

Jesus the Recruiter

Jesus didn't start out to be a solo act, to be the amazing wonder-boy from Nazareth and to keep the crowds on the edge of their seats. His mission was to build a team, a band of brothers who could be molded into a missionary force that would turn the world upside down. So, I think it would be interesting to look at how He approached the men who would form His inner circle and then make some observations about the particular qualities that qualified a person to be one of the twelve disciples of the Son of God. Are you ready?

There are several different accounts of Jesus calling the various ones who were to become His companions and trainees on the journeys He would make throughout Israel. One that gives us a bit of a unique glimpse into who these guys were is the one in John's gospel, near the end of chapter one. Here we first meet Andrew, who was brother to Simon, the fisherman from Capernaum. And when we meet Andrew, we find out that he is a disciple, a mathetes, which means a learner, an intern, we might call him, to John the Baptist.

We knew that John attracted crowds and that many people came to him to be baptized as a sign of repentance for their sins and their desire to dedicate their lives to God. But here we see that he was mentoring some young men in the ways of the Lord and they were paying really close attention when John pointed out Jesus to them and said, "Look, the Lamb of God!" As soon as the words leave his mouth, Andrew and another of John's disciples start after Jesus. He turns around and sees them there and asks them what they want. On the spur of the moment they couldn't come up with much, so they just say, "Uh, where are you staying?" And Jesus says, "Come and see." So Andrew and his buddy hang out with Jesus for the day, until about 4 in the afternoon. Andrew knows that his brother Simon wouldn't want to miss out on this event, so he goes, finds him and brings him to Jesus. When Simon arrives, Jesus looks at him and says, "You are Simon, son of John -- or, as the Cotton Patch Gospel puts it, "You are Simon Johnson" -- "You will be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter). So a young guy walks into the room, maybe not sure what to expect except that his brother is sold on this man, and the man says, "Hi, you're Simon, but you're going to be called Peter."

Now, we're at verse 43:

The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee.

We know Jesus had been in the area where John was baptizing and we're pretty sure that that location was close to the north end of the Dead Sea -- maybe 10 -12 kilometres farther north. So now He has decided to head up north to the Galilee, a journey of at least 120 km.

Finding Philip, He said to him, "Follow Me."

"Finding Philip." Did Jesus trip over Philip on the way out the door towards Bethsaida? No, because evidently Jesus is already in the Galilee when this takes

place. He decided to go and in the next verse He is there. Philip is from the town of Bethsaida, which is on the north-eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee -- this was also Andrew and Peter's home town -- and we read that when Philip heard Jesus call his number, "You follow Me" he went and found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the One Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote -- Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."

Notice how little ink is spilled in relating this account. The reason may well be that writing was much harder in those days. There was no such thing as paper, so writers would have to use parchment made from animal skins or papyrus which was made from reeds -- and which also didn't last as long as the skins of calves, sheep & goats. Some of the earliest documentary evidence for the New Testament is papyrus scrolls, and usually from very dry climates such as Egypt or Middle Eastern countries. Writing on such materials was slow and tedious and that may have contributed to the brevity of the accounts.

Taken as it is, this account in John's Gospel describes Jesus near the site of John's baptismal ministry, then a sentence later in Galilee. He finds Philip, which leads me to think that He was looking for him, and then calls him to be a disciple with two words: "Follow Me." Philip turns to go find Nathanael and announces the arrival of the Messiah, the One Moses wrote about, the One the prophets foretold.

Have you ever read the complete novel that Snoopy wrote -- yes, the Snoopy in the Peanuts comic strip. Let me read you a portion, just so you can get a flavour for the style.

"It was a dark and stormy night. Suddenly, a shot rang out! A door slammed. The maid screamed. Suddenly, a pirate ship appeared on the horizon! While millions of people were starving, the king lived in luxury. Meanwhile, on a small farm in Kansas, a boy was growing up."

If you want to see how Snoopy brings it all together, you have to read Part II, which is just a little longer than the Part I we just read. The point is that what you see in the gospels is really light on details. You don't get a lot of transitional material or a lot of background or biographical insights. What you get is the bare bones, the essentials that the gospel writers wanted to communicate. Which means two things as we go about trying to understand what is set before us in these biographies of Jesus - that every line is significant and that the task of filling in the gaps is going to require a lot of research and careful projections based on what we do know, both about Jesus and about those who wrote His story.

