

Lake Shore Baptist Church
Sermon January 26, 2010

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Title: *Not All Who Wander Are Lost*

Text: Matthew 4:12-23

One of British author J.R.R. Tolkien's memorable characters is the hobbit, Bilbo Baggins. Tolkien describes hobbits as little people, about half our height, and smaller than the bearded Dwarves. Hobbits have no beards. There is little or no magic about them, except the ordinary everyday sort which helps them to disappear quietly and quickly when large stupid folk like you and me come blundering along, making a noise like elephants which they can hear a mile off. They are inclined to be fat in the stomach; they dress in bright colours (chiefly green and yellow); wear no shoes, because their feet grow natural leathery soles and thick warm brown hair like the stuff on their heads (which is curly); have long clever brown fingers, good-natured faces, and laugh deep fruity laughs (especially after dinner, which they have twice a day when they can get it).

Bilbo Baggins is a hobbit who enjoys a comfortable, unambitious life, rarely traveling any farther than his pantry or cellar. But his contentment is disturbed when the wizard Gandalf and a company of dwarves arrive on his doorstep one day to whisk him away on an adventure.

Gandalf says, "I am looking for someone to share in an adventure that I am arranging, and it's very difficult to find anyone."

Our hobbit, Bilbo Baggins responds, "I should think so — in these parts! We are plain quiet folk and have no use for adventures. Nasty disturbing uncomfortable things! Make you late for dinner!"

It's clear how the hobbit feels about adventures. He's pretty much a homebody. He doesn't stray far from what is familiar — either in geography or experience. Yet, he goes.

Journey stories are everywhere. They fill our novels, short stories; our films. Think about King Arthur and the knights going out on a quest, American pioneers crossing the wilderness, Marco Polo traveling to the Far East.... Homer's *Odyssey* from Ancient Greece, Huck Finn and Jim traveling down the Mississippi, *Around the World in 180 Days*, *Easy Rider*, *Thelma & Louise*. Israelites in the desert for 40 years....

Here's another: Space: the final frontier. These are the voyages of the starship *Enterprise*. Its five-year mission: to explore strange new worlds. To seek out new life and new civilizations. To boldly go where no man has gone before!

Ignoring the split infinitive, which I hope you will when I split one, from ancient to modern times, journey stories are deep within our psyche. They speak very powerfully

to us at the deepest levels of our existence. I also think it's why when you drive to Ft. Worth, along the road you see massive lots filled with recreational vehicles.

Journey is simply in our blood.

Highly influential scholar, Joseph Campbell, studied the archetypal stories of cultures around the world. He described the beginning of something as a "*Call to Adventure*." Sounds like the call that went out to Bilbo Baggins, doesn't it?

What about the call from today's gospel reading? Isn't Jesus issuing a "call to adventure" to the two pairs of brothers? Andrew & Peter; James & John? He doesn't tell them where they're going to go, what they're going to do, how they will eat, where they will stay, who will go with them. Jesus simply says, "Come, follow me."

How would you respond? I think I would likely say, "Yeah, right." Follow you where? Follow you when? Follow you how? I can hear these men say, "Jesus, I've done some personality assessments. They tell me I'm a person who likes to plan things out, know what's coming. I don't deal well with all this ambiguity. Give me some more information, please."

Would that be *your* response? Are you like me? A little bit skeptical? questioning? I mean *who* walks away from their job and their family like this? Who does something this crazy?

And yet, they go. They drop what they're doing and they do exactly what Jesus asks, "Come, follow me." Their only qualification was a willingness to walk away from the life they had and walk toward Jesus.

I've heard this text preached many times through the years. And I must confess I've questioned many of those sermons. Many of them seemed to make these about-to-become disciples into something like robots. It's as if they suddenly just turn their minds off and become zombies. As if they no longer have any earthly concerns at all.

Just because the text doesn't mention their concerns doesn't mean they're not there. I think the text assumes that the disciples continue to have ongoing struggles of many kinds, more than can be described by the gospel writer.

Struggles just like we would have starting out on a journey. A journey about which the disciples know so little. They don't know where Jesus is going to take them, how they will get there, where they will sleep, and what they will eat.

They have stepped into a new space. The space between what has been and what will be, between the already and the not yet.

They have stepped into what scholars call liminal space.

Researcher Susan Beaumont describes liminal space as a "...threshold moment. Liminality is the in-between space when you are neither here nor there..."

Most all of the great biblical stories were about figures who went through seasons of liminality, times of transformation, times of being shaped more closely to the image of God. Adam and Eve fell from grace and ever since then mankind has been on a continuous journey toward redemption. Ruth gives up her identity as a Moabite, moves to Judah with her mother-in-law, marries Boaz and becomes the great grandmother of King David. Joseph is thrown into a pit, carried off to Egypt by slave traders and experiences his own season of liminality, one that eventually leads to his saving his own people from starvation. Jesus spends forty days in the wilderness, struggling with the *in-between-ness* of his journey. Paul starts out as a persecutor of the church. He's struck blind on the road to Damascus. He descends into a period of darkness and emerges as a champion of Christ's church. He is no longer who he was, but he has taken on a new identity. More has changed about him than simply the restoration of his sight. He's a new person.

