

Join the Adventure

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, January 15, 2017, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Luke 4:1-30](#) and [Luke 5:1-11](#)

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Maybe I should begin with a confession – that this sermon title is perhaps a bit of false advertising. When someone invites me on an adventure, I expect it to have some excitement and to end with a sense of “that was fun.” I’m not sure that’s where I’m going.

The second thing I should do to start with is to show you a little video clip. I know I showed this two weeks ago, but the difference between knowing your *why* and picking your appropriate *what* is going to be important in this sermon. [See video clip at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LZe5y2D60YU>] When you know your *why*, your *what* has more impact because you’re walking in or toward your purpose.

Our scripture readings cover a lot of territory. Last week we heard Luke’s version of the baptism of Jesus. Today, we pick up right after that. Though not as immediate as in Matthew’s and Mark’s gospels, Jesus’ response to being baptized is to go off by himself into the wilderness to pray. Jesus fasts, a prayer form that some find very helpful. After his fasting has gone on for quite some time, instead of having a deep communion with God, Jesus has an encounter with the personification of temptation and rationalization.

I think what’s happening here is this: At his baptism Jesus experienced some clarity of his call. His *why* became clear. Let the people know that the liberating love you know and that they should love in that same way. What wasn’t clear yet was his *what*. This is certainly one way of looking at these temptations.

Maybe one way to fulfill your *why* is by magic. Wow the people by turning stones into bread. Fill their bellies and they’ll follow you. And you can have whatever you want in the process. “Public influence and private indulgence – if you just use your miraculous powers to acquire whatever you desire!”¹

Maybe one way to fulfill your *why* is by gaining political power. Bow down and worship evil and you’ll get all the kingdoms of the world. On this path, “self-seeking power, not self-giving love, reigns supreme.”²

And then there’s this one: Following your *why* won’t kill you. Go ahead and jump of the top of the Temple. The fall won’t kill you. God won’t let that happen to his beloved child. That notion that fulfilling your *why* may cost your life? Forget it.

Jesus comes out of the desert not just with clarity of his *why* but also of his *what*, at least some of the *whats* he’ll not use. “He will not use his power for

¹ Brian McLaren, *We Make the Road by Walking* [Kindle version], chapter 20, page 92. Retrieved from

² *Ibid*, 92.

personal comfort and pleasure. He will refuse unscrupulous means to achieve just and peaceful ends. He will not reach for spectacle over substance... [He won't be] driven by a human lust for pleasure, power, or prestige."³

He will be empowered by the Spirit, and he will be willing to pay the ultimate price. And if we want to join the adventure ... are we willing to let the Spirit empower us, and are we willing to pay the ultimate price?

Following his desert experience, Jesus goes to his hometown, and on the Sabbath, he goes to synagogue. "There is a time in the synagogue gathering where men can read a passage of Scripture and offer a comment upon it. So on this day, Jesus stands and asks for the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolls the scroll until he comes to the passage that speaks of the Spirit anointing someone to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, healing to the blind, freedom to the oppressed."⁴

That's exactly what he experienced in his baptism. That's a wonderful summation of his *why*. That's his mission statement. And he says so. Jesus sits down – "a teacher's customary posture in those days. He offers his amazing commentary – notable for its brevity and even more for its astonishing claim: "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in you hearing."⁵

How's that for an inaugural address? I checked something out this morning. Jesus' inaugural address could have been tweeted – with room to spare.

"Imagine if a prophet arose today in Panama, Sierra Leone, or Sri Lanka. In an interview on BBC or Al Jazeera he [or she] says, 'Now is the time! It's time to dismantle the military-industrial complex and reconcile with enemies! It's time for CEOs to slash their mammoth salaries and give generous raises to all their lower-paid employees! It's time for criminals, militias, weapons factories, and armies to turn in their bullets and guns so they can be melted down and recast as trumpets, swing sets, and garden tools. It's time to stop plundering the Earth for quick corporate profit and to start healing the Earth for long-term universal benefit. Don't say "someday" or "tomorrow." The time is today!"⁶

Who would listen to that? I think such a prophet would be ignored by the vast majority of people, especially by people in power. The only people I can think of who would listen would be people who know the pain of oppression and violence. Only people who would hear hope in these words would listen. Anyone who would hear these words threatening their power and prestige would ignore this prophet or try to make the prophet seem like a crackpot.

