

***Why We Don't Fit In***  
By Rev. Jonathan A. Malone

*Preached at Lower Merion Baptist Church  
Sunday, March 26, 2006; Bryn Mawr, PA*

**4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent  
John 3:14-21**

***“...God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world...”***

***Movement 1 – The Call to Know Jesus***

Today I'm inviting you to follow Jesus. I'm just going to come out and say it; I am inviting you to follow Jesus. I don't have any fancy introduction, I don't have any cute or funny story to open with, just the invitation, come and follow Jesus. I am placing that invitation before you, because there are some here who are looking for Jesus, although we may not be ready and open to follow him. We may be like Nicodemus, coming to Jesus in the middle of the night looking for answers, as he did in this passage. Like Nicodemus, we have heard rumors about Jesus, and we are hungry to know more. Well, come and follow, and know this Jesus.

I also know that there are some here who have already said 'yes' to Christ, have walked with Christ, but find their faith has faltered and fallen. Maybe they have gotten out of groove with Jesus. Maybe they have forgotten what it really means to follow Jesus. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. found himself in this place early in the civil rights movement. He had received threatening phone call after threatening phone call and finally it was too much. It was at that moment when he realized that all the time he spent studying at Morehouse, or at Colgate Divinity School, or at Boston University did not give him the strength he needed. What he needed was the faith that he received from his daddy, also a minister. What he needed was the Jesus, the Lord he said 'yes' to before. And I know there are some of you here who have fallen out of step, and fallen into a place where you need to remember the 'yes' you said long ago to Jesus. So I'm inviting you again to follow Jesus.

There are some here who have never said 'yes' to Christ. This invitation is for you to follow Christ. That is what the whole gospel of John is for, to invite you to follow Christ. All through the gospel we "see" and we "hear" about Christ. Earlier in this third chapter, we hear Jesus tell Nicodemus about the need to be born again and to be born from above. This very passage, which we read today, tells us why we are called to follow Christ. So I extend the invitation to you to follow Christ, for there will be a time when you will need him, there will be a time when you will look for him and when you will rest upon the faith that Christ offers. Don't wait, but say, "yes" now. "There are no atheists in foxholes" we are told, but you need not wait until you find yourself in the foxhole. Say yes to Christ now, take his hand, and follow Jesus. That's all I'm going to do is invite you to follow Jesus.

***Movement 2 – Follow Jesus Because of Signs?***

Some follow Jesus because of the signs he performed. Some saw Jesus turn water into wine. Some saw Jesus give sight to a blind man. Some saw Jesus multiply bread and fishes. Some saw these signs and believed. Yet that is all they based their faith upon. They were empiricists; they were rational people who would only follow Jesus because of what they saw. That is partly what led Nicodemus to speak to Jesus. Nicodemus was acting on behalf of a Jewish community that saw such signs and wanted to know more. There may have been Jews hearing the gospel of John who related with the questions of Nicodemus. If the signs were explained, or if we saw another sign, then we would believe. The signs make us want to follow Jesus.

Think of today when mobs of people flock around those who perform wonderful acts. We live with John Stuart Mill's rational empiricism, that what we see, if it makes sense, is what we will believe. If someone comes, heals, and then calls us to follow, we would follow because that individual has demonstrated that he or she has a special power. We want to see the sign to believe.

There are some churches that will not let you have a leadership position unless you demonstrate the act of speaking in tongues. Only then will we know you really have the Holy Spirit. We want to see the sign to believe. We are at the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Azusa Street revival (1906), a revival when many claimed to be healed and cleansed by the Holy Spirit. So often, in hearing the testimonies of attendants we hear, “I wouldn’t believe it if I didn’t see it.” Yet those who did started something new, and the Pentecostal movement was formed. We wanted to see the sign to believe.

It is like the scene in *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back*, when Yoda is trying to convince Luke to use the force and lift his X-Wing out of a swamp. Luke doesn’t believe it is possible. When Yoda performs the act, Luke says, “I don’t believe it...” to which Yoda replies, “That is why you fail.” Luke had to see it and still didn’t believe it. We as well want to see the sign to believe it.

That is the way so many of us treat Jesus. We don’t believe he is special unless we see the signs he has done. Unless we know that he raised Lazarus from the dead, unless we know that he healed the lame man, unless we know that he walked on water, we won’t believe that Jesus is the Son of God. But show us the signs and we will follow him. If we see the sign, then we will follow.

