and why Jesus began his ministry. This follows his Baptism which was his call to ministry and his Temptation when Jesus decided how to fulfill his calling as the Messiah. Jesus moves from Nazareth to Capernaum as the headquarters of his ministry. Matthew sees his coming to the Sea of Galilee as the fulfillment of Jesus training for ministry. He is “certified ready to receive a call” as we would say in Presbyterian terms. He can go out and look for a job. He begins his ministry by calling four disciples. His message is repentance. His ministry focuses on three things: preaching, teaching, and healing.

For a moment, stand with Andrew and Peter fishing by the sea, or sit with James and John seated in a boat with their father. The familiar sea air reeks with a sense of security. Would you suddenly drop everything known best to you and go traipsing off to who-knows-where with a man who Matthew seems to think is the “*great light*” that Isaiah said would come to “*the people living in darkness?*” When you hear this man say “*follow me,*” would you not first want him to tell you something about where you would be going and what you would be doing? Would you not want some assurance of a worthwhile pay-off for embarking on such a risky journey? Perhaps you would think to yourself: Fishing on Lake Galilee may not seem like much, but it’s a way to make a living. And this is my home.

When we really hear Jesus’ invitation – “*follow me*” – it is as if time and place fade. His words slice through two millennia since he first spoke them and when we first hear them. Questions leap to our minds: What do those words from the mouth of Jesus mean for our lives? Is there any relationship between the implications of those words back then and their application now?

Let’s be honest about this. Familiarity and distance dull sensitivity. We have read the stories of discipleship and heard the words of Jesus so many times that their sharp edges have been blunted, their tendency to shock have been stifled, and their radical nature erased. And they seem to come from a time that is no more. Often I wonder if we even can hear those words from Jesus today, much less obey them and follow him.

If we are really honest, most of us may admit that we do not really believe a person can live in the world today as Jesus instructed us to live. Just when we think we can agree with him on something like the authority of the law, he breaks a law in the interest of compassion. It's hard to abide this kind of unpredictability: law that is subjected to compassion. Think of what chaos that would cause in our communities. We understand justice, but Jesus elevates grace and mercy over justice. Enforcing the law is the only fair thing to do. How on earth could we expect anyone ever to learn the important differences between right and wrong when Jesus makes forgiveness and rehabilitation superior to punishment? That's no way to run a church, much less a society.

Jesus' vision defies reason. He knows the power of coins, the might of military forces, and the influence of government control, but he insists that nothing equals love in importance. What's more, he expects us to live by such love. Why, Jesus commends help for the poor as the ultimate indication of authentic religion. He seems to honestly believe that responses to the poor reflect people's love for God or lack of it. And if that is not enough, Jesus tells us to forgive people who have done us wrong, to pray for our enemies, and to return good for evil. Can you believe it? Literally, can you believe it?

Look carefully at this man from Nazareth, at Isaiah's "great light." He does not invite our reflection on a theory. Rather he asks for obedience to his summons that can alter reality. He is serious, not dead serious, but alive serious.

We must be honest here, at least with ourselves even if with no one else. Following Jesus is not all it is cracked up to be in contemporary Christianity. To follow Jesus means to pay attention to aspects of life that we prefer to ignore and to stop talking out of both sides of our mouths to please everybody. It means coming down on the side of grace even if it means bearing the brunt of harsh criticism. It means practicing a stewardship of life based on recognition that everything we have belongs to God, and that everything finds its best use when channeled into support for loving actions. It means turning loose our prejudices—to stop putting other people down in an effort to elevate ourselves. It means supporting the work of God in the world, not out of the excess of our resources, but out of the fullness of God's good gifts.

When Jesus showed up that day in front of Peter, Andrew, James and John, they did not know what we know about the One who called their names and asked for their loyalty. My goodness, we have thousands of years of evidence of the credibility of this man's vision, the impact of his authority, and the power in his healing. But, still we hesitate to heed his call. I am totally amazed that those men followed Jesus with such immediacy. What did they see?

Not long ago an international team of astronomers, led by Yale University and the University of California scientists, pushed back the cosmic frontier of galaxy exploration to a time when the universe was only 5 percent of its estimated age of 13.8 billion years. The team discovered an exceptionally luminous galaxy more than 13 billion light years away (i.e. in the past) and determined its exact distance from Earth using the combined data from NASA's Hubble and Spitzer space telescopes, and the Keck 10-meter telescope at the Keck Observatory in Hawaii. These observations confirmed it to be the most distant galaxy currently measured, setting a new record.

Scientists have estimated the age of the Universe to be 13.8 billion years old (give or take 120 million years). So don't miss this point. When we observe an object that is 13 billion light years away, we are essentially observing it as it was 13 billion years ago, when the Universe was young. Through these ultra-powerful space telescopes we are viewing a galaxy as it existed long ago, when it was only about 100 million years old.

By the way, everyone knows that light travels at 186,000 miles per hour. Right? *No*. It doesn't. Light travels at 186,000 miles per SECOND, not per hour. That's how astronomers come up with these billions of light years that separate Earth from distant stars. A light-year is the distance light travels in one year. How far is that? Close to 6 billion miles! The numbers get very large!

So, let's put everything in perspective. The numbers are very large and there are too many stars in the night sky for scientists to count them all, and some are just too far away. Nor can we count the billions of people that have answered the call to follow the *great light* of Jesus over the last 2000 years. To be sure, many have accepted him as their Savior. Many have confessed him as the Son of God. Many have joined a church in his name. But what about following him—honestly, totally following him? At the center of Christianity stands a response—the response we give to the call to follow Jesus.

A *great light* overtakes the darkness of our lives and we can't seem to look away from this light because our eyes are transfixed by it. In a way it's like the scientists that recently discovered the farthest galaxy away from Earth. They can't take their eyes off of it.

At that point in our lives, worlds collide, kingdoms intersect, authorities vie for power, priorities compete for recognition, and lives change forever or remain on a course pretty much the same as it always has been.

The importance of Jesus' words "follow me" is found not in how a group of fishing buddies responded to him by the Sea of Galilee long before we were born, but in how we respond to him today. Jesus fully reveals his *great light* to those who obey, those who in toils, conflicts, and sufferings experience his fellowship. By responding "yes," by following him as he has commanded, in looking at the Great Light, we learn who Jesus is.

How do we see this Light? We won't need a telescope. We do need the eyes of faith.

Now...let us pray.