

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, Pentecost 18, October 1, 2023.

Have you ever wondered, had you witnessed Jesus in person, if you would have followed him? We're following him right now, but if we had lived in first century Palestine and been able to see him in person, would we have followed him?

If he appeared right now, right here, and said "Follow me," would we get up and follow? And not just follow for a few minutes, but leave family and friends and then follow for who knows where and for how long?

I'm not sure, of course, but I suspect that the band of followers would be few. Too many unanswered questions. Too much sacrifice. Too much risk. Too much uncertainty. After all, what will the family think? What will the neighbors think? What if Jesus is not the Son of God?

What if

Well, what often, and by design, follows this question is a decision. Yes, I will follow. Yes, I believe. Yes, I will take the risk that I might be wrong. Yes, maybe Jesus is not who he says he is.

And often, what follows this decision is a mixed bag of belief. Things happen, like the undeserved death of a friend, and we question whether we made the right decision to follow Jesus. After all, we prayed for healing, and instead of being healed, our friend died.

At this point, what we are really questioning is whether Jesus really is God Incarnate.

My guess is that you and I have been through this exercise multiple times, maybe many times. Yet, here we are, convinced that Jesus is not only worthy of our curiosity, but worthy of our conviction.

We won't know the answers to the big questions about life and death until we experience death. Then presumably we'll know what's on the other side. That assumes, of course, that "knowing" is possible when we die.

So many questions, and so few answers, at least on this side of the divide.

But, would we want it any other way? I don't think so. Can you imagine life without questions, without mystery, without uncertainty?

In today's Old Testament passage, Ezekiel quotes the Lord. "For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone. Turn, then, and live." For Ezekiel, "living" acknowledges that there are questions. **(Ezekiel 18:32)**,

He wasn't alone. Jesus himself loved questions. They were part of his teaching style. In today's gospel **(Matthew 21:24)**, Jesus answers a question with a question. The chief priests and elders asked him "By what authority are you doing these things, who gave you this authority." Jesus answers, "I will also ask you a question."

Effective teachers, both parents and classroom instructors, do this, don't they? Encourage the child, encourage the student, to wrestle with their own question. Think it through. See if you can come up with the answer. Chances are that you know the answer.

Spouses do this as well. Have you seen my keys? One answer is "Yes, they're in the den." Another answer might be "Well, where did you last handle your keys?" To which we sheepishly respond, "Oh, maybe they're in the den."

We like challenges, don't we? In fact, that's why we're here, in this setting. We want our intellect to be respected, but we also want to tap into the intellect of others. Maybe even into the intellect of the very God we're hoping to honor, to respect, to love, to obey.

And guess what? That very God, that Creator of the Universe, that Ultimate Answer, chooses to respond to our longing by becoming one of us. A fascinating decision on God's part. In effect, God concludes that you and I – God's favorite creature, if you can believe it, and we do - becomes one of us, and invites us to follow. The theological version of the Yellow Brick Road.

One of Elton John's most successful songs is "Goodbye Yellow Brick Road." It's a song about the tension between "penthouse" and "plough." The lure of excitement contrasted with the reality of daily living.

You and I know this tension first hand. We experience it daily. Really high highs and really low lows, with a lot of mixed experiences in between. Including one critical question. What lies beyond? Or, perhaps, just perhaps, Who lies beyond?

“Goodbye Yellow Brick Road” ends with this line: “Oh, I’ve finally decided my future lies **beyond** the yellow brick road.” Key word: **beyond**.

Not just penthouse. Not just plough. Something – actually Someone - who connects the two.

It is this Someone that you and I, in this setting, call God. And this One whom we call God - whom we know, thanks to Jesus - has a vested interest in our curiosity.

God wants us to believe. God wants us to count on. God wants us to share. God wants us to trust. For God, the Yellow Brick Road is not fantasy. There is a road. There is a path. And there is joy at the end of the road, which is really the start of a brand new road, the likes of which we have not seen in this life, but which we hope, we trust, we will see in the next life.

And the exciting thing is that what we see in this life gives hints of the life to come. And when we see those hints, we conclude – often in secret, but sometimes aloud – that, yes, there really is a God.

You all, we all, know this level of faith first hand. It’s our faith right here. It’s the same faith that has been proclaimed on this Island for an hundred years, mostly in this chapel, but often beyond this chapel.

Individual faith and corporate faith. We didn’t invent it. We received it. And, with the on-going help of the Holy Spirit and the Church founded in the Name of Jesus, we introduce a new generation to this Good News.

You, we, are students of Faith, and, yes, we are teachers of Faith. By how we live, how we support one another, how we bounce back from disappointment, how we share joy, how we forgive, how we move on.

