

September 28, 2025

Moving Toward Jesus

John 1:35-51

There's an old song that I grew up singing called "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus." Many of you might know it. I'm not going to sing it, but the words of the first verse go like this:

I have decided to follow Jesus,
I have decided to follow Jesus,
I have decided to follow Jesus,
No turning back, no turning back.

It's a song about the choice that has been made to follow Jesus, and the resolve to not turn back to our old ways. It's a pledge of allegiance to Jesus; a declaration that nothing will sway us from following him.

I think it's an optimistic song. It's hopeful and simple. I think, however, that it's missing a few key pieces of what it *practically* looks like to follow Jesus. What do I mean by that?

When the first disciples encounter Jesus, they do so through the words and witness of John the Baptist. Hannah talked last week about how John was simply a witness to Jesus' arrival on the scene—he *witnessed* Jesus' baptism and saw the Spirit descending on Jesus like a dove. Then, John tells two of his own disciples, "Look! There is the Lamb of God!" And they follow Jesus.

You can see this pattern on the graphic on the screen: John sees Jesus, he tells his disciples about Jesus, and then they follow him. We'll see this pattern a few more times through this passage as we continue.

Now, if we've been in church for a while, we don't think much of the phrase, "The Lamb of God." With the benefit of hindsight, we know that this refers to the sacrifice that Jesus will make on behalf of humanity. But let's stop for a second and wonder what these disciples would have understood by this phrase. Any of you newcomers to the Bible might also be wondering what this means.

The Lamb of God... it's a clear reference to the Law of Moses, the Torah, which laid out the sacrificial rituals by which the people of God could come to God. In a world where animal sacrifices were common, there was nothing strange about this, though it's certainly strange to us.

Leviticus 1:1-2 says, *The Lord called to Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting. He said, "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'When anyone among you brings an offering to the Lord, bring as your offering an animal from either the herd or the flock.'"*

Much later, the prophet Isaiah spoke of a man who would suffer on behalf of the people,

*He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth. (Is. 53:7)*

So, in speaking these words, *the Lamb of God*, John is evoking the *entire* Jewish Bible; he is proclaiming Jesus as the one who will suffer on their behalf and make right their relationship with God.

What do the disciples do in response? They *follow Jesus*.

During this time in Jewish history, it was common for travelling rabbis (the Jewish word for *teacher*) to take on disciples as they moved through the country. All Jewish boys studied and memorized the first five books of the Bible, the Torah, by the time they were 10 years old. (In case you're wondering, girls had a different education—usually learning how to read, write, and run a household.) The brightest students then went on to memorize the entire Tanakh, the Old Testament as we know it today, by the time they were 14 years old.

After this, many of them pursued practical trades to make a living, but some continued as disciples of various rabbis. These disciples were usually men who wanted to learn more about the Torah and how to live a Jewish life. If they wanted to follow a particular rabbi, they would approach the rabbi and appeal to be their disciple, or apprentice.

So, these disciples hear about Jesus, the one who their current rabbi says is the fulfillment of all their Scriptures, and they want to follow him. They want to learn from him, about him, and get to know him. I love how the First Nations Version puts it, "*Wisdomkeeper,*" *they asked. "Where are you staying?"* (John 1:38) They are asking this Wisdomkeeper, Rabbi, and Teacher if they can stay with him and learn from him.

What does Jesus do? He openly invites them to "come and see." He invites them in; he accepts their request to apprentice under him. Do they know anything about Jesus? No, not really, other than that their own trusted wisdomkeeper and rabbi, John, vouched for him. That's good enough for them!

In fact, this is so satisfactory that one of them, Andrew, finds his brother the next day and tells *him* all about Jesus. We see this pattern emerge again: **Andrew encounters Jesus, tells another Simon about Jesus, and Simon decides to follow Jesus, too.**

Andrew's promotional statement to Simon is actually quite short. He says only, "We have found the Messiah!" This, too, is good enough for Simon, and he follows Andrew to Jesus. Why is this good enough?

Like *the Lamb of God*, this title, **Messiah**, holds all kinds of weight with the Jewish people. There are ancient hopes of redemption from oppression tied into this title, calling back themes of deliverance from Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon from the earlier books of the Bible. Remember—the story of Scripture is so ingrained in the fabric of Jewish society that all of the stories of the Exodus, wilderness, entering the Promised Land, building the tabernacle and temple, the kings of Israel and their eventual exile because of their unfaithfulness to God and return to the land because of God's faithfulness are *right there* under the surface of everyone's hearts and minds.

This is the long-awaited Messiah? Well, there's no doubt that these disciples want to follow him if that's the case!

One by one, these disciples join Jesus, compelled by the simple phrase, "Follow me." That's it. There's no set of doctrines that they need to comply with before joining. While it is implied that they know Israel's history and their Scriptures very well, it is never recorded that Jesus quizzes them on it or vets them before accepting them as his apprentices. He simply asks, and they come.

