

# Sermon Text for October 8, 2023

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

*Psalm 23, Matthew 8:18-22*

*“Where you go I’ll go”*

Before Covid, don’t you love when I start a sermon that way? Before Covid I would attend a preachers conference that took place every year and it would be in various cities around the nation. In 2002 it was in Chicago and my friend and I decided that we would go and see this growing church called WillowCreek. It was a Tuesday evening and we didn’t expect much but they also were having a conference for pastors and their senior pastor, a guy named Bill Hybels, was speaking. He said two things that evening that have stayed with me to this day. One was a commentary on Jeremiah whom he said ministered for 40 years, was doing God’s work, but didn’t get a single convert. Not every church is going to be a WillowCreek and it doesn’t mean that somehow you have fallen short of God’s plans for you in ministry.

The second example he gave was one of Cortez when he landed on what would have been foreign soil to him and after a few days in the buggy jungle with little food and water his men were starting to complain and he realized that they were about to mutiny and get back on the ships and sail back home to Spain. It is said that he in the middle of the night commanded that all of the ships be burned so that his men would know that they were now committed. Once you decide to go on this expedition there is no turning back. It was the first time that I heard about this and the application is obvious when we think about discipleship and what it means to follow Jesus, which is our topic for today. Once we start following Jesus, there is no turning back, you have to burn the ships, even if your ministry looks more like Jeremiah than it does Bill Hybels.

But as we follow Jesus, do we always know what we have signed up for? Some of you have been asked to serve on an officer board here at the church, whether it is as elder, or deacon, or Trustee. You may have no idea what you have signed up for. That is similar to what happens when you agree to follow Jesus, we have no idea what is in store for us. But what we do know is that there are going to be times when we are going to want to get back on the ships and sail home and have nothing more to do with this whole following and discipleship things. We just brought on new members and I’m guessing not one of you when you joined the church knew all that was involved in being a part of this family.

If it’s just believing the right things and attending church, well, that’s easy, I can do that. But following Jesus is so much more, and it may even be more than what you think you originally signed up for. When you decide to follow Jesus it isn’t this, it isn’t cultural

Christianity where we all feel good when we are together because aren't we doing a nice thing being together. It is a radical obedience that we may not be fully on board with and one day we may come face to face with a decision as to whether we really want to do this or not. Or at least we should come face to face with that decision if we are truly following Jesus.

We are deep into our sermon series of the Gospel of Righteousness. Today Jesus makes it very clear what it means to be a disciple and let me give you a fair warning, what he says is not a formula to grow churches, it should make you wonder if you really want to do this disciple, this following Jesus thing. Let's read.

## **READ**

Isn't Psalm 23 just your favorite? I had us read it in the NKJV because it is so much more familiar and it is the one that I memorized growing up. When we go to Israel you can look out on the hillsides as you drive along in your bus and you see on these hills lines that zig-zag all over them. It looks like someone took a pencil and drew furrows into the hillsides, but what they are are the pathways that the sheep and shepherds have taken over the centuries. They are called the right paths, or the paths of righteousness. Since we are in the Gospel of righteousness I think it is important to know that Psalm 23 when it talks about paths of righteousness they are paths that over the centuries people have taken that lead to safety and to home.

Look at Psalm 23 and see all the places that the great shepherd, our Lord, takes us in life. He leads us to green pastures where we can rest and eat. He leads us to still waters where we do not have to worry as we drink, because when the waters are troubled we can't drink then. He leads us in these safe right paths. As we go further we see that he even leads us into the valley of the shadow of death. That is one that we would probably prefer to do without.

But following the shepherd in our lives, following God is not always easy, but we know that eventually we will arrive at home. That is the gist of Psalm 23, and we read it a lot at funerals because they are a celebration that the person who has passed on has arrived at home, finally, and that they are resurrected, completely whole and without blemish. There is no Scripture more comforting in all the Bible than Psalm 23.