Jesus hometown crowd is impressed that their hometown boy is so articulate and intelligent and bold. "But Jesus won't let them simply be impressed or appreciative for long. He quickly reminds them of two stories from Scriptures, one

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid*, 93.

involving a Sidonian widow in the time of Elijah and one involving a Syrian general in the time of Elisha. God bypassed many needy people of our religion and nation, Jesus says, to help those foreigners, those Gentiles, those outsiders. You can almost hear the snap as people are jolted by this unexpected turn.”⁷ Jesus is telling them that this good news that has been fulfilled in their hearing isn’t just for them. It’s for all humanity.

The only sense I can make of what happens next is that Jesus’ hometown synagogue feels betrayed. How could the promise God made through the prophet Isaiah to the Jews be for everyone? The crowd quickly flips from proud to furious. They are transformed by their fury from a congregation into a lynch mob, and they try to push Jesus over the edge of a cliff. They might as well be trying to push him off the roof of the Temple.

If Jesus didn’t have the clarity of his *why*, everything would have fallen apart just as it began. If Jesus hadn’t wrestled with some of the *whats*, seeing which ones would go against the very character of his *why*, he might have taken his calling in an unfruitful direction. He needed his time in the wilderness “to get his mission clear in his own heart so that he wouldn’t be captivated by the expectations of adoring fans or intimidated by the threats of furious critics. If we dare follow Jesus and proclaim the radical dimensions of God’s good news as he did, [if we dare to join the adventure,] we will face the same twin dangers of domestication and intimidation.”⁸

“Jesus managed to avoid execution that day. But he knew it wouldn’t be his last brush with hostile opposition.”⁹ He continued his preaching and healing. And soon he began inviting select individuals to become his followers.

In our second lesson, we heard about his calling of Simon, Andrew, James, and John to be his first followers. If you’re a fan of the gospel of John, you’ll hear echoes of John resurrection story that takes place at the lake and involves a significant fishing success. But it’s the final words of the passage that most interest me: “Then Jesus said to Simon, ‘Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.’ When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.”

They left everything and followed him.

“As with aspiring musicians who are invited to become the students of a master-musician, this was a momentous decision for them. To become disciples of a rabbi meant entering a rigorous program of transformation, learning a new way of life, a new set of values, a new set of skills. It meant leaving behind the comforts of home and facing a new set of dangers on the road. Once they were thoroughly apprenticed as disciples, they would be sent out as apostles to spread the rabbi’s

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid*, 94.

⁹ *Ibid.*

controversial and challenging message everywhere. One [does] not say yes to discipleship lightly.”¹⁰

I am currently reading one of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s books, *The Cost of Discipleship*, considered by many to be his most important book. Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran pastor, a theologian, an anti-Nazi dissident, and a key founding member of the Confessing Church – a movement to keep the church separate from the Nazi party and faithful to Jesus. *The Cost of Discipleship* was published in 1937, during the rise of the Nazi party, and in some ways may have served as Bonhoeffer’s time in the desert as he prepared for what his ministry became under Nazism. Let me share just one quote from this book, all of which is appropriate at this point in the sermon. And please excuse the non-inclusive language of this 1930’s German, recognizing that when he says “man,” he means “person,” and the pronoun “he” for this person should really be “he or she.”

“When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die. It may be a death like that of the first disciples who had to leave home and work to follow him, or it may be a death like Luther’s, who had to leave the monastery and go out into the world. But it is the same death every time – death in Jesus Christ, the death of the old man at his call. Jesus summons to the rich young man was calling him to die, because only the man who is dead to his own will can follow Christ.... The call of Christ, his baptism, sets the Christian in the middle of the daily arena against sin and the devil. Every day he encounters new temptations, and every day he must suffer anew for Jesus Christ’s sake.”¹¹

It occurs to me that “the world Christian is more familiar to us today than the word disciple. These days, Christian often seems to apply more to the kinds of people who would push Jesus off a cliff than it does to his true followers. Perhaps the time has come to rediscover the power and challenge of that earlier, more primary word disciple. The word disciple occurs over 250 times in the New Testament, in contrast to the word Christian, which occurs only three times. Maybe those statistics are trying to tell us something.”¹²

The adventure Jesus invites us to join is one that involves leaving everything behind. It is an adventure that begins with dying. And then it moves to discerning Jesus’ good news for today and working to make it real.

As we move into a time of quiet, I invite you to reflect on ...
... anything from the sermon or scripture that caught your attention; or
... a time when you went through some hardship or temptation that prepared you for a later opportunity; or
... the dangers of being captivated by the support of your loyal fans and being intimidated by the threats of your hostile critics; or

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* [Kindle version], location 1279-1286. Retrieved from amazon.com.

¹² McLaren, *op. cit.*, 94.

... the image of Jesus standing near you at your work, calling your name, and saying these two words to you, "Follow me."