

## **Where He Leads, I will follow....**

**By Bob Young**

*NOTE: I include a portion of the "Letter of Invitation" to help the reader understand the purpose of this lesson and how and why it was developed.*

*We would be honored if you could join us this summer for our annual guest speaker series. Our theme this year is "Where He leads me, I will follow . . ." If there is anything consistent in the lives of God's people in the Bible, it is that He led them all through experiences or to places they never expected. The same God does the same to His followers today. For this series, we would like you to share a story about when God led you or someone you know through an experience that was faith-shaking and/or faith-making.*

*These experiences could be a journey through sickness, through financial loss, through a ministry crisis, through parenting challenges, a career change, intellectual doubt, a call to the mission field, etc. Your story does not have to be extraordinary. The idea is that the cumulative effect of this series will weave a tapestry of testimonies that encourages our people to stay faithful and be open to where God may lead them. This series is also a bridge between our summer Sunday lessons focused on how God transforms people, and our fall Sunday lessons on becoming fully-devoted followers.*

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**How does God transform people? How do we become fully-devoted followers?** I frankly admit that I do not understand the process entirely, but I can declare that in my own experience it is a vulgar event, characterized by fierce battles, far from the comfort zone most of us prefer.

### **Introduction**

There come times that send us reeling; moments of great sorrow, great joy, great beauty, serenity, outrage, insight; times when time seems to stand still. Past-present-future all fuse into one; we wonder if we are tasting eternity. These are moments shaped by God, just for us. As one looks back, one can lift them out of the past, recompose the days, and taste them again in the fullness of their zesty flavor.

### **1967—Difficult Decisions**

Days like that contributed to my call to preach. Graduate from HS in 1966, went to WSU. Summer 1967—youth rally in my home congregation, between my freshman and sophomore years at Wichita State. I spoke; high human emotion, reasonable crowds. That fall, I jumped at the opportunity to preach every Sunday in a little church in Penalosa, Kansas.

During that sophomore year I decided to transfer to OCC to study Bible and prepare to preach. But there is more to the story. The real story is in one event—one name--Evan Pearce.

This 19 year old was learning that God works in ways I had never experienced before. How unthoughtful of God to challenge me beyond my comfort zone.

Two semesters later, I cannot finish my degree in four years without going a summer trimester; I need a summer job in OKC, not selling Bibles for Southwestern. I remember the day as though it were yesterday. I applied for and got a job with a manufacturing firm, I could work and go to school. I could marry the girl of my dreams, and I would before summer was over. I remember the grateful prayer to God that he would so marvelously provide. How fiercely God loved and exhibited that love in days of destiny and decision.

### **We're talking about God, not us.**

How can I do what I am here to do without first saying something about God? Following God is never about us; regardless of how spectacular may be our story. Following God is always about God. We must settle that. I see and share three basic concepts.

- Calling us beyond comfort zones

- Walking beside us with a fierce love
- A vulgar God. Our God is a vulgar God—I only mean that he works in the everyday world.

### **Comfort Zones and Misplaced Priorities**

One of the first missionaries in the Bible is Jonah. If one genuinely wishes to understand God's fierce love, the Minor Prophets are a great foundation for understanding God's desire that his people walk faithfully. But the point I wish to make is what happens when one is called outside one's comfort zones.

God called Jonah as a real missionary with a mission to take the message of repentance to Nineveh: a foreign nation, Gentiles, not the people of God. Jonah is given a job but runs from God's call. Why? The principle is simple—it took him beyond his comfort zone.

Few are willing to leave their comfort zone to serve God. Sometimes the best way to block God out of our busy-busy-busy lives is to keep busy-busy. Busy with prayer, busy with church, meeting, Bible reading, Bible study, even religious concerns. Busy, and there is not time for a life-giving moment in our life. Jonah was busy getting ready to go to Tarshish when God called him in the opposite direction. He was not the first, nor would he be the last.

In the NT, the scribes and Pharisees were so busy with religion, Bible, Scripture, they missed the divine visitation. Has God been present in my life, your life? This year? Last year? Was he here, there, present, did we see him, know him, honor him, hear him. We declare that the Christ is here, life-giving moments are all around us, a wedding, a night visit with a religious leader from the church down the street, a woman in the grocery store for more water, a paralytic, a blind man. But religious people were too busy. Am I too busy? Are you too busy? The gospels are little more than an array of individual moments that measure opportunity more than the chronology.

A blind beggar yelling for attention, a tax collector sitting in his office minding his own business when an intruder says "follow me"...ten lepers along a road wailing in misery one moment and healed the next, but only one is grateful...a dead-tired body, beaten, bleeding, stretched out on a couple of beams of wood and nailed there...a flustered governor washing his hands of the whole bloody mess...two disciples startled by a stranger on the Emmaus road and more startled when they recognize him as he breaks bread with them...what if you add it all together? What is it? Certainly less than three years, not even three months. The barest moment of human history, but we divide all time by it--BC or AD.

Comfort zones are so overwhelming that we seldom see them, let alone escape them. They lure us toward choices that make obeying God hard. Jonah's life giving moment looks a lot like death. Inside the fish, he prays, and God spares him from the fish, he is spit out on the shore. God's word comes again, and this time Jonah is better prepared for the opportunity. He must have told that story again and again.

Thus he obeys God; Nineveh listens. Jonah preaches and "lo and behold" the Ninevites listen, hear, believe, repent, change, mourn. What a dilemma! A successful preacher who did not want to succeed.

