

**Philippians 3:7-16**

**Luke 9:51-62**

**February 21, 2021**

**The First Sunday in Lent**

*Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC*

## **A LUKAN LENT THE SUMMONS**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

“Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?” This is the first line of today’s opening and closing hymn. It sounds like a pleasant invitation, and it certainly leaves you the option to say “No, I won’t.”

The subtitle of today’s hymn is “The Summons.” That sounds much less ambiguous. A legal summons is “an order to appear before a judge or a magistrate.” The summons you receive will include the specific amount of time you have to respond to the summons. You are required to appear. You don’t have the option to say “No.”<sup>1</sup> (Well, I guess you do, but you know what I mean . . .)

A month ago, we heard the story from Mark’s gospel about Jesus calling Simon, Andrew, James, and John to be his first disciples. “Follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will make you fish for people.” Even though “Follow me” is in the imperative mood, it sounds more like an invitation. Simon, Andrew, James, and John didn’t have to accept Jesus’ summons, but they did. And remember, “immediately” they left their nets and the boats and followed him.

Today’s hymn, “Will You Come and Follow Me (The Summons)”, was written by John Bell and Graham Maule for the Iona Community off the coast of Scotland. It was used at the conclusion of a year-long mission by young people in the Scottish church who were sent to live in impoverished parts of Scotland. These young people lived on welfare payments and served in very difficult circumstances. At the end of their mission, a farewell ceremony was held in the house where the youth had been living for the year. John Bell and Graham Maule originally wrote this song for that one event, but it became very popular and meaningful.

The first four verses are the voice of Christ extending the invitation and summons — “Will you come and follow me.” The fifth verse is the voice of the one who is called “Lord, your summons echoes true when you but call my name.” According to one history of the song, “In this song the call to service is one that is transformational — when we accept Christ’s calling to come and be where God is already, our lives are shaped by the experience. The last line of each verse also echoes the mutual nature of how God works in us and through us and through God we find our living, our moving, and our being.”<sup>2</sup>

“When we accept Christ’s calling to come and be where God is already” — that is the meaning of today’s gospel story on this first Sunday of Lent. And that summons

stands in sharp contrast to how we so often ask, expect, even demand that God come to where we already are and to stay there with us.

The season of Lent is often called a journey. For the next seven weeks we will make our way through the gospel of Luke, following Jesus on his journey to Jerusalem. The journey begins as Jesus “sets his face to go to Jerusalem.” This journey isn’t a pleasure cruise or a day trip or a sightseeing tour. Jesus is determined to go to Jerusalem. In Luke’s gospel it takes him ten chapters, almost half the gospel, to get there. As someone has noted, Jesus’ road to Jerusalem determines everything else. When Jesus sets his face to go to Jerusalem, that means he has accepted God’s summons in his life.<sup>3</sup> Then Jesus turns to us and asks, “Will you come and follow me?”

Imagine that you are planning a big celebration for a significant event — a wedding reception, an anniversary party, a retirement send-off. You are excited as you send out the invitations and ask, “Will you come?” Typically the R.S.V.P. will ask if you plan to attend and, if so, how many are coming. Also, you usually need to respond Yes or No by a specific date. If you are R.S.V.P.ing, a simple Yes or No should be sufficient. But, if you can’t attend and you are really close to the host, you might offer an explanation — “That’s the weekend of Joe’s graduation. . . We’re going out of town for my mother’s memorial service . . . etc., etc.” While disappointed, the host will probably graciously accept your regrets. Imagine, though, if you are the host and you get this R.S.V.P., “I’ll come to your party if I don’t have anything better to do that weekend.” That would be pretty offensive, wouldn’t it?

The analogy isn’t exactly 100% accurate, but maybe it helps us think about the urgency and importance of the summons of Jesus, “Follow me.” When you get your invitation to the wedding or party in the mail, you typically have several weeks to reply. Jesus’ summons requires an answer right now. That’s at the heart of what Jesus says to the three would-be disciples:

\* Follower #1: “I will follow you wherever you go.” Jesus: “Do you know what you’re saying and what kind of journey I’m on?”

\* Follower #2: “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” Jesus (and doesn’t this sound harsh?): “My invitation is more important than that.”

\* Follower #3: “I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to my family.” Jesus: “If you look back, you’ll miss the opportunity. I’m moving ahead.”

