

Immediately!
Isaiah 9:1-4, Matthew 4:12-22
First Presbyterian Church
January 22, 2017

Isaiah 9:1-4

⁹But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. ²The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness - on them light has shined. ³You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. ⁴For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.

Matthew 4:12-23

¹²Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. ¹³He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: ¹⁵“Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles - ¹⁶the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.” ¹⁷From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

¹⁸As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea - for they were fishermen. ¹⁹And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” ²⁰Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. ²²Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

²³Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

Sermon¹

I've always enjoyed driving... especially long distances. Maybe it's just the sense of independence and control that comes with holding a steering wheel and pressing down on a gas pedal. Maybe it's the fact that driving is “down time” when there's nothing to do but drive and think... drive and listen to a book or music... drive and take in the landscape.

A month after graduating from high school I took off from Atlanta in my '65 Dodge Dart

¹ I am much indebted to Michael Lindvall, Pastor of Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City for the inspiration and content of this sermon.

with a pup tent and a sleeping bag in the trunk and a box full of 8 track tapes on the floor beside me... and I headed off for Young Life's Frontier Ranch in Buena Vista, Colorado. I had a spiral-bound *Rand McNally Highway Atlas* in the passenger seat and several *AAA TripTiks* in the glove box. The mileage to and location of the next KOA campsite was marked clearly on both. Logging about 500 miles a day, I figured it would take me three days to get there. It all helped calm my parents' nerves... knowing that I had carefully planned where I was going... how I was going to get there... and approximately when I would arrive each evening to call them from a campsite pay phone.

Well, as I was preparing this sermon it occurred to me that though I love road trips, not once in my life have I taken off without knowing exactly where I was going and how I was going to get there. Maybe some of you have done that – either as carefree young person with a backpack and a few bucks in your pocket or now in retirement taking off and just seeing where the road leads you. But I have never done that... and then it hit me... that I actually have taken *one* unplanned road trip in my life... and it's a pretty BIG one.

In the passage I just read from Matthew's Gospel, Jesus invites his first disciples to follow him. It's an invitation to a road trip, both a literal journey with long days of walking and overnight stays... AND a spiritual journey with teaching and preaching and growing and changing. But the story is so familiar that we might not notice something that is very important: twice Matthew uses the word, "immediately." In verse 19, Jesus calls Peter and Andrew and "*Immediately* they left their nets and followed him." Then in verse 22, he calls James and John and again, "*Immediately* they left the boat and their father and followed him." There's no Q and A time... no orientation period... no new member classes... no sit-down-and-let's-talk-about where we're going. They just *immediately* drop their nets... leave their poor father on the beach... and follow him. Of course, there could have been more to the story than Matthew can tell us. It's possible that Jesus had been in the area for some time... and that these four men could have been listening to him for days... there might have been a back story here. But when Matthew tells us that they heard Jesus' call and went immediately, he communicates a deep spiritual truth – that the decision to take to the road... the decision to follow Jesus Christ is always one you make *before* you have all the facts. As one preacher has said: When it comes to following the Lord, you can't possibly know all you need to know until you go... because it's only in the going that you come into the knowing.² Simon and Andrew, James and John, didn't follow Jesus because they had it all figured out. No, they took to that road because there was something about him... there was just something about him... and the same is true for us.

Thirty years ago, Fred Buechner said this more eloquently than I: "A Christian is one who points at Christ and says, 'I can't prove a thing, but there is something about his eyes and his voice. There's something about the way he carries his head, his hands, the way he carries his cross – the way he carries me.'"³ You remember Albert Schweitzer, of course... medical missionary to Africa... brilliant organist... cutting-edge Bible scholar... successful pastor... towering theologian.

² Michael Lindvall in his sermon "Road Trip" preached at Brick Presbyterian Church of New York City, January 27, 2013.

³ Frederick Buechner in *Wishful Thinking*. See:

<https://www.facebook.com/Frederick.Buechner.Center/posts/1020654594651742>

Well, he ended one of his many books with these words about Jesus' calling of the disciples: "He comes to us as One unknown... by the lakeside... He speaks to us the same word: "Follow... me!" And to those who obey... He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship.... They shall learn in their own experience who He is."

Well, each of us has our own story of call and following... but I officially embarked on this unplanned trip when I was 11-years old. I've told you before about my profession of faith and baptism at the Second Ponce de Leon Baptist Church in Atlanta. No infant baptism for my family – we practiced "believer's baptism" which means that the one coming for baptism is thought to have some sense of what they believe and has already begun to show that in their daily life. So here I was being baptized...with my parents and the pastor and everybody else in the congregation sort of assuming I knew what I was doing. But tell me - what 11 year old boy knows what he is doing? No, this is the *one* road trip I have embarked on in my life without knowing exactly where I was going... And I certainly didn't know that the trip I embarked on that evening would one day lead to my standing in the beautiful pulpit of a church in Hickory, NC preaching a sermon about it.

I do know *more* about the trip than I did that day. I know more about the One I am following than I did then, but I still don't know anywhere close to everything. So I find great comfort in the fact that Peter and Andrew and James and John set out without knowing where their trip would lead them... that they took to the road because there was *something* about him...that they left immediately and only later learned a great and ironic truth about faith: it is in the following that we come to know the one we follow.

The road itself is the teacher in much the same way riding a bicycle is a teacher. You learn to ride a bicycle by riding a bicycle. All the "pre-riding instructions" on the theory and practice of bicycling might be helpful – "Here, you put your feet on these pedal things...and you put your hands here...and when you want to stop make sure you squeeze these things." But you can only learn by throwing a leg over the seat and doing it. The first few times are usually terrifying... and no matter how well you were prepped most new riders fall over a few times. – it's all part of the learning!

It's like that with faith. You learn faith by actually doing it. You learn what matters to God by studying the Bible. You learn to pray by praying. You learn to forgive by forgiving. You learn to serve by serving... to give by giving... to trust by trusting.

Minnie Louise Haskins was a little known British poet in the first part of the last century. Most of the world would not know of her work except for one poem of hers that was made famous by King George VI of Great Britain. You and I have come to his story and the poem through the film, "The King's Speech." George VI was that reluctant monarch with a stutter who guided England through the Second World War... and he quoted Minnie Lou Haskins' poem in his famous Christmas Day address of 1939, broadcast over the radio in the early days of the war. The poem is very appropriate as we begin this new year and especially at the end of this sermon.

It goes like this: "I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year, Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown and he replied Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God, that shall be to you better than a light And safer than a known way."⁴

Far better than a light... safer than a known way... is to go out into the darkness putting your hand in the hand of God. Some of the "knowing" will come. It will come with time. But it will only come if you go... immediately!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁴ The Gate of the Year is the popular title given to this poem. The author titled it "God Knows." The Rotarian Oct 1940. Vol. 57, No. 4. Rotary International.