What we can clearly observe about this passage is that Philip was convinced about the person of Jesus in pretty short order. He didn't need to hang out with the Master for a few weeks in order to know that this was someone very special, in fact, that He was the One who had been promised from Old Testament times: the Redeemer Messiah. He met Jesus, heard His call and responded.

Now, at this point, Nathanael hasn't seen Jesus and he has only Philip's word to go on. His response should not surprise us: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" People who have been to Nazareth say it's kind of a nothing town and apparently it's always been that way. There's nothing to see, nothing to do, no reason to stay around. So people come, see where Jesus grew up, and then move on. "Can anything good come out of a place like that?" And Philip gives him the best response possible: "Come and see."

Let's join the text again at verse 47:

When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, He said of Him, "Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false."

"How do you know me?" Nathanael asked.

Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you."

Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel."

Jesus said, "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that! I tell you, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

Nathanael is one of those straight-up kind of people who just blurts out what's on his mind. "How do you know me?" "Rabbi, you are the Son of God, the King of Israel!" He goes from being the skeptic, wondering if anything of value can come from Nazareth, to being blown away by the fact that Jesus knows all about him; where he's been, what he's like, and what his potential is. There's something about Nathanael that's really likeable; maybe it's his ability to change his mind when confronted with the reality of Jesus and maybe also it's his transparency, his openness.

I think it's worth noting how Jesus responds to this burst of faith from Nathanael. "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that. A little faith will be rewarded by great experiences of the power and presence of the living God . . . you'll be in on it all, Nathanael!"

Two more quick stories, this time from Matthew's gospel, starting with the calling of Simon and Andrew in chapter 4:

As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, He saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow Me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men." At once they left their nets and followed Him. Going on from there, He saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother, John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed Him.

Now, Matthew 9:9

As Jesus went on from there, He saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax

collector's booth. "Follow Me," He told him and Matthew got up and followed Him.

We know that Jesus had already met Andrew and Simon, and that He was the one who gave Simon the name 'Peter'. But, aside from spending a day with them, He hadn't called them away either from fishing or from being the disciples of John the Baptist. Now, He specifically calls them away from their livelihood, from fishing in the Sea of Galilee: "Come, follow Me and I will make you fishers of men."

We don't know if Jesus had had previous contact with James and John or with the tax collector, Matthew, but in each case it didn't take long for Jesus to make a lasting and powerful impression. He called these men to leave behind what they were doing and to join with Him in mission. And, like Nathanael, they responded to Him in a way that was surprising for its quickness. They dropped what they had spent years learning and years doing and entered into a life they had no idea about, the life of being disciples of an itinerant rabbi, a preacher, a healer, a man they knew either nothing or very little about.

So, as we look at these stories, I want to see if we can find what it was about Jesus that gave these seven men the confidence to become followers, disciples. First, what did they know about Jesus?

Andrew had heard John's testimony about Jesus. John had baptized Jesus and had spoken about Him on a few occasions, including pointing Him out to those who were with Him and saying, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. This is the One I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because He was before me.'" And the next day John told Andrew and one other disciple that Jesus was the Lamb of God. So Andrew, whose testimony about Jesus was influential in convincing Simon Peter, was told that Jesus was "the One" by the teacher he had attached himself to, John the Baptist, and that made him curious enough to follow Jesus around for a day.

With Philip, I think we're missing some of the story. It's clear that Jesus was looking for Philip upon His return to the Galilee, and when He found him and called him to become His follower, Philip was quick to believe and to follow and to tell his friend Nathanael, "We have found the One Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote -- Jesus of Nazareth."

The other thing we know is a rough timeline, at least the order, of events in these early days of Jesus' ministry. After His baptism, he had gone into the wilderness for 40 days of fasting prior to being tempted by the devil. Had He already met Andrew before He went into the wilderness? Possibly. After leaving the wilderness, He heard that John had been put in prison. Then He went back to the Galilee, moved from Nazareth to Capernaum and began by preaching a message very similar to that of John the Baptist, "Repent, or 'Change your ways' for the kingdom of heaven is near."

Word about Him spread quickly, especially after He began to heal the sick and there may have been some healings, not mentioned in Matthew and Mark, that took place before Jesus called His disciples. Andrew would have returned home after John the Baptist was put in prison and so it's not unexpected that Jesus would find him with Simon Peter -- fishing.

Was Philip's testimony based on some of the things Jesus had begun to do, particularly His teaching and healing ministries? Again, the answer is - very likely. He seems to have formed a strong allegiance to Jesus in a very short period of time. As we saw earlier, that could have a lot to do with the lack of detail in the text, the whole brevity in the style of writing that resulted from having to rely on pretty primitive writing methods. Jesus could have been looking for Philip because He knew Him from some earlier encounter ... and Philip seemed to know Jesus, too.