Jesus' words in Matthew 8 are not nearly as comforting when we consider what it means to follow Jesus. Let's set the stage. He is down from the Mount of Beatitudes, he has just healed the leper, the centurions servant, and Peter's mother in law. That evening they brought to him crowds of people and he healed all of them. Now in vs.18 he is surrounded by more crowds of people, and we know that Jesus loves people, don't get it twisted, later in chapter 14 we read that

he is with another crowd of people and he has pity on them, but here he is just trying to find a way to get away from them. So he orders, he doesn't ask, he demands that they bring him a boat so that he can get away from them, he just needs his space, his boundaries are being stepped all over. Eventually he succeeds and gets in a boat and next week we will see what happens to him and his disciples while they are in that boat.

But before they can get him that boat two people approach him and each has a dialogue with Jesus that has to do with being a disciple, with following him. The first says Jesus, I will follow you wherever you. Where you go, I'll go, I will follow you. He doesn't really know what he is saying and Jesus proves that by his answer. Foxes have holes and birds have nests, but when you are with the son of man, you don't have either of those things, you don't have a place to lay your head. When you sign up to follow me, whatever the foxes and the birds have, you are going to have to do without. Life will be a matter of rigorous and self-denying living. It means something when we don't hear a response from him. Almost like you could see him say, oh, no thanks.

This guy was a scribe and having read the religious laws that we are reading now in our journey through the Bible you can see that they were taken care of by God. They had some of the nicest places to live, they never went hungry. They were politically well connected, so the idea of not knowing from one day to the next where you are staying and where you are getting your food, yeah, I didn't sign up for that. Can't I just follow you as a cultural Jew who believes in you but that belief doesn't really have any impact on my life?

The second person this Scripture says that he was a disciple. Maybe it was one of the twelve, or just a generic person who was following Jesus. I like to think that it was a disciple, maybe even John since Jesus gives him his mother to take care of when he dies. But all Scripture says is that he was a disciple. Jesus, before we get much further in this whole following thing, let me go bury my dad.

There was nothing more important, according to the Jewish law, than to love your parents, so much so that if your mother or your father died then you were allowed to not take part in the daily prayers in order to bury them. This act of caring for your parents superseded all of the laws and was the most important thing that any individual could do. This disciple knew it and Jesus knew it.

Plus there is a precedent for a disciple taking some time off before he follows a prophet or a Lord to care for his parents. Look at I Kings 19:20, Elisha, the disciple of Elijah asks

permission to go back and kiss his parents goodbye. Seems like a reasonable request, while burying your father seems like a slam dunk. If it were any of us we would say of course, go back, we'll get started once you get back. But not Jesus. He basically says no. Let the dead bury the dead, they don't need you any longer, the kingdom needs you, and you are called here to follow so you must follow.

Jesus in Luke 9:62 which are the parallel verses to Matthew uses the example of once the hand is on the plow, you cannot look back, you cannot turn back, you are committed and you cannot uncommit and recommit. The lesson Jesus is teaching us today is that nothing can come before discipleship to Jesus in the cause of the kingdom. Nothing. We have a lot of fun around here and we have created a real sense of family and community, but what we are doing here is not insignificant, it is a matter of life and death. The disciple is not to let himself or herself be distracted by anything, however legitimate it is in itself. Discipleship means not only an initial decision but also the constantly renewed decisions that attachment to Jesus involves.

Listen to this, discipleship will have an impact on family members. The call is radical and so too the commitment must be radical. There is a fundamental principle here about the radical character, urgency, and uncompromising nature of discipleship.

It is hard to follow Jesus. We have already read in Matthew 7:13-14 **read**, it is hard. It is supposed to be hard. Both of these saying prepare us as Jesus' disciples for hardships, ostracism, and alienation. If we answer yes to following Jesus then we will see real sacrifice and trials in our lives. Psalm 23 encourages us to go and follow the good shepherd who leads us even through the valley of the shadow of death. Jesus tells us that our path will be difficult, but when we put our hand to the plow and push through what is required of us to follow him, we will be able to walk alongside of his, as the Psalm states, our whole life long. When we say that we are going to follow Jesus, we need to know what we signed up for. Amen.