In 1978, Christian missionary Paul Hiebert coined the phrase *social sets*. Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch expanded on social sets in their book, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, in 2013.

The idea of a social set is that humans naturally group themselves together and define themselves, usually by asking the question, "*Who is with me?*" People naturally want to define themselves by their tribe. There are two main types of social sets.

First, there are **bounded sets**. Think of a bounded set like a pasture with a fence. There are cows inside the fence, and there are predators outside the fence. If the fence is solid, the cows stay inside the fence and predators stay out. In the church world, this looks like keeping certain rules, doctrines, or other socially acceptable norms to keep certain people inside the fence and undesirables out. In my church growing up, it looked praying the sinner's prayer, wearing skirts on Sundays, and never playing with real playing cards. These were the markers of who you knew was 'in' and who was 'out.' People who didn't do the 'right' things were suspect at best and shunned at worst.

Other examples of how a bounded-set church or community might draw their lines is in the words that you use (do you know the right 'Christian' words? If you do, you're 'in.'), the doctrines you believe in (believer's baptism is 'in;' infant baptism is 'out'), what your sexuality is (if you're straight, you're 'in;' if you're not, you're 'out'), or what kind of worship

music your church has on a Sunday morning (drums are ‘out,’ organs are ‘in’). While the intent of bounded set communities is to safeguard what they view as right or holy, in practice it can be exclusive, harmful, or downright toxic.

Now, look at how Jesus interacts with the disciples. Does he make a list of qualifications? Does he vet them? No, he doesn’t. He simply accepts them as they are—as simple fishermen. Later, he would welcome tax collectors, Zealots, women, Greeks, and Roman officials into his circle of disciples.

Hmm. So, if Jesus didn’t operate by a bounded set sort of thinking, then what was he after? How were people supposed to know who his disciples were if he didn’t have some sort of standard of behaviour or code of conduct? By extension, how do we know if the church today is on the right track?

The other social set is called a **centred set**. Many countries contain their cattle without any fences at all. Instead, they place a large dugout or oasis in a central location. The cattle won’t wander far from the source of water because, well, if they did, they would die. They need water to live, and so they stay close.

In a similar way, churches and communities with centred-set thinking don’t put up fences or rules to determine who is in or who is out. Instead, everyone orbits around the center an Source of Life—Jesus. Sometimes they might wander farther away from it, while other times they might head straight for it because they are desperate for it. In centred set thinking, we either move toward Jesus or away from Jesus; it’s not a one and done “I asked Jesus into my heart, and that’s that.” Instead, every action you take and word you speak is a movement closer to or farther from Jesus.

Following Jesus, then, isn’t about whether you follow this rule or that; it’s not about whether you prayed a specific prayer, got baptized, attend church, volunteer, or say the right words. It’s simply about where you are in relation to Jesus—are you moving toward him, or away from him? Are you spending time *with Jesus*? Are you becoming more like him, looking more like the teacher you are following?

When we move toward him, when we obey his commands to love one another, to keep the Sabbath and make space to simply listen to what God is saying, to rest and enjoy the beauty of life and humanity, and to ruthlessly eradicate the ugly, sinful things within us that harm ourselves, others, and our creation, we follow Jesus. We look like him.

When we do the opposite—when we harm others, ourselves, or the creation around us by our actions, words, or thoughts—we move farther away from Jesus.

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Jesus invites each of the disciples to follow him. “Come and see,” he says. It’s an invitation that leads to life. Eventually, moving toward Jesus morphs into moving *with* Jesus.

This all leads me to wonder—which kind of church are we? Are we a bounded set kind of church, one who sets rules about who can be ‘in’ or ‘out’? Do we decide who belongs to ‘us’ and who needs to stay out there with ‘them’?

Or are we a centred set kind of church, where everything we do is oriented around Jesus? He is the Source of Life, the one to whom we cling, the one whom we follow. We don’t need to judge how far or close others are to him; instead, we judge ourselves for how close we are and whether we are moving toward him or away from him.

Now, this is uncomfortable for those of us who like structure and rules. But Jesus doesn’t define the rules of what it means to follow him, aside from “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbour as yourself.” Everything he teaches revolves around these two commands. There aren’t any specific guidelines, other than to *follow* him and *know* him, and then to love others and share this good news with them.

That’s what Philip does. He is invited to follow Jesus, and he tells his friend, Nathanael, all about it, “Hey, we have found the one whom Moses wrote about!” Again, Philip is referencing God’s words to Moses in Deuteronomy:

I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their fellow Israelites, and I will put my words in his mouth. He will tell them everything I command him. (Deut. 18:18)

A new Moses? The greatest prophet and leader Israel has ever known? That’s an incredible claim! Philip names Jesus of Nazareth as this new Moses... but Nathanel is skeptical.