### **Fast Forward to 1980: Holmes Road and missions**

I remember when the church in Lansing faced such a moment for missions; \$30000 on a single day on that first Mission Sunday. An elder, "Proudest day of my life, even though I didn't believe we could do it." I remember the struggle and hurts that followed. God led us beyond our comfort zone. We chose a missionary, but he did not stay on the field. The reasons do not matter. Satan won round #1. We selected another family, Cuban, more recently from Nicaragua. Surely this is the one, shades of Samuel of old, but no. Satan won round #2: defeat, despair, discouragement. The choice of Carlos, a Costa Rican government employee turned preacher, the result was wonderful fruits—in Honduras not Costa Rica. God provides.

### **Fiercest Love for Weakest Lives**

Indeed, there is something incredible about how this God of the Bible operates—how he fiercely loves us in the weakest moments. We want it to be noble, spectacular, we like the applause, the pats on the back. We want to see the success. We want noble principles for living, timeless truths, something to focus life. But he insists on coming in little moments we do not recognize—he works best in our weaknesses, our humiliation, our suffering, sacrifice, through particular people, moments, days. Seldom spectacular, sometimes embarrassing.

Have you considered what Jonah thought...When he ran but God caught him anyway...when he was in the fish. I wonder why he prayed. Have you asked what he thought when he landed on the beach, slightly bruised but still alive? When Nineveh responded? Did he see the moment? Did he see God?

### **1993**

I remember another moment when God was present: Thanksgiving Day, 1993. ["Story of my mother's death"] I would not have done it that way. I would have done it differently. How vulgar of God! What fierce love exhibited! How uncomfortable!

There are moments in time when time stands still, and we are sucked into the juices of life....moments of fulfillment, crisis, moral decisions, victory, and ultimate faith in God. The Bible is filled with such moments. Es. 4:14; 2 Cor. 6:2; Eph. 5:16; Col. 4:5; 1 John 2:18. Mt. 16:3--discern the signs of the times; 26:18--my time is at hand; Mk 1:15--the time is fulfilled; 13:33--take heed, ye know not the time; Lk. 12:56, how can you not discern this time; John 7:6,8, my time is not yet full.

In Greek, there are two words for time--chronos, kairos. Chronos is time as we westerners think of it. Clocks ticking, time rolling. While the ages roll on. Kairos is time with quality and significance, "It's about time, it's time to speak up; speak now or forever hold your peace, now is the time for all good men..." Eccl 3:1ff. Seasons, times when for a moment we catch a glimpse of what our lives are about, time when we stand with one foot securely in eternity, for timeless eternity is the essence of kairos time. Time to be seized by the challenge of life; time to understand the purpose of life. The book of Jonah is filled with kairos moments. Our lives are filled with kairos moments.

### **A Vulgar God**

I mean nothing disrespectful by the phrase, but I declare that God is actively working in the everyday events of our world. I want to say it in a way I remember. I look for God elsewhere—on Sunday, in spiritual moments, but he always shows up in the depths of life daily lived.

### **Conclusion**

This church has surely had such moments. Individuals have such moments--beginnings, new beginnings, potential, wonder, mystery, opportunity, challenges, a time to be seized, life's challenges, Satan's opposition, the way is never easy. Comfort zones stretched, God's fierce love exhibited, God's vulgarity on display in ways that many doubt that God is God.

**Fast Forward to today.** Pay attention to these moments which seize you. They come quietly, in beauty, sorrow, sudden awareness. They are times for prayer and fasting. A time to ask candidly what we are about, to ask about God's message, to ask if we about God's message, to ask if we are about God's presence and God's mission into this world. Are we his hands? his feet? his mouth? Where is the evidence of God's guiding hand, where is our Nineveh? Is it for us about God? What does it mean for us to be transformed? for us to be fully-devoted followers?

Such questions should sensitize us to life's moments. You may not be in the church house when God wants to speak. Those moments when you stand with one foot in eternity, become aware that life is

everywhere about you, and that much of life is where we are not, but our life is only where we are. These kinds of moments will seize you, shape you, change you, keep changing you, if you will let them.

What do you see as you reflect on your life? Do you see marvel and mystery? ministry and mission? Can you see your own well-defined comfort zones? Do you see spirituality in self, love for others evidenced in strong evangelism and missions? Do you see God?

*Father, open our eyes when we do not see, purge our hearts when they clog with self, cleanse our lips when they speak with guile, guard our hearts. May our lives be pure, may we clearly see the challenge, and may we commit to truth, may we speak that truth to a world foundering in sin's stagnation. We pray for this church, for one another, and for the lost world about us, for effective outreach that the message may not stop with us. Help us seize the day while it is day, before the night comes. In the name of the One your prophet describes as the Sun of Righteousness. Amen.*

This is a new season, a new time. Seize the time. Consider well the times, but look always to the Timeless One. Today is our time, tomorrow may not be. Time for prayer, for Jesus above all else prayed in his kairos moments. This is a unique season. May we not miss the divine visitation this summer, as we seek God's next step for us.

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Post-preaching reflection: the act of reflecting, a thought occurring, consideration, meditation, y recalling and remembering. Other passages come to mind. Eph. 1:15-16; Phil. 1:3-4; 1 Th. 1:2. Paul spent time reflecting on people who were important to him. Reflecting helps us to be mindful of the lives and needs of others. In our fast-paced world of instant everything and hurrying to get nowhere, pausing for reflection is vital. Reflection helps us see God at work.

The reflections of this sermon are guided by the instructions I received, by the opportunity to tell the story of how God has been at work in one life. How does one do that? I looked for a biblical model. I thought of Paul's efforts to summarize the major events of his life—his conversion stories, his conversation with the Ephesian elders in Acts 20, his claims based on his personal story and experience in 2 Corinthians. In the same book, Paul described such efforts as possible foolishness. Perhaps you will allow me some latitude or even foolishness, if such it be. I did not find an adequate structure to frame my story, so I only took texts as a general guide to think about what it means to be a genuine follower of Jesus—themes, concepts, desires, loves.