

“Follow Me” / Mark 1:14-20 / 22 January 2012

“The time is now. The kingdom is near. Follow me,” Jesus says. “Follow me.” Sometimes it’s best to keep things simple. Let me tell you the sad story of William Henry Harrison, ninth President of the United States. At 68 years of age, Harrison was the oldest man ever elected to the office prior to Ronald Reagan. Neither a Democrat nor a Republican, he was a member of the old Whig Party. He was the first President to die in office, and he had the shortest administration in history: a mere thirty-one days. Harrison had that rare tendency among political men; he loved to make long speeches. What many people do not know is that President Harrison also hated to wear his scarf and mittens. In the late winter of 1841, William Henry Harrison went to his own inauguration wearing neither coat nor hat, but making one very long speech.

Back in the day, presidential inaugurations took place on March 4 rather than January 20. I always remember that because March 4 is coincidentally the date of my ordination. But in terms of weather, there’s usually not much difference between late January and early March. It’s cold, and it’s snowy. Inauguration day in 1841 would have merited a winter weather advisory today. It was one of those blustery days that can’t decide if it wants to rain or snow. It was windy, and the big flakes of wet snow fell hard over DC. Visibility was poor, everything drenched. But an inauguration is too big to hold indoors. And it has to happen early in the year, regardless of the weather. That’s why we keep inaugurations simple and short.

Harrison had labored for weeks over his inauguration speech. He had even consulted his good friend Daniel Webster, the man who wrote America’s first dictionary. Webster edited the speech and made it a lot shorter than Harrison’s original version. But still, Harrison ended up with the longest inauguration speech in US history. The speech took exactly two hours to deliver. Two hours! I’m certain that CNN did not play the speech over and over. At 8,444 words, no President before or since has surpassed Harrison’s inaugural address in length. In a driving snowstorm with no coat and no hat, William Henry Harrison stood and spoke for two full hours about the old Whig Party agenda: a strong Congress, a limited presidency, limits to be placed on the lobbyists of the day. Harrison promised to issue paper money, which the country had not yet seen. And of course, he couldn’t resist talking a little bit about his own military service and his victories in Tecumseh’s War and the War of 1812. And when it was all over and done, still snowing hard, and still not wearing a coat or hat, Harrison was paraded in an open-air carriage through the streets of the capital.

Inaugurations in the United States are dignified but simple events. A prayer, a song, some oaths, a speech, another song, and that’s it. It is true that the 19th century was the heyday of long-windedness. And it’s true that in the 19th century a sermon could easily last two hours inside an unheated church building, where there were at least a roof and walls to protect you from the elements. Ushers were given long wooden pokers to waken the folks who fell asleep during sermons. (I’ll be suggesting that to the Session.) But even in the 19th century, a President was expected to keep his inaugural address fairly simple, stately, and short. People are standing in the cold. They’re trying to celebrate. A two-hour inauguration speech was unheard of. There are reasons for simplicity and brevity on Inauguration Day, for President Harrison caught a cold about a week later. And the cold developed into pneumonia, and a case of pleurisy. And President Harrison died exactly one month from the day, after a short, miserable term in office.

I'm not saying that going outside without a coat in the winter will make you sick. Experts are saying nowadays that exposure to the cold does not necessarily make you more susceptible to germs. Believe whatever you want about that. What I am saying is that sometimes things are simple for a reason, and it's to our own peril when we make them longer, or more complicated, or more sophisticated than they're meant to be.

"Follow me," the Carpenter from Nazareth says when he turns up out of nowhere on the beaches of the Sea of Galilee. And somehow, that simple command is so full of power, so full of promise, that four strangers bid good-bye to the world they know. They step off their boats, leave behind their nets, and their families, their livelihoods, careers, and they follow a stranger who's all aglow with the life of the Spirit. Jesus' first sermon in the Book of Mark is clear and compelling; it's short and simple, although the church through the ages has made Jesus very complex indeed. But his first message is merely this: "The time is now. The kingdom of God—a whole new life—draws near. Change. Trust the good news." And four simple men whose daily preoccupations were mostly about waves, and wind, and schools of fish; four simple men who had never labored for anything more than their daily bread, they up and followed. They never returned to their nets, and the world has never been the same. This is the Christian message in its purest and its simplest form. It's urgent. It's immediate. It declares a change that's about to occur, and it invites—no, commands—you to take part. "Follow me." Adding to it can only diminish it. Take away from it if you can; it's already so sparse and unadorned that what can you subtract? "Follow me."

This simple command echoes down through the centuries, speaking its bold and reckless claim on your life and on mine. Leave behind all the things that seem to matter so much, and throw your life into a quest that matters more. There's urgency here, today, now. The Jesus who turns up on the beaches of the world—not the lovely Christ of painting and song—the real Jesus is an urgent man. His call is uncompromising and immediate. The time is now. A new life draws near. Change. And trust this good news. Follow me.

There's something to be said for keeping it simple. My great-grandfather, whom I never knew, supposedly used to say, "If you're going to lie, keep it simple." Otherwise, you might forget what you told people. More recently, I heard a comedian say, "Tell the truth. That way you'll never have to remember anything." Society as a whole is just beginning to rediscover the beauty of simplicity. Most of us live such harried lives that we're starting to see the value of keeping things simple. We don't really have the time or attention spans needed for anything more complicated than the bottom line. We need things to be short and to the point not because we're any less intelligent than we used to be, but because we've got to drive the kids to their sporting events and music lessons. And don't forget the evening meeting at the church. There is a movement afoot to simplify a lot of things these days. The *Book of Order* is half of our denominational constitution. A pastor once told me that when he was ordained, in the 1950s, our *Book of Order* could fit in his shirt pocket. The *Book of Order* is now about half the size of *War and Peace*—which might actually be a better title for it. And yet, the denomination recently took steps to make it smaller and simpler again—less bureaucratic. If the worldwide drive to simplify our lives can strike even the Presbyterian *Book of Order*, then it can probably reach citadels and strongholds that we never dreamed.