Beaumont describes these stories this way: "Each biblical journey is a venturing forth: an ending, followed by a disorienting season of transition, and finally a reorientation to something new that is substantially different from what was left behind."

"The Christian story is, by design, an invitation into liminality. The hoped-for reign of God is already inaugurated in the figure of Jesus Christ, but not yet complete. We embrace an understanding of our eternal lives as liminally suspended until the final return of Christ. We have already been redeemed, but the fulfillment of that redemption will not be complete until the end times when Christ returns. Our theology frames an identity for us of semi-permanent liminality."

Think about the ancient Hebrews after they left Egypt:

"The Israelites weren't in the wilderness very long before they began grumbling about how nice it had been back in Egypt, where things were at least predictable and stomachs were full. They alternated between begging Moses to go back and demanding to know how quickly they might move forward. The Israelites endured a lengthy liminal era during which they struggled to leave behind their identity as slaves. They discovered a new identity and social structure better suited for a free and chosen people. Reorientation occurred as they settled into the promised land some forty years later."

Beaumont continues speaking about the biblical characters: "Everybody is drawn out of, "I was this kind of person in this settled place, and then that identity undid itself and God took me to a new identity...Liminal seasons are challenging, disorienting, and unsettling."

Whether they realized it or not, I think this was exactly what the disciples chose when they decided to follow Jesus that day by the Sea of Galilee. They were entering an in-

between season, a time where the old way of being was being carefully examined and a new way of being was emerging. The gospels clearly illustrate that this process took place in a season, not an instant. And I think that's true for us, too.

So, how do we get through these seasons of in-between? How do we deal with all this ambiguity? What do we need to help us through all this wandering?

One of the foundational truths of today's text, is that the disciples followed. Following is not as easy as it sounds. It takes some intentionality to navigate liminal space, that place between the already and the not yet.

Here are some of my suggestions:

First of all, the *disciples followed Jesus*. They left behind their nets and their boat. That was no small thing for fishermen. They left behind their entire way of life.

Sixteenth century writer and contemplative, Ignatius of Loyola gave us what I believe to be some valuable instructions about navigating liminality. I also think they resonate with how the disciples answered Jesus' call.

Ignatius wrote about what he called *Holy Indifference*. Holy indifference is the capacity to **let go** of what doesn't help me to love God and/or love others—**while staying engaged with what does**.

We see Holy indifference in the prayer of Mary after she's been told she will give birth to the Messiah. Think about the liminality of that season in her life. She was certainly in the middle between the already and the not yet. A part of her *not yet* was on the way in nine months. And it must have been frightening. Yet, she said to God's messenger, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

When Jesus prayed in the Garden before his crucifixion, he prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what *I* want but what *you* want."

The Apostle Paul put it this way in Galatians (2:19f-20): "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

The early church leader Augustine said it this way: "Our hearts are restless until they rest in thee."

It's this singular focus on God, God's love, and God's redemptive work through love that provides the rock to which we can hold during these seasons of in-between.

And Holy Indifference does not mean not caring. It's not some kind of turning yourself off to the world around you. One can be characterized by holy indifference and yet be deeply passionate. In fact, since God is love and God's redemptive work takes place

through love, we cannot be indifferent in the Ignatian sense *unless* we love and love deeply.

Again, Holy indifference is the capacity to **let go** of what doesn't help me to love God and/or love others—**while staying engaged with what does**.

We must seek what God wants for us. Nothing more. Nothing less. Like the disciples, we have to leave some things behind, drop some things right where they are, and follow Jesus. We focus on God's love and how God is using God's love to transform each of us and all of us together as we negotiate this time between the already and the not yet.

Edwin Catmull is the retired President of Pixar and Walt Disney Animation Studios. He's received five Academy Awards and is famous for his promotion of creative cultures. Catmull says this about liminality: "There is a sweet spot between the known and the unknown where originality happens. The key is to be able to linger there without panicking."

One of my prayers for us as individuals and as a congregation is that we can patiently wait on God to speak to us during this time of transition.

Liminal seasons are where we are able to find our truest identity, if we're willing to wait.

As the prophet Isaiah (40:28-31) said,

Have you not known? Have you not heard?
 The Lord is the everlasting God,
 the Creator of the ends of the earth.
 He does not faint or grow weary;
 his understanding is unsearchable.
²⁹ He gives power to the faint,
 and strengthens the powerless.
³⁰ Even youths will faint and be weary,
 and the young will fall exhausted;
³¹ but those who *wait for the Lord* shall renew their strength,
 they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
 they shall run and not be weary,
 they shall walk and not faint.

As Jesus called the disciples that day, they knew not where they were going. It had to be scary. But somehow they found the faith to follow. The journey was long, full of hills, and winding paths. It required much of them. *It no doubt made them late for dinner.*

May God give us the same faith as those disciples, to follow not fully knowing where the journey will take us. And may God not only give us a new vision during these days of transition, but may God also give us the patience to wait and watch and listen as our new identity takes form within our community.

May God make it so. Amen.