

Third Sunday after the Epiphany – 2026

Isaiah 9:1-4

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Matthew 4:12-25

I love my wife, so don't get the wrong idea as I tell this story. It was Friday evening and we were in separate cars, going from Clairemont to a restaurant in Rialto. I said: "I'll follow you." I had a lot of confidence. I'm good at this sort of thing. I've got a zippy, little car. I'll stay on her bumper. She knows where we're going and that's all that matters. "You lead, honey. I'll follow you." It was rush hour. We were going from the 10 to the 215 to the 210. On ramps, off ramps, a zillion other cars crammed together and sometimes seven, eight lanes of traffic. My eyes were fixed on her bumper. It was dark. She's now driving the most common car in America, a dark car, with absolutely no distinguishing marks. But hey, I'm confident. Have you ever had to follow someone in the car ahead? I was trying to change lanes as she changed lanes. I was trying to speed up as she sped up. I was trying not to let anything come between her and me because that's the best strategy. Be a polite driver to all those other folks but be assertive when I had to be. She knows where we're going. I don't know how to get to where we're going. I was 100% reliant on her. But I'm good at it. *I completely lost her.* She didn't know. I got the sense that she didn't much care. I called her up. "I lost you." "Oh, I didn't know that you were *following me* following me." She thought that a sane man would turn on his own directions – which I didn't (because I'm good at following, which, apparently, I'm not).

No one, and I mean no one, becomes Jesus' disciple by his or her own initiative. He calls us. Lazarus was called out of the tomb by the authoritative voice of the Son of God. Jesus calls us. When we were dead in trespasses and sin, God made us alive in Christ, it is by grace you have been saved (Ephesians 2:5). Follow Me. He made light to shine out of darkness (Genesis 1:3; 2 Corinthians 4:6). He makes disciples by calling sinners to Himself (John 15:16). Jesus said: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day" (John 6:44). Christ's call is in His Word. His deliberate call reaches you: "Follow Me." And so, you are here, Christians, claimed by the net of the gospel and drawn like fish into the ark of Christ's church. Follow Me. But the Lord *knows* we are following.

How many of you have ever felt that you lost track of Him, that He progressed to some crowded place that you couldn't follow, and that He had forgotten you, went too fast for you, wasn't interested in you catching up? Andrew and Simon, James and John – they were called. Follow me and I will make you fishers of men (Matthew 4:19). How wonderful! Christ is building His church. These are apostles, they will be the Sent Ones, the pillars of the church who will proclaim the kingdom, who will testify to the resurrection, and who will be martyred for their faith. Did they know what they were being called to? No; I don't suspect that they didn't. Did they grow? Did they see the glory of God in the face of Christ? Did their hearts soar as they saw the healing, the authority of the Lord displayed before their eyes?

It's ironic; follow Me then becomes "where I am going you cannot come." More than once, Jesus told those who loved Him, those who had left everything to follow Him (Matthew 19:27), that they weren't allowed, weren't able to follow Him (John 8:21; 13:33). He was going someplace they couldn't follow. Simon was baffled: "Lord, where are you going?" (John 13:36).

Simon Peter protested: “Why can I not follow you now?” Peter then puffed out his chest: “I will lay down my life for you” (John 13:37). No one could follow Jesus where He was going. The sacrificial Lamb was going on a strange and lonely pilgrimage. All of humanity was going to be borne by the sinless Son of God but none could follow. Alone, He was pierced for our transgressions. Alone, He became the object of hell’s fury and the Father’s judgment. Alone, He had the weight of Divine Law condemn Him. Where I am going you cannot come. That, my friends, is the mercy of God, mercy of the highest order, mercy which surrounds you. Where I am you cannot come. That is grace and love and protection. Do you realize, that if He didn’t go alone what you would suffer? He redeemed you from death. He saves you from hell. He takes the punishment that you deserve, and you are eternally protected. Take note of what Jesus said to Peter: “Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward” (John 13:36).

Peter followed Jesus into the Lord’s death and resurrection. Similarly, we have been baptized into Christ. We were baptized into His death (Romans 6:3). If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has gone, behold, the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17). We don’t follow the Lord on a freeway in separate cars. Our discipleship is closer, more intimate. His death and resurrection have recreated us. His life permeates our being. We follow Him in the most astounding way. But something else is true. You allow things to get in between you and Him. You don’t stay on His bumper. You flirt with the world and its faithless practices and your interest in following Christ wanes. You sin in one way or another, and you delay repentance. You paper over your transgression, pretending that it’s inconsequential, because you don’t want to acknowledge your very real and very obvious need for forgiveness. Too frequently, you are just as interested in following yourself, following your craven appetites, following the faithless crowd as you are in following the Lord Jesus. In this we’re all the same. If genuine discipleship depended entirely upon us, we would be abject failures.

A great light has shined on you (Isaiah 9:2). That’s why you are a Christian. Zebulun and Naphtali were two tribes of Israel that drew short straws when the Promised Land was parceled out (Joshua 18:10; 19:10, 32). That’s because they were given northern lands, lands that bordered hostile enemies who were idolatrous and pagan. These northern tribes were constantly being tempted by their neighbors who followed foreign gods. They regularly succumbed to spiritual darkness. Other tribes viewed them with contempt (1 Kings 9:11-13). Who but the sick need a physician? Who but those in darkness need a great light? Aren’t we the ones who need the Light of Christ? Aren’t we the ones who, apart from Him, would be dressed in midnight? As much as you flirt with the world, you know that if you abandoned Christ you would supremely miserable, a genuine foreigner in the world’s darkness. You belong to the Light. On *you* a great light has shined. You no longer walk in darkness for you have seen the Light of Christ, His glory piercing your gloom as He hangs triumphant on the cross. Follow Me. Sinners like us are Zebulun and Naphtali. On us He has made His Light shine.

God’s Word does what it says. Jesus says, “Follow Me” and then, if you get lost, He comes searching for you. He leaves the 99 and comes searching for you (Matthew 18:12-14). You are the one that the Lord fishes for. He has claimed you, made you His own. You are a child of the light (1 Thessalonians 5:5). Children of light put others’ needs above their own. Children of light know that Jesus has broken the hold of death and that reality makes you strong in the face

of any threat. Children of light love others as they have first been loved by the King of the cross. Children of light look for opportunities to show others who they follow. We are children of light. We let our light shine so that others may see our good works and praise our Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16).

St. Matthew tells us that after Jesus called His first disciples that He was preaching and teaching throughout Galilee and healing every disease and affliction. It was a revelation, an epiphany. He had authority. He had come to inaugurate God's end-time Kingdom. He would take our afflictions and sorrows into His death and His glory would capture the globe. Great crowds followed Him. Great crowds follow Him still. We are in that number. His call – Follow Me – is written all over every one of you. You follow Him here, at this altar. You follow Him in your vocation, in your station of life, wherever He has placed you. We follow Him together, as church. We follow Him as families, as men and women, as truck drivers and nurses and teachers and secretaries and shop keepers and programmers and policemen and retirees. We follow Him gladly. We follow Him so very gladly.