Yet in this passage Jesus only gives us one sign through which to believe, and that is the sign of the cross. The healings, the miracles all mean nothing in light of the sign of the cross. That is a sign that doesn’t make sense. It is a sign that is not rational; it is, as Paul says, foolishness and weakness. So if you are going to follow Jesus, don’t follow him just because of what you see. Don’t follow him because of the signs he performs. We must go deeper because the cross pulls us deeper. We must look for a more profound reason to follow Jesus than healings, transformations, and water walking. The cross is the sign that Jesus gives and it pulls on our very essence of discipleship. Some follow Jesus because of signs he performed, but let’s go deeper.

### ***Movement 3 – Follow Jesus because of Judgment?***

Some may follow Jesus so they will be assured a place in heaven. Instead of taking the carrot of signs, we take the stick of punishment. I am sure you have heard that those who do not believe in Jesus are going to hell. Such thought is very common in Christianity and is used as a reason to convince people to follow Jesus. The fear of damnation is the cause of salvation we are told, and we follow Jesus to avoid hell.

There are some churches that push this idea especially at Halloween when they would host a salvation house. Such an experience is similar to the haunted house, except that the scare offered is the reality of what hell might be like. Then you are given the choice; live the pagan, sinful, debauchery life of sin and go to hell, or accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior and go to heaven. Believe or burn. We are sacred into believing, and we don’t want to make the wrong choice. We hear Jonathan Edward’s evangelical, brimstone sermon, *Sinner in the Hands of an Angry God*, we hear how we are dangling over the pit of hell on a spider’s web, and we ask, how I can get out of such punishment. We are told that all of us are born sinful, all of us are born condemned to hell, and we have no way out.

So many of us say ‘yes’ to Christ so that we can make the safe wager and be assured eternal salvation. Many of us say ‘yes’ to Christ so that we can sleep easy knowing when that day comes, we will get to heaven. But what about the time in-between then and now? When we have bought our own life insurance through Christ, what should we do as we wait to cash in on our policy? What do I do in-between then and now to fill the time? Should I return to my normal life? How do I follow Jesus, when all I am concerned about is avoiding judgment? And what about that passage which says, “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” Christ did not come into the world to tell us how we are going to be punished, but how we can be saved. This doesn’t seem to be a passage of judgment. Focusing on eternal life does not seem to save the world in the here and now. So many follow Jesus to be assured a place in heaven, but it does not seem to be the path we ought to take. That’s not following Jesus, but asking Jesus to wait on us.

### ***Movement 4 – Follow Jesus because of Light.***

We are called to follow Jesus because he walks in the light. All through the gospel of John we are reminded of this, that Jesus walks in the light. In the very beginning of the gospel we are told, “the light shines in the darkness.” John came to testify to the light. Jesus walks in the light and is the light. When Jesus was going to see Lazarus who had just died, his disciples were afraid because of the authorities. But Jesus said, “I walk in the light, and I will not stumble,” (paraphrase). Jesus says to Nicodemus, that the light has come into the world. Jesus walks in that light; Jesus is the light.

We see this because Jesus is different from all the others of that time, and from all the others of today. Jesus stands out, not primarily because of the miracles he performs, not because of what he teaches, but the way he performs miracles, the way he teaches, the way he listens, the way he lives amongst the people. It is different from the ways of the world; it is the way of the light, the path, the intention of God. The actions of Jesus, the light of God points out the ways in which the establishment and the institutions are oppressing the people. Remember last week when Jesus overturned the tables in the temple? The light was exposing the darkness and the evils for what they were. Remember how Jesus stopped to take time with the children? Remember how Jesus spoke with the woman at the well? Remember how Jesus taught us to love our neighbor, even if it was someone we were taught to hate? The light shines on us and shows us a new way, a different way, God's way.

Jesus is different from the world, and he doesn't quite fit in, and that is what Nicodemus noticed, that is what the disciples noticed, and that is what we notice. Like the sergeant in the movie *From Here to Eternity*. The sergeant is someone who does things by the book, but always, always tries to play it fair. He will not inflict more than is appropriate, and he is noticed. The young private notices the sergeant because he is different from the rest of the leaders in the unit. It is this way with Jesus. Jesus stands out not so much because of what he does but more because how he does it. Jesus stands out not so much because of what he says, but the way he says it. Jesus stands out not so much because of where he is going, but the way in which he gets there. Jesus does not offer moral dictates to live by or categorical imperatives to follow but a way to walk. Jesus is the light and the life lived according to God to the world, and that is a reason to follow him.

