

A Road Full of Promise

By: Meagan McLaughlin

January 22, 2023. What drew the disciples to follow Jesus? What draws us to be disciples and follow Jesus? We know that the road is not easy, but as Pastor Meagan reminds us today, we do not walk alone.

Readings: [Isaiah 9:1-4](#), [1 Corinthians 1:10-18](#), [Matthew 4:12-23](#)

*** Transcript ***

Recently we've been watching the Disney+ series "Willow." Has anyone seen that? I think I see a couple of hands out there. So, this is a series that focuses on a quest to rescue a kidnapped princess, and restore safety and peace to Tir Asleen. You would think that the hero of the story would be Willow since the show is called "Willow" — and he certainly has a critical role — but by the end of the first episode it is clear that the success or failure of the quest actually depends on Elora Danan, a young sorcerer whose power has been hidden for her own safety until she was needed. As she discovers who she really is, she says repeatedly that she doesn't actually want to be Elora Danan. She may be destined to be the most powerful sorceress of all time, but the road ahead isn't easy. It involves leaving behind everything she's ever known, trusting only in the promise that things will be okay. And Willow and the rest of their companions also leave everything they've ever known, and follow Elora on a journey into the unknown that is filled with all the risk such a journey entails.

And this is not the only story about an unlikely hero and faithful, courageous companions. Harry Potter has Hermione and Ron. Ms. Marvel has Nakia Bahadir. Luke Skywalker has Han Solo. Xena has Gabrielle. Batman has Robin. All the heroes have a sidekick, a companion — a disciple, if you will.

As I reflect on the gospel for this week, I'm struck by the flow of Jesus' ministry, as it is shared in Matthew. Jesus hears that John, who has baptized Jesus, had been arrested for calling those with power to repentance. And we know that John will be beheaded. And when Jesus hears about the arrest, he immediately begins to preach the very same thing that got John into so much trouble: "Repent, for the kingdom of God has come near." This was not a popular message. Quite the opposite. And those who have followed Jesus on this road of truth-telling and gospel-sharing have faced similar opposition.

Especially this week as we remember the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., we think of him as a hero whose words inspired thousands across the country. And that is certainly true. But not everyone saw it that way at the time. He wrote some of his most profound words from a jail cell after being arrested, and called out those around him who wished that the truths he spoke about racism, classism, and economic injustice were not so hard to swallow. And he was actually arrested over 30 times before he died. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s gifts were seen as threats to those in power, to the point that he had an FBI file and was ultimately assassinated.

Truth be told, we generally still prefer the easier truths, the soft-spoken and soft, gentle words and tones, to the clear, prophetic voices that reveal the broken places and pain we would rather not face. We will sing in a few minutes about how Jacob dreamed of the ladder that represented for him the promise of God. And a few chapters later, Jacob wrestled with God all night as he tried to find his way forward. Jacob, like Jesus, had to face truth and challenge head on.

Jesus preaches this challenging message, knowing it would make those in power angry. And then Jesus

goes out and begins to call people to follow him, gathering disciples for the journey ahead. And somehow, some way, when Jesus called, knowing what was happening with John, knowing that Jesus was preaching the same message that got John arrested, the disciples followed him right into that fire — immediately, Matthew tells us. It makes me wonder what they were thinking when they dropped their nets, left their families, and began to walk the hard, dangerous road alongside the prophet from Galilee. What drew the disciples to follow Jesus? What draws us to be disciples and follow Jesus? What is the vision of God that Jesus embodies for us?

God's vision, as we know from so many promises throughout our scriptures, promises healing for every sickness and illness, as Matthew says at the end of today's gospel. Every disease of body, mind, and spirit — including, I imagine, diseases of violence, oppression, and division that Dr. King pointed out — break down our communities as well. God's vision turns us in a new direction, expanding our vision of who God is, and showing us the way when we get sick or lost or stuck. God's vision shows us hope.

Matthew tells us Jesus left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, echoing the promise in Isaiah that the Spirit of God reaches all places, all peoples, all creation. God's healing extends to the ends of the earth, and no one is left behind. God's vision brings clarity and truth. Jesus faces and proclaims hard truths, such as our need for healing and redemption, knowing that truth brings freedom. Jacob discovered this freedom when he saw the ladder, and even more so when he wrestled with God to find his way. Paul writes to the Corinthians, who were divided over what human leader they should be listening to, and warns them that we humans can get lost very easily, and following Christ is what will bring truth and clarity to our lives.

We as Christian disciples today follow God in Jesus, and we find clarity and truth in a world where there is so much confusion and lies and still arguing over personalities trying to build power for themselves. We follow Christ and find healing, clarity, and truth. And around all of this, God envisions holy community, grounded in love, commitment, and hope. Isaiah proclaims that God brings us together in joy and strength. Paul tells the Corinthians that Christ is the one to trust. Jesus invites the disciples, us, to join him to grow the community of love, truth, and healing that God envisions for us. God envisions holy community, and there is a place for us, each one of us, to be present and share the unique gifts that God has given us.

The disciples immediately dropped their nets and set off to follow Jesus, on a road that was difficult and dangerous, but still full of promise. The road is not easy, but we do not walk alone. We disciples of Christ today hear Jesus' invitation and follow Christ to the promises of God. And that is why we follow.

Thanks be to God.

*** Keywords ***

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