

Come, Lord Jesus – make these words your Word, that our hearts may become your heart. Amen.

Have you ever followed anyone?

Been a devotee of a guru, a teacher, a money manager, a public figure?

We don't place a high value on "following" in our culture... unless it's on social media.

In Jesus' time, people who were serious about their spiritual life would find a master to follow, whom they would serve, whose teachings they would learn, whose way of life they would adopt. Even so, it's hard to imagine how those fisherfolk could just leave everything and follow Jesus.

But Jesus came along and made an invitation, and a command, and a promise.

An invitation, a command, a promise.

The invitation is "Come." Be in relationship with me.

The command is "Follow." Go where I lead.

The promise is "I will equip you."

Did Jesus come along and see that these fisherman had the people skills, the intestinal fortitude, the spiritual quality to be effective preachers, healers, and witnesses? No. He said, 'I see you can fish. That's a skill I can help you translate into the skills you're going to need. Come, follow me, I will equip you for the ministry to which I'm calling you. And then I will send you.'

Engage. Equip. Empower. That's my mantra for us at the Christ Churches.

When we make a decision to follow Christ we enter into a relationship, not a five-year plan. We enter a training program, not a career... and gradually we discover that the training program is the career; the relationship is the plan.

And we never get a print-out of the whole journey.

We get the next bit, or we get a strong sense to do something, or call someone.

We learn to listen, to act; we tune our wiring as we grow in relationship.

And as we take each step, the landscape changes and we see more clearly the step after that.

My favorite movie about faith is *Field of Dreams*, in which an Iowa farmer hears repeated whispered instructions to plow under his lucrative corn field and build a regulation-size baseball diamond.

There is a command, and a promise: *If you build it, he will come.*

He becomes convinced this voice is for real, and he enters in.

He doesn't know who "he" is, but he obeys.

He builds the diamond, and soon a whole two teams' worth of dead major league baseball players start materializing through the corn and playing games.

His hero, Shoeless Joe Jackson, is one of them. Babe Ruth. Everybody.

They're so excited to have a place to play again.

But there's more. He doesn't get told the whole picture up front –

he just has to keep doing the next thing, and the next thing.

When he's flagging, the voice whispers, *Go the distance.*

At one point, when his wife is really starting to think he's off the rails, they both

have the same dream on the same night, and realize they have to keep going.

They drive to Boston and at Fenway Park they see another clue in the scoreboard.

Instructions keep being revealed to them, gradually, as they follow.

And in time, the "he" that the voice was whispering about appears –

his own father, from whom he was estranged.

God has a purpose for us, a destination.

But what happens if we ignore the guidance?

I wish we'd heard more of the story of Jonah this morning, not just the snippet

that was our first reading. It's a great story of a reluctant prophet.

God gives Jonah clear instructions: Go to Nineveh and tell them if they repent of their evil ways, I will not send the punishment they deserve.

Nineveh was a wicked place, let's call it the Las Vegas of the ancient near east.

What happened in Nineveh stayed in Nineveh!

Jonah doesn't want to offer those people the chance at forgiveness;

he wants them to fry. So he catches a ship going the other direction.

What does God do? Sends a storm, shipwreck, big fish... three days in the belly,

and then the fish hiccups Jonah up onto a beach. And there's that voice again:

"Okay, now go to Nineveh and tell them, if they repent, I will spare them."

This time he goes – still reluctantly – and they do repent. Right away.

And Jonah is furious –he does not want to see God be merciful to them.

Sometimes we run the opposite way because we don't approve of what

God is up to. Sometimes we run away because we're afraid of what

God's plan is going to do to our lives. Well guess what?

Jonah is a great story of how God will wait us out.

We can completely ignore God's guidance, but if God is truly calling us to something, God will find a way to bring it back in to our picture. And if we don't feel God calling us to a particular something, know that God is always calling us into deeper relationship. God's guidance isn't always booming... sometimes it feels vague, and learning to follow means learning to trust when it's God speaking, and when it's you. Eventually you'll get confirmation.

The vestry will tell you, they took awhile to get around to calling me, and then I took awhile to say "yes" – I couldn't imagine living in Southern Maryland. But after I started I got to see how wonderful these two congregations were – and God led me to a home where I get to see water every day. Confirmation.

God does guide us, and as we learn to be better receptors, we get guided a lot. I've talked about my sense that our mission may well be around diversity, setting up Circles of Difference where conversations can happen among folks who see the world differently. Well, darned if the Episcopal Church doesn't come up with a set of questions to guide just the kind of conversations. There is a destination ahead – we're given the route as we go.

And there is a relationship with Jesus to build now. We aren't called to be disciples of a church. The church is simply the gathering place from which disciples of Jesus are nurtured, formed, sent and supported. When we get too attached to the place, the congregation, the organization, we can get too rooted. We forget about being disciples. We forget "Come, follow me." And Jesus comes along and stops and looks at us. "Follow me," he says. "I've got bigger fish for you to catch. I've got other nets for you to cast. I've got stuff in store for you you can't even imagine. Come on."

I don't know exactly what God plans to do through this congregation, but signs like the increasing numbers participating in spiritual growth programs, and our financial health tell me we are being positioned for great things, bigger fish. "Follow me and I will teach you to catch people," Jesus said. The command to follow came with a promise of purpose. Everything we're doing can lead to something bigger. Tutoring can lead to relationships across boundaries of difference. Sacred Ground can lead to our leading a county-wide anti-racism initiative.

As in *Field of Dreams*, our destination is reconciliation with the Father,
restoration to the fullness of a relationship once broken;
a cosmic, never-ending game of catch in the summer twilight.

And as we build that dream, others come.

At the end of the movie, the whispered promise changes from

If you build it, he will come to If you build it, they will come...

As word gets out about this ghostly ball field where the greats of baseball
play nightly, we see cars lined up on the exit ramp off the interstate,
people willing to come and pay for the privilege of participating in this miracle;
the farmer's investment repaid and then some.

As we move from "Come and see," to "Follow me"

we are invited to say, "Yes, Lord, I'm in. I'm following."

We become willing to be engaged in relationship, equipped for ministry;
empowered to transform others.

If we build it, they will come.

Amen.

Mark 1:14-20

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 sea-- 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.

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.