### ***Movement 5 – The Salvation of Light***

The light allows us to truly live as we follow Jesus. When we decide to follow Jesus, we walk the path of light that Jesus sets before us. When we decide to follow Jesus, we live the life that Jesus sets before us. This is a freedom to live in a different way from the way of the world. Karl Barth says that Jesus gives us the freedom to say "yes" to God's call, and "no" to the call of the world. Notice Jesus and follow Jesus not because of the deeds he performs, but the way in which he performs them. The world says don't worry about the poor, but Jesus heals the poor, the marginalized, the outcast, and those who have nothing to offer in return. Yet when asked, he heals the centurion's servant, when asked he goes to the leader of the temple, and expects nothing in return. We aren't called to perform miracles, but to serve and be present to the marginalized, the outcasts, and the low class, the least of our society and expect nothing in return. We go to those who are mourning, and we offer comfort knowing that comfort will not be returned. We go to those who are in a place of distress and we offer help knowing that help will not be returned. We pray for those who are in a place of darkness and despair and know that prayers will not be returned. For those who ask, we will offer. For those who need, we will be present. Then we will be living in the way of the light. It is being present to the world so that we stand out and will be noticed. And we will not fit in because we will be living in the light in a world of darkness.

Think about telling your boss that you cannot work late because you need to spend time with your family. Think about telling your friends that you cannot go to the movies because you need to spend time at the shelter. Think about telling your loved ones that they will not receive birthday presents because you have dedicated money in their name to a cause of charity. Think about making your vacation a time for mission. Think about making your life a ministry for God.

There are people in this church who have given home, and wealth, and prayers and energy to causes that can offer nothing in return. In the eyes of the world, in the realm of darkness, it is a foolish investment; it is a waste of time. But in the light of Christ it is the life fully lived.

We are called to follow Jesus not because of where he is heading but because of how he gets there. There is something different, something profound, and something that doesn't fit with the world that is this Jesus. My brother and sisters, when you decide to walk with Jesus, when you live the life that God calls us all to live then you will know what it means to be saved in the here and now. When you say no to the world and yes to Christ, and live that life you will know what it means to be saved. When you walk in the light, when you act with Christ then you will know what it means to be saved. Don't follow Jesus because of the signs he performed, but how he performs them. Don't follow Jesus because you will be assured salvation in the future, but because you can live salvation now. When we follow Jesus, when we live in the light, then we will truly live in this world.

### ***Movement 6 – The Salvation of God’s Love***

The cross gives us the chance to live again and again. This is where Jesus is heading. This is what Christ was talking about when he said that the Son of Man must be lifted up. Through his going up, the world will be saved. Through his actions on the cross you and I will be saved. My brothers and sisters, there will be times when we will want to fit in with the world. There will be times when we will want to seem to be in the stream with the rest of the world, and we will step out of the light of Christ. There will be times when we will be selfish, when we will be short-tempered, when we will be prideful, we will be judgmental, and when we will be close-minded. There will be times when we will stop living, and go back to the culture of death that is practiced by the world. And then, come Sunday, we will find ourselves on what Charles Finney calls the “anxious bench.” This is the place we sit if we need forgiveness. This is the place we sit if we need redemption. My brothers and sisters, forgiveness is given, life is given, and salvation is given today because we can look up from that bench and see the Son of God lifted up on the cross. Through Christ on the cross we know that God loves us. Through Christ on the cross we know that God forgives us. Through Christ on the cross we know that we are given another chance to turn from the world and follow Christ in the life that God calls us all to live.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only son so that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.” It is a life we are called to live daily, and a life we will live when we die and then fully live with God. When we fail to follow Jesus, we can look up at the cross and know we are forgiven, know that the darkness is cast out, and we can again walk the path that Christ calls us to walk. And again we won’t fit in with the world because we will be living the way of the light, the way of Christ, the way of God.

So again I offer the invitation, will you decided now to follow Jesus? Will you decide to walk in his steps, to take up his cross and follow him? Will you decide now to follow Jesus? Will you put the world behind you and the cross before you? Will you decide now to follow Jesus? Not for fame, not for glory, but for life lived with God. Will you decide now to follow Jesus?

AMEN