And how we explore. What we proclaim in this place is not static. It’s alive. The Spirit doesn’t sleep. The Spirit is active in ways we can only imagine. Engaging the future as well as the present and past is exciting. This place is not dull. Never has been. It’s alive with the Spirit. And, as it is for you, it’s a great privilege and

pleasure to be in touch with the Son of God and with one another through the power of the Spirit.

The Yellow Brick Road. Maybe it doesn't end. Maybe it leads to another road, a road which Paul defines in today's lesson from Philippians as "making joy complete." **(Philippians 2:2)** A road you and I and whole generations explore and nurture right here in this lovely chapel and wherever and whenever we share the Love of God in Christ.

Amen.

Service of Holy Communion
Pentecost 18 – October 1, 2023

Hymn 321 – My God, thy table now is spread

My God, thy table now is spread, thy cup with love doth overflow;
be all thy children thither led, and let them thy sweet mercies know.

O let thy table honored be, and furnished well with joyful guests;
and may each soul salvation see, that here its sacred pledges tastes.

Drawn by thy quickening grace, O Lord, in countless numbers let them come
and gather from their Father's board the Bread that lives beyond the tomb.

Nor let thy spreading gospel rest till through the world thy truth has run,
till with this Bread shall all be blessed who see the light or feel the sun.

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Blessed be God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
And blessed be his kingdom, now and for ever.

Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no
secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy
Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name;
through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth.
Lord God, heavenly King, almighty God and Father,
we worship you, we give you thanks, we praise you for your glory.
Lord Jesus Christ, only Son of the Father, Lord God, Lamb of God,
you take away the sin of the world: have mercy on us;
you are seated at the right hand of the Father: receive our prayer.
For you alone are the Holy One, you alone are the Lord,
you alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit,
in the glory of God the father. Amen.

The Lord be with you.
And also with you.
Let us pray.

Collect for Pentecost 18

O God, you declare your almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity: Grant us the fullness of your grace, that we, running to obtain your promises, may become partakers of your heavenly treasure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

First Reading – Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32

Psalm 25:1-8

Second Reading – Philippians 2:1-13

Hymn 691 – My faith looks up to thee

My faith looks up to thee, thou Lamb of Calvary, savior divine!
Now hear me while I pray, take all my guilt away;
O let it me from this day be wholly thine.

May thy rich grace impart strength to my fainting heart, my zeal inspire;
as thou hast died for me, O may my love to thee,
pure, war, and changeless be, a living fire.

While life's dark maze I tread, and griefs around me spread, be thou my guide;
bid darkness turn to day; wipe sorrows' tears away,
nor let me ever stray from thee aside.

Gospel – Matthew 21:23-32

Sermon

The Rev. Charles Rowins

Nicene Creed – page 358

*We believe in one God,
the Father, the almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is seen and unseen.*

*We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father.
Through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven:
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,
and was made man.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again In accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father,
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.*

*We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son.
With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified.
He has spoken through the Prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen*

Prayers of the People Form IV – page 388

Let us pray for the Church and for the world.

Grant, Almighty God, that all who confess your Name may be united in your truth, live together in your love, and reveal your glory in the world.

Lord, in your mercy. *Hear our prayer.*

Guide the people of this land, and of all the nations, in the ways of justice and peace; that we may honor one another and serve the common good.

Lord, in your mercy. *Hear our prayer.*

Give us all a reverence for the earth as your own creation, that we may use its resources rightly in the service of others and to your honor and glory.

Lord, in your mercy. *Hear our prayer.*

Bless all whose lives are closely linked with ours, and grant that we may serve Christ in them, and love one another as he loves us.

Lord, in your mercy. *Hear our prayer.*

Comfort and heal all those who suffer in body, mind, or spirit; give them courage and hope in their troubles, and bring them the joy of your salvation.

Lord, in your mercy. *Hear our prayer.*

We commend to your mercy all who have died, that your will for them may be fulfilled; and we pray that we may share with all your saints in your eternal kingdom.

Lord, in your mercy. *Hear our prayer.*

Confession and Absolution – page 360

Let us confess our sins against God and our neighbor.

*Most merciful God,
we confess that we have sinned against you
in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done,
and by what we have left undone.*

*We have not loved you with our whole heart;
we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.
We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.
For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us;
that we may delight in your will, and walk in your ways,
to the glory of your Name. Amen.*

Almighty God have mercy on you, forgive you all your sins through our Lord Jesus Christ, strengthen you in all goodness, and by the power of the Holy Spirit keep you in eternal life. Amen.

The Peace – page 360

The peace of the Lord be always with you.
And also with you.

Announcements and Preparation of the Table

Eucharistic Prayer – page 361

The Lord be with you.
And also with you.
Lift up your hearts.
We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.
It is right to give him thanks and praise.