“Simplicity, after all, is the height of sophistication,” as my father used to say, with a phony British accent. And it’s the height of honesty, and while some things are immensely complex and highly nuanced, and they can only be understood with great care and attention to details of history and circumstance, other things are indeed simple. And making them more complicated than they’re meant to be diminishes them. And yet, lo all these millennia, how the church has complicated the message and person of Jesus.

I used to serve a Presbyterian congregation full time and a Lutheran congregation only on Sunday mornings. The Lutheran church was actually larger than my own church, but they were having difficulty luring a pastor into that far-flung region of the forest. And so I preached at both churches each Sunday. Actually, the Lutherans liked a decent sermon, but they mostly came to church for communion. I preached the same sermon at both churches, but every week I had to shorten my Presbyterian sermon by about six minutes in order to accommodate the weekly celebration of the Lord’s Supper at the Lutheran church. And I could see it in the eyes of the different congregations: at my Presbyterian church, people were most attentive and most open to some sacred encounter during the sermon. But at the Lutheran church, people felt most open to the Sacred when they knelt at the rail to receive the bread and wine.

In any case, one week in June—when I was candidating at a certain Bower Hill Church in Mt. Lebanon—I arranged for guest preachers at both the Lutheran and the Presbyterian churches. But someone called me from the Lutheran church to say, “Pastor,” (the Lutherans never called me ‘Brian’), “We’ve got a layperson filling in for you this week. Could you go by the church sometime to bless the bread and the wine beforehand?” At first I thought she was joking, and I nearly replied with my own little joke about blessing them over the telephone. But that would not have been good. She wasn’t joking. To her—as to many Christians—the bread and the wine were no laughing matter. And so I made my way into the sacristy of that grandiose old church. I located the communion elements. And I said a little prayer that they might bear the presence of Christ to the people who received them. And in that moment, in a room lit only by sunlight filtering through dark stained glass, I too felt the sacredness of that task. I recognized the beauty and the power of such reverence for simple things like bread and wine. And I thought to myself, “How is it that there are so many different ways to understand the journey of faith? How is it that I can preach in two Protestant churches, but their cultures and expectations are so very different?” How is it that there are Catholics doing their thing over there, and Baptists over there, and Pentecostals, and Methodists? And all of us find great meaning in our own ways of approaching that Mystery known as God, all of us are compelled by our own emphases on the divine. Christianity is so complicated. Are some of us right and others wrong? Occasionally my kids will be watching cartoons when they accidentally hit the wrong button on the remote, and the TV lands on the station of some big-haired preacher speaking prophecies over the airwaves, and I ask myself, “Are he and I even part of the same religion? And if I had a head of hair like his, would I really do that to it?” If Jesus’ call was really so simple, how is it that we’ve gone so many different directions with it?

“Follow me. The time is now. A new life draws near, perhaps a whole new world. Change, and place your trust this good news. Follow me.” It’s his eternal command, echoing down the ages, and every sermon worth preaching or hearing has repeated its one and only theme: Follow me. Now. What could be simpler?

You've surely read the joke that circulates on the Internet from time to time about the Catholic priest, the Baptist minister, and the Jewish rabbi who decide to go out into the woods and convert the bears. They decided to meet up afterwards to share their experience with the group. The Catholic priest comes back with a limp and a bandage around his head. He says, "Well, the bear was hesitant at first when I started reading to him from the catechism. He got a little agitated when I poured the baptismal waters on his brow. But he got used to me, and now he's a faithful Catholic." The Baptist minister was a little more beat up, walking on crutches, his speech slurred from pain medications. He said, "Well I just began to read to that bear from the Book of Romans. I showed him his need for a Savior. And I dunked him in the river in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. He was mad at first, but in the end, he shed tears of repentance. Now he's a born-again Baptist." The Jewish rabbi was in a body cast, lying in a mobile hospital bed. He could barely speak. Dejected, the rabbi admitted, "I probably shouldn't have started with circumcision."

Not to denigrate the meaningful religious traditions of circumcision, or the catechism, or even the Book of Romans. They're all beautiful in their contexts. But "follow me" is the simplest and the best place to start. And as much as I love all of this, our music, and our architecture, and our traditions—I don't think it's what Jesus had in mind all those years ago at the seaside. No, the only place to start is right on the beaches where you and I catch our daily fish, the place where you and I get tangled in our own nets. The only place to start is with that urgent calling, "Follow me." The time is now. A new life is near—perhaps a new world.

Your beliefs are less important than your behaviors. Jesus himself never asked us to figure out the tough questions of life. He never asked us to believe the right things, nor even to be right. All he asks is that we follow him. Follow him into the ways of self-giving, into lifestyles that put the greater good of the world above our own small comforts. Sometimes things are simple for a reason, and we shouldn't make them longer, or more complicated, or more sophisticated than they're meant to be. Anything more I say about it would only confuse his simple command to you today: Follow him. You in your pew, the man or woman that you are, you with your tangle of nets, with your own web of relationships, and worries, and joys, your many doubts, you at this phase of your life, you with your secrets, your strengths, your flaws: What would it mean for you to hear the call? Follow me. Follow me. Amen.