So, these early disciples were influenced by John the Baptist's testimony about Jesus, by earlier encounters they had had with Him, and by the stories about Him that were starting to circulate around the Galilee region.

But they were also influenced by His call. Jesus was very direct with each of them, calling them to follow Him, to be fishers of men, to leave behind the old and fully commit themselves to something new and radical. Later in His ministry the crowds said that He taught with authority, not like their scribes, their teachers of the Law. It was a Jewish custom that young men who wanted to learn to be a rabbi would attach themselves to a famous rabbi and become his disciple. Paul had been a disciple of the famous rabbi Gamaliel. He would have had to seek this man out and ask permission to become his disciple. Once that permission was granted, he would become a student in the school of his master. There might be several such students at one time. But Jesus chooses His disciples -- He doesn't wait for them to come to Him, but He calls them out and asks them to follow Him. That fact alone would have been very affirming, empowering, if you like, to men like Andrew and Simon, James and John, Matthew, Nathanael and Philip. They would not have thought of themselves as worthy to seek out Jesus and ask to be His disciples. They were the hillbillies from Galilee, the rough and tumble fisherfolk of the north who spoke with an accent and who were generally regarded as second class. So for Jesus to call them out and ask them to be His followers was life-giving, inspiring and a challenge they enthusiastically embraced -- sometimes too enthusiastically, as we'll see later.

The other side of the coin is to ask the question, "Why did Jesus choose these guys?" There were many people who were more educated, more learned in the books of the law, more disciplined and more likely to have influence. But there was something that Jesus liked about these men that made Him choose them. What do you see in them? Do you see their faith? Jesus was always looking for faith, for this childlike trust in Him and He found it in the men we've looked at today. With faith, He also found commitment, the willingness to drop what they were doing and become devoted followers. Beyond those things it didn't seem to matter that one worked for the Romans and one was known as a Zealot rebel working against them. It didn't

matter that eleven were from Galilee and only one from Judea, a guy named Judas Iscariot. It didn't matter that they were slow to learn, slow to embrace the mission or slow to shed their old ways of thinking . . . Jesus gave them the time and they gradually learned about the Kingdom of God.

What does all this teach us and what can or should we be doing with that knowledge?

1. It teaches us to think about evangelism differently than we usually do. We usually think about presenting the gospel message, the good news of God's grace to us through Jesus, and asking people to make a decision. But Jesus didn't ask for people to check the "yes" box, but to follow Him. He didn't ask us to put our name on the line but to put our life on the line. In short, He didn't look for decisions -- He looked for disciples. How would it change our approach to our friends or family members who don't yet have a relationship with Jesus if we thought of them becoming followers, disciples, and we asked them to join us in the journey of faith? There may be some helpful insights for us in this area, particularly if we can see the relationship element that was so key to how Jesus approached people. He didn't ask them to do anything abstract, like 'have this thought', but to walk with Him.
2. These passages remind us again of the priority of faith in God's Kingdom. We tend to value more obvious things, like a person who has money, reputation, success, skills. That's all good, but shouldn't we be at least a little bit interested in what Jesus looked for, what He valued and encouraged and responded to? Considering where He would ask them to follow Him in the years ahead, Jesus needed people of faith -- we need them again today.
3. The third thing I see in these passages is that they remind us of the importance of God's call in our lives. They remind us that Jesus didn't call us to a whole long list of rules but to have a relationship with God through Him, through His sacrifice on the cross. We are called to represent God in this world, to be His ambassadors, not because we're so wonderful, but because we're so forgiven. So we pursue relationship, we focus on our need to spend time with our Saviour, to read His Word, to speak with Him daily, to know and to obey His voice. Jesus has called each of us, to different things, usually according to the way He has created us, gifted us and according to the experiences He has led us through - but He has called us and we need to hear that call.
4. Finally, Jesus' call is not 'iffy', it's not vague, it's not 'if you feel like it'. His call was always clear, demanding, decisive and forceful. He didn't come up to Philip and say, "Here's something you might want to think about," nor did He approach the sons of Zebedee with a phrase like "one option you might consider". His call is not like all the other options, the variety of choices we have in the world around us, but is the call of life and death, the call to decisive action, the call to surrender, to forsake the old and to embrace the new. Again, we need to hear that call for what it is and we need to respond to it as it is, for the sake of the One who calls us, out of darkness and into His marvellous light.