It is right, and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to you, Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. Therefore we praise, you, joining our voices with Angels and Archangels and with all the company of heaven, who for ever sing this hymn to proclaim the glory of your Name:

*Holy, holy holy Lord, God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest.
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.*

Holy and gracious Father: In your infinite love you made us for yourself; and, when we had fallen into sin and become subject to evil and death, you, in your mercy, sent Jesus Christ, your only and eternal Son, to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us, to reconcile us to you, the God and Father of all.

He stretched out his arms upon the cross, and offered himself, in obedience to your will, a perfect sacrifice for the whole world.

On the night he was handed over to suffering and death, our Lord Jesus Christ took bread; and when he had given thanks to you, he broke it, and gave it to his disciples, and said, "Take, eat: this is my Body, which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me."

After supper he took the cup of wine; and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and said, "Drink this, all of you: this is my Blood of the new Covenant, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink it, do this for the remembrance of me."

Therefore we proclaim the mystery of faith:
Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

We celebrate the memorial of our redemption, O Father, in this sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. Recalling his death, resurrection, and ascension, we offer you these gifts.

Sanctify them by your Holy Spirit to be for your people the Body and Blood of your Son, the holy food and drink of new and unending life in him. Sanctify us also that we may faithfully receive this holy Sacrament, and serve you in unity, constancy, and peace; and at the last day bring us with all your saints into the joy of your eternal kingdom.

All this we ask through your Son Jesus Christ. By him, and with him, and in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit all honor and glory is yours, Almighty Father, now and for ever. Amen.

Lord's Prayer

And now, as our Savior Christ has taught us, we are bold to say,

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy Name, thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.*

Breaking of the Bread

Alleluia. Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us.
Therefore let us keep the feast. Alleluia.

The Gifts of God for the People of God. Take them in remembrance that Christ died for you, and feed on him in your hearts by faith, with thanksgiving.

Communion

Post Communion Prayer – BCP pge 365

*Eternal God, heavenly Father, you have graciously accepted us
as living members of your Son our Savior Jesus Christ,
And you have fed us with spiritual food in the Sacrament of his Body and Blood.
Send us now into the world in peace, and grant us strength and courage
to love and serve you with gladness and singleness of heart;
through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Hymn 432 – O praise ye the Lord

O praise ye the Lord! Praise him in the height;
rejoice in his word, ye angels of light;
ye heavens, adore him by whom ye were made,
and worship before him, in brightness arrayed.

O praise ye the Lord! Praise him upon earth,
in tuneful accord, all ye of new birth;
praise him who hath brought you his grace from above,
and praise him who hath taught you to sing of his love.

O praise ye the Lord! All things that give sound;
each jubilant chord re-echo around;
loud organs, his glory forth tell in deep tone,
and sweet harp, the story of what he hath done.

O praise ye the Lord! Thanksgiving and song
to him be outpoured all ages along!
For love in creation for heaven restored,
for grace of salvation, O praise ye the Lord!

Dismissal

Alleluia! Alleluia! Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
Thanks be to God. Alleluia! Alleluia!

Lessons for Pentecost 18 – October 1, 2023

Collect: O God, you declare your almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity: Grant us the fullness of your grace, that we, running to obtain your promises, may become partakers of your heavenly treasure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

First Reading: Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32

The Word of the Lord came to me: What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge”? “As I live,” says the Lord God, “this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parents as well as the life of the child is mine: it is only the person who sins that shall die. Yet you say, ‘The way of the Lord is unfair.’ Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair? When the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity, they shall die for it; for the iniquity that they have committed they shall die. Again, when the wicked turn away from the wickedness they have committed and do what is lawful and right, they shall save their life. Because they considered and turned away from the all the transgression that they had committed, they shall surely live; they shall not die. Yet the house of Israel says, ‘The way of the Lord is unfair.’ O house of Israel, are my ways unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair? Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, all of you according to your ways,’ says the Lord God. “Repent and turn from all your transgressions; otherwise iniquity will be our ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone,” says the Lord God. “Turn, then, and live.”

The Word of the Lord. *Thanks be to God.*

Psalm 25:1-8

To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul; my God, I put my trust in you;
let me not be humiliated, nor let my enemies triumph over me.
Let none who look to you be put to shame;
let the treacherous be disappointed in their schemes.

Show me your ways, O Lord,
and teach me your paths.

Lead me in your truth and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation; in you have I trusted all the day long.

Remember, O Lord, your compassion and love,
for they are from everlasting.

Remember not the sins of my youth and my transgressions;
*remember me according to your love and for the sake of your goodness,
O Lord.*

Gracious and upright is the Lord;
therefore he teaches sinners in his way.

He guides the humble in doing right
and teaches his way to the lowly.

Second Reading: Philippians 2:1-13

If there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than ourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

The Word of the Lord. *Thanks be to God.*

Gospel: Matthew 21:23-32

When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things. What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him."

The Word of the Lord. *Thanks be to God.*