“Nazareth?” he says. “What good comes from Nazareth?”

Now, Nazareth wasn’t a dirty or rough town. It was quite far north in Judea, estimated at about a four-day walk from Jerusalem, the capital of the region. The issue with Nazareth was rather that most prophets and prominent leaders were expected to come from the urban, populated, educated regions—Jerusalem or Samaria, or perhaps an ancient, well-known town like Bethlehem, which had been named in earlier prophecies.

But Nazareth? It’s a nothing-town. No prophecies or potential leaders were connected to Nazareth. It’s the equivalent of our current prime minister having been born in Fort Smith, Northwest Territories... where is that??

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Nathanael is skeptical. We can understand that. And yet, he comes along with Philip to meet Jesus, perhaps because he is curious about what this Jesus is all about. When he meets Jesus, Jesus sees him—all of his questions, doubts, and insecurities. He sees him, and he welcomes him just as he is. The New Living Translation says it this way, “*Now here is a genuine son of Israel—a man of complete integrity.*”

Now, hold on a second, Jesus. How can you know that? You haven’t even met Nathanael yet! Nathanael is just as puzzled by this as we are, asking, “How do you know me?”

Jesus answers by saying that he *saw* Nathanael sitting under the fig tree; he saw his interaction with Philip and heard Nathanael’s honest criticism. Jesus *witnessed* Nathanael in a supernatural way, and then he names Nathanael as a man of integrity. Jesus acknowledges Nathanael’s uncertainty about who Jesus is.

Whereas the other disciples heard about the Lamb of God, the Messiah, and the Wisdomkeeper, and decided to follow him immediately, Nathanael is not so sure. He has questions. Jesus welcomes his questions, and names them good. Honourable. True. Jesus welcomes Nathanael, just as he is.

How often do we have questions about what it means to follow Jesus? How often are we uncertain about what this following-Jesus life looks like? Jesus names your questions as good, honourable, and true. Your honest questions and doubts reflect your honest heart. They are in themselves a movement toward Jesus. He sees this already, and he welcomes it. He welcomes you.

Nathanael doesn’t have all his questions laid to rest, but he is convinced that this is a teacher that he wants to follow—he calls him **Rabbi, Son of God, King of Israel**. He honours Jesus with the highest of names, recognizing that this is no mere human prophet, but the very Son of God come to earth, who would establish God’s kingdom on earth.

Jesus says that Nathanael will see many more things than this; Jesus himself is the bridge between heaven and earth, and this is only the beginning.

That’s enough for Nathanael. We don’t read it here, but later on, he is listed with the rest of the disciples after Jesus is resurrected. He follows Jesus. He moves toward Jesus with his whole heart and life. Nathanael is the kind of guy who wears his heart on his sleeve and he follows Jesus with all of who he is.

Following Jesus is not a one-and-done. It’s not “Yay, I’m in and now I don’t need to do anything else about it because I’m saved.” The decision to follow Jesus is an everyday process of moving toward and with Jesus.

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We, if we profess to be Christians, are followers of Jesus. You have a choice. And guess what? Jesus isn't a static pool of water in our midst. He's on the move; his Spirit lives and breathes and moves in our world, and we get to follow him wherever he goes. If you stay still, deciding, "Ah well, I don't need to do anything else. I'm a Christian!" then eventually, you may be much farther from the Source of Life than you intended. Following Jesus requires an active faith. It means that every day, in every action, we are choosing him; it's not about the rules you follow, but the *person* you are following.

It's not for us to judge where another person is in their faith, but it *is* for us to tell others about this Jesus whom we love, whom we follow! Just like John did, and his two disciples, and Andrew, and Philip—they couldn't keep this good news to themselves; they had to tell others—"Hey, have you heard about this Jesus?"

I'd like to invite Lenna Isleifson up this morning. I've asked her to share with us briefly why she decided to follow Jesus and what that looks like for her today. As we move through the Gospel of John, we will hear from ancient witnesses who saw Jesus and chose to follow him. I thought it might be helpful to hear this same testimony from one of our own.

Lenna, why did you decide to follow Jesus?

Were there any people who brought you to Jesus?

What does following Jesus look like for you today?

What does it look like for you to tell others about following Jesus?

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I prayed a prayer when I was seven. I thought I was 'in.' But at some point, I realized that doing all the 'right' things wasn't good enough. I didn't have a relationship with Jesus. When I was 14, I told Jesus that I wanted to follow him with my whole heart. Has it been easy? Not at all. Some decisions I make take me farther away; others bring me intimately close. But he's always there. In every stage and place in my life, I have been secure in knowing that I am oriented to the Source of Life. He's on the move, and he invites me to follow. If I want to stay close, I'm going to keep spending time with him, keep reading Scripture, keep praying, keep connecting in community. The Gospel of John invites us to follow Jesus. Will you move toward him, too?