

A campfire in the middle of the tents brings warmth and safety when staying the night on a chilly evening in the middle of nowhere. A nightlight makes a little one feel comforted—they can see there's nothing to fear and their surroundings are still familiar. The glow of a phone in a blacked out room allows me to find the stinking soother that Herschel has skillfully spat out, that both he and I may have some peace. A light shining into the far lands of Naphtali and Zebulun, lands slightly regathered after exile, lands disregarded and despised by the people closer to holy Jerusalem, God's light coming to them sounds like sheer blessing. And it is.

Christ enters the town, the place that had been living in the shadow of death, Isaiah and Matthew tell us, and He shines light. He teaches and He heals, He brings God's blessings to those that had been all but written off by the rest of God's people.

And that the light may shine even as He moves on, to different cities and indeed even ascending back into the heavens, He calls certain men to follow Him most uniquely. These men would learn from Him, write of Him, preach of Him as the Church is established. "Follow me" Jesus says. He doesn't heal them; He doesn't teach them anything extraordinary. He speaks the invitation and command to follow Him, to be made into the fishers of men, and they drop what they are doing and join Him on His Way. He brings His light, His kingdom into their lives and without even knowing all of that, they are on their way, His Way.

It all seems innocent and innocuous, as though it's just another day in their lives, but without saying so much, He is inviting each person, those healed, those taught, and especially those invited to follow Him in fishing for men, He is inviting them to take up their cross. He is inviting them to die to themselves. He explains

it more explicitly later in Matthew 16: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”

Even before He preached it, is not this precisely exactly what happened? These men dropped their nets, they got out of their boats, they even left they fathers, and they followed Christ.

Even the crowds, who heard and were healed, they were invited to leave the comforts they knew. They were on the way to forsaking the mixed beliefs they held (for this region was a melting pot of faiths and idols) but Christ was proving to them that He was the only way. It’s true that they didn’t need to all become Christ’s disciples, and many of these wouldn’t continually trust in the Lord, I’m sure, but the call has been put out there as the light shone, and especially after all that Christ would go through, I’m equally sure that these seeds planted early in Christ’s ministry would bear fruit years later, and people here, too, would forsake their old life in order to trust Christ.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a martyr of the second World War and theologian extraordinaire, puts this way:

“The cross is laid on every Christian. The first Christian suffering which ever man must experience is the call to abandon the attachments of this world. It is that dying of the old man which is the result of his encounter with Christ. As we embark upon discipleship we surrender ourselves to Christ in union with His death—we give over our lives to death. This it begins; the cross is not the terrible end to an otherwise god-fearing and happy life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ. 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 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. In fact every command of Jesus is a call to die, with all our affections and lusts. But we do not want to die, and therefore Jesus Christ and His call are necessarily our death as well as our life. The call to discipleship, the baptism in the name of Jesus Christ means both death and life. 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. The wounds and scars he receives in the fray are living tokens of this participation in the cross of his Lord." *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, pg. 99.

Not all Christians have a conscious conversion experience, where they can remember when they didn't believe and when they did believe, and the number is certainly lower in churches that practice infant baptism, but that doesn't mean that this dying to our old self is irrelevant to us who have never known anything other than faith, or who have known faith for many years now. For this old self clings to us. This old Adam, as Paul calls the sinful self, doesn't disappear until death, much to our dismay. No matter how hard we pray, no matter what guardrails we put in place, no matter who is keeping us accountable, no matter what disciplines we set out upon, our sin persists. Even if we are able to curb the expression of it in our words and actions, the temptations sit in our hearts and minds, and they often grow into what we at least yearn to act out.

Each day there is a call from Christ to follow Him, to trust in His promises and out of those promises to remember and care for our neighbour just as He has remembered and cared for us. It's not as though we need to drop everything and move to another country to preach Christ, but it's to remember that we have been called, that we are called, and that we are on the Way with Christ. So if our job, that which provides for us, that which gives us security, leads us to a place where we are working against Christ and His cause, we may need to step away. Or our pleasures, gifts that they are, may need to be sacrificed when God places someone in need before us. You don't have to give up Starbucks (thank God) or your hobby of model car collecting, but it is not your god caring for you, so to sacrifice a bit of it to care for your neighbour in need is well and good. And our sins, God help us, the sins that bring us joy and satisfaction, to gossip, to lust, to stew in self-righteous meditations regarding the idiots around you, to covet, each day we are called to repent of these sins, trusting that God forgives us, and God alone can bring about change, and hoping for both those things day in and day out while striving to put them to bed ourselves as well.

This doesn't sound like a light shining and bringing peace and hope and joy, and yet as Christ moved into Zebulun and Naphtali and Grande Prairie, this is the light that shines. It is just as in John's introduction, he talks of the light shining into the world it created but the people would not receive the light. The light convicts us—it shows us just how much we've fallen short and just how different life ought to be, but it also shows us that we aren't the ones who will right it. And all of that is offensive to us. But it's also our only hope.

And in dying to ourselves, in holding onto our lives very loosely and in repenting of the sins that satisfy us, in realizing that we are not enough in and of

ourselves but Christ alone is enough, this is light, this is the kingdom come, this is true life even though it feels like death.

And it comes because Christ was willing to genuinely endure the cross, compared to the miniature sufferings we endure. He gave up His life, breathing His last, mocked and scorned and abandoned, suffering with faith even beyond the end, that you would have life. This act of God, this promise ongoing, is enough to carry you through every cross you must bear, even that last one of death before you see the life God has for you, the life that will not end, the life when crosses will at last be done away with.

“Follow me” is Christ’s daily call to His Church, reminding us to turn from our own ways onto His Way; inviting us to repent of our sin and to trust in His righteousness; calling us out of the kingdom of darkness and death into the kingdom of light and life; going with us as we continue to proclaim such a command and invitation to those who have not yet had the privilege of hearing such wonderful news: “Follow me,” Christ says to you, and to all the world.

Amen.