### “Follow Me” Steve Finlan for The First Church, Jan. 22, 2023

**Isaiah 9:1–4**

1 But 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. 2 The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined. 3 You 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. 4 For 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 lake, 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— 16 the 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.”

18 As 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 lake—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.

23 Jesus 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.

Welcome everyone to First Church. Seeing you always brings joy and I always look forward to sharing the joy of God’s love with you each Sunday. Fellowship with one another feeds a part of our souls and makes all of our lives richer. We learn so much from one another, and it’s so important to be open to meeting new people, to be accepting of others. Today we call this “networking,” but something like it existed back in Jesus’ day.

You know how you often make friends through your existing friends. I think that is what happened with the early apostles.

Matthew makes it sound like Andrew, Peter, John, and James immediately begin following Jesus, the instant they met him. A more likely story is the version in John’s Gospel, where Andrew and Peter were originally followers of John the Baptist. They knew Jesus from when he was baptized (John 1:32–42), if not earlier. Thus, they met through their religious connections, their mutual connection with John the Baptist.

So when Jesus went and called Peter and Andrew, they already knew who he was, and that he had been baptized by John. That causes us not to treat the story as an almost magical encounter, where the fishermen drop what they’re doing and follow a complete stranger.

Still, there is a demandingness in Jesus’ call. The apostles had to be willing to leave behind fathers and mothers and brothers and sisters, and travel with Jesus throughout Galilee, Samaria, Perea, Decapolis, and Judaea, preaching to Jews and Gentiles alike. The great metaphor, “I will make you fish for people,” describes the sudden change in their lives. That sudden change can occur for everyday disciples, as well as for full-time apostles.

The Isaiah passage vividly expresses this suddenness when it says “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined” (9:2). Many Greeks of the first century felt that way when they accepted the Christian message, that a great light had shone upon them, and they were now among the children of light. It was a sudden and permanent change for each person individually, and for their shared identity. They could now understand themselves as being included among the children of God, and part of the story of Israel. The Gentiles were included even in Isaiah, where it is “Galilee of the Gentiles” that will receive the light. Many Gentiles lived near the Jews of Galilee.

Did that ever happen to you, when a great light shone upon you suddenly? Or did you come to the light through a slow accumulation of realizations? Was it like the sun bursting through the clouds, or was it like sitting by a lakeshore and increasingly enjoying the peace and the sound of birds? Did you have a sudden realization of the lordship of Jesus, or did you grow into it over the years?

It can happen either way. I’ve had both experiences. With the intense conversion experience came a change in my life, from sadness and uncertainty to joy and faith. And I quit smoking. I quit suddenly. I’ve also had the experience of slow growth. I’m guessing that Peter and Andrew remembered their calling as a sudden decision to follow Jesus, although, in fact, they already knew him, and probably knew his teachings. But when it came time to form the apostolic corps, it happened very quickly; they had to leave their families promptly. Even though they knew Jesus, the changes in their lives, their new lifestyle of traveling from city to city, the change of daily work and having to interact with many new people, must have been quite an adjustment.

It was an intense demand: join up with an independent prophet who has no institutional support, travel through Jewish and Gentile regions preaching and ministering, and have no certainty about where it will all lead. It was an act of faith to join with him. We know of one apostle who lived to a ripe old age and had a congregation who loved him. That’s John the son of Zebedee, but he was the exception. About half of the apostles suffered martyrdom. Even John had to endure a period of enforced exile to the Isle of Patmos.

Yet this fellowship had experiences like nobody else, and they set in motion a process that really changed the world. Many years later, when the Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, the ancient pagan empire started to change into a Christian one. The church took over the Roman empire, and then the church outlived the empire, when the empire collapsed.

So, as you grow in your religious living, be ready for either experience, either the sudden enlightenment and life change, or for gradual growth. As Ephesians says, “we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ . . . be renewed in the spirit of your minds” (4:15, 23). There is a freshness and delight in that renewing, whether it comes with an intense experience, or is the fruit of gradual growth. Both kinds of growth are valid. Drink in the truth, be open to change, and be renewed!