These are prime examples of what are known as the “hard sayings of Jesus.” It might be easier to answer the summons if you are called away from less than desirable circumstances. But, as Fred Craddock says in his commentary, “The call to discipleship is not set against weak and flimsy excuses but against primary personal and family obligations: attending to creature needs, filial duty, and family love. Loyalty to Jesus . . . takes precedence over the best, not the worst, of human priorities.”<sup>4</sup>

And that’s why this story from Luke’s gospel is so appropriate as we begin our Lenten journey with Jesus to Jerusalem. As the announcement about Lent in last week’s bulletin said, “The season of Lent is a time of self-examination in preparation for the celebration of the resurrection of the Lord at Easter. It is the power of the resur-

rection on the horizon ahead that draws us into repentance toward the cross and tomb.”<sup>5</sup>

In other words, the season of Lent is a time for us to examine our lives and confess how often we respond to Jesus’ summons by saying, “I will follow you, Jesus, but . . .” Or, as someone said in Bible study this week, we have to face up to the truth that we all too often say, “I will follow you, Lord, but on my terms, not your terms.” Here’s how a blogger states the same thing: “Does Jesus make a noticeable difference in our lives? Or to put it [another way, *sic.*]: Does the grace, mercy, and love of God made incarnate in Jesus trump our plans and shape our lives, or do we shape our faith to fit the lives we’ve already planned?”<sup>6</sup> How do we R.S.V.P. the summons of Jesus in our lives? In my reading this week, I found these words that I wrote in my quote journal. They are a good description of our Lenten journey — actually, of our entire discipleship journey: “We never stop asking [Dietrich] Bonhoeffer’s question, ‘Who is Jesus Christ for us today?’ to which we may add the qualifiers, ‘in our work,’ ‘in our politics,’ and ‘in our relationships.’”<sup>7</sup>

The word of grace in today’s gospel lesson is that we aren’t on the journey by ourselves. Jesus doesn’t summon us to discipleship and ministry and then say, “Good luck, you’re on your own. I hope it works out OK for you.” No, Jesus says, “Follow *me.*” When we R.S.V.P. in good faith, we can be assured that, as our hymn says, “In your company I’ll go where your love and footsteps show. Thus I’ll move and live and grow in you and you in me.”

The most challenging part to me of Jesus’ summons in this story is when he says, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:62) That sounds a lot like Peter wanting to build three tents up on the mountain of Transfiguration so they could stay up there, basking in the glory of Jesus rather than going back down into the valley.

But Paul’s words of encouragement to the Philippians can also inspire us in our journey of faith, not just during the seven weeks of Lent but throughout the marathon race of faith: “Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 3:12-13)

The song “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize” became the unofficial anthem of the Civil Rights Movement. The song encourages keeping on keeping on, even in the face of adversity. Many people have pointed out the scriptural references to Luke 9:62 and Philippians 3:14 & 17, which we have heard today. Whether we hear Jesus’ summons as a gracious invitation (“Will you come and follow me”) or an imperative (“Follow me”), Jesus waits on our R.S.V.P. If we say “Lord, I will follow you,” then let us keep our eyes on the prize: “I got my hand on the gospel plow Won’t take nothing for my journey now Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on. Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on.”

***Let us pray: Lord, we want to follow you whoever you lead. Reach out to us this day, stirring our hearts with your Holy Spirit that we may faithfully be your disciples. For we ask this in Jesus' Name. Amen.***

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Jean Murray, "What to Do If You Receive a Summons or Subpoena," May 26, 2020 at [www.thebalancesmb.com](http://www.thebalancesmb.com).

<sup>2</sup>Joseph McBrayer, "The Summons — John Bell," at [www.jmcbray.com](http://www.jmcbray.com).

<sup>3</sup>Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Luke* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1984), p. 168.

<sup>4</sup>Fred B. Craddock, "Luke 9:57-62," in *Harper's Bible Commentary*, James L. Mays, General Editor (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988), p. 1028.

<sup>5</sup>"The Season of Lent" at [www.presbyterianmission.org](http://www.presbyterianmission.org).

<sup>6</sup>David Lose, "Out of Control," June 24, 2013 at [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org).

<sup>7</sup>Richard Lischer, "The Called Life: An Essay on the Pastoral Vocation," *Interpretation* (Volume 59, No. 2, April 2005), p. 174.