

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Being God’s People: Following”
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1 Samuel 3:19-21; Mark 1:14-20

An online article put it this way. “Just 17 years old, the church was drawing an average weekly attendance of 12,329 to 15 locations. In fiscal year 2013 alone, Mars Hill baptized more than 1,000 people, planted 53 churches in India, and supported 20 church planters and evangelists in Ethiopia. It released 50 new worship songs, gave away more than 3,000 Bibles in the United States and Ethiopia, and took in nearly \$25 million in tithes and offerings.”¹ Then within a few months in 2014 it had totally and completely collapsed. Its founding pastor, after being confronted with his ongoing abuse of staff, misappropriation of money, much of which he used to buy copies of his own book so he could make the New York Times Best Sellers List, and his unwillingness to listen to his elders was asked him to take some time to consider his actions. Rather than doing that, he left and people fled. Some fled to other churches. Many fled Christianity itself. So how could this happen? The answer, from my perspective, is that we human beings have a deep desire to play follow-the-leader.

From time immemorial, human beings have craved to follow a leader who claimed to possess ultimate truth and would lead them into the promised land. From Alexander the Great, whose soldiers fought to the end of the known world, to George Pickett whose troops marched into withering fire from Union soldiers at Gettysburg, to people today who believe that their favorite politicians and television pundits are the only people who speak the truth, we seek the leader to follow. We want to believe that these people can save us. There are two problems with this desire. The first is that all these people are flawed human beings who can never deliver on what they promise. The second is that you and I, those of us here this morning, are not to be playing follow-the-leader, but follow-the-Lord. We are not to follow the messenger, but the one whose message we proclaim. I realize that this is easier said than done. Whether we want to believe it or not, the whole Alpha-male, or Alpha-female thing, still causes us to want to follow-the-leader. So how do we do it? How do we go from playing follow-the-leader, to following-the-Lord? Fortunately, the opening verses in this first chapter, offer us some assistance.

First, to quote Jesus, “The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe the Good News.” In these words, we are reminded, that the kingdom has come near in Jesus. Which means that it has not come near in the Herods, the Romans, or any other revolutionary leader. Only in Jesus. Because of that reality, we are to change our minds and behaviors to believe that this is so. This is the repent part. Repent literally means to change one’s mind. It means to change our minds that there is some leader, past, present or future, who can bring about the salvation of human kind. We are to change our minds that the leaders we follow are infallible and worthy of the kind of adoration that only belongs to Jesus of Nazareth. We are to change our minds such that Jesus is the one whom we follow. We begin then by ceasing to play follow-the-leader and consciously beginning to follow-the-Lord.

¹ Gospel Coalition, US Online May 30, 2017

Second, we are to follow. We are to see Jesus, not only as the one who is to lead us, but we are to be those who follow in his footsteps. The most powerful image of this kind of following I have seen in a long time comes from the movie, *The Free State of Jones*. The movie is based on the true story of Newton Knight, who deserted from the Confederate Army and then led a rebellion against the Confederacy in Jones County, Mississippi. In the movie, he is running from men who have been instructed to hunt him down and hang him. Wounded, he is led into the swamps by a slave who takes pity on him. And then another slave named Rachael appears, to lead him deeper in so that he would be safe. As she does so, she has to lead across what appear to be deep waters. Essentially she says, “You have to place your feet exactly where I put mine. There is only one path in and if you step off it, you will fall in and be lost.” Place your feet where I place mine. This is what we are called to do in following Jesus. We are to place our feet of forgiveness where he places his. We are to place our feet of compassion where he places his. We are to place our feet of acceptance where he places his. This is what following Jesus looks like; placing our feet where he placed his.

Finally, we are to follow-the-Lord together. When Jesus begins calling disciples, he does not call them to simply be individuals in relationship with him. Instead he calls them into community. He calls them to be the new, alternative Kingdom of God. And not only are they to be the alternative Kingdom of God, they are to invite others to be part of this alternative kingdom as well. You and I are called to do and be the same. We are called to follow together; to follow together so that when one of us falters the others are here to pick us up. We are to follow together so that when one of us moves out into the swamp of following some other leader, we can gently bring that person back. We are to travel together because we need each other. We are also to be that alternative kingdom. We are to be that community of love, peace, patience, forgiveness and compassion. We are to follow together.

In a few minutes, we will be ordaining and installing our newest class of elders and deacons. Their task is not to rule over us. Their task is to help us follow the Lord. Their task is to discern what Jesus would have us to do and to be. This morning I would encourage you, as they are asked the questions for ordination and installation, to listen for the centrality of Jesus in their calling. For in those questions you can see that they are called to be intentional followers of Jesus.

My challenge then to you this morning is this, to ask yourselves, “How am I more and more following the Lord, rather than following the leader?”