

“Follow Me”
by Casey Bushman
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Good morning. Friends, how are you doing? Are you holding up? I wish you were here so we could all have a conversation about these crazy times. Are you feeling that sense of collective anxiety? It's not just me, is it? It feels like our entire nation is holding its breath, bracing for whatever chaos this week may bring, fearing a reprise of the events of January 6th. Here in Austin the Capitol grounds are being closed over credible reports that elections protests may turn violent. The front page of the Saturday Statesman shows a downtown business covering its windows with plywood, as if a hurricane were about to make landfall on Congress Avenue. All this while our community struggles to tread water amidst a tidal wave of COVID cases and hospitalizations. Our convention center has been transformed into a field hospital just to keep our healthcare infrastructure afloat. How many crises can one community — one nation — weather simultaneously?

All of this chaos is manifesting in our lives in different ways. Perhaps you spent your week on the phone or online frantically trying to get an appointment to receive your COVID vaccination, only to come up empty. Or maybe you've been texting a loved one who just tested positive, checking in and hoping for the best, wishing there was more you could do. Or, like me, you've been spending too much time doom-scrolling on Facebook, waiting for the next shocking news report about violent uprisings and dangerous extremists. This anxiety even seeps into the lives of our children. My kids are asking questions I do not want to answer. They wonder aloud why I abruptly shoo them away when they look over my shoulder at the news footage from DC streaming on my laptop. This is taking a toll on all of us, *all the time*. Perhaps even now you are tempted to open up a tab on your browser and check just how much worse things have gotten since we began this service — and if I have just caught you in that very act, I promise I do not judge you! If I were not preaching this morning I would be tempted to do the exact same thing. :)

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Such chaos forces us to reckon with reality, to face the uncomfortable truth that we are not in control. You may even want to say those words with me: "I AM NOT IN CONTROL." :) Say it as many times as you need to. We are human beings. We have limits. We are subject to the decisions of those in authority, even in matters of life and death. We are vulnerable to lies and deception that influence our actions on a large scale. Our society — yes, even the great United States of America — is *shockingly* fragile. *Shockingly* fragile. This is our reality. It is disturbing, but it is our reality.

It's worth pointing out that our world is not completely unlike the world that 1st century Jews were facing. Serious political instability accompanied an unpopular Roman rule. There was economic uncertainty as well, along with an enormous gap between rich and poor that caused many to feel cheated by an unjust system. No global pandemic, to my knowledge, but plenty of debilitating disease and physical suffering. A restless and angry population yearning for change proved fertile ground for divisive ideologies to take root. Firmly-entrenched in their separate camps, each group had their own plan for how to restore God's kingdom to its former glory. And each group stood staunchly opposed to all the others. Tension between political and cultural groups boiled over at times. Violence was not uncommon. Parents were uncertain about what kind of world their children would inherit. ... These are the circumstances in which that original invitation of Jesus went forth:

"Follow me. Come, walk alongside me. Learn from me. Eat with me. Watch me. Get to know me. Be my companions."

... A quiet invitation. A humble offer. Personal, intimate. The disciples whom Jesus called would have known other would-be messiahs that had come along in recent years. These movements tended to follow a predictable pattern: a charismatic leader would come along, promise change, build a large following, then flame out quickly when the authorities cracked down. Widespread disappointment followed.

Knowing this, you would think that Jesus would show up with a more refined recruitment strategy, a more impressive elevator pitch. Something that might compel people to believe that *this time would be different*. These people were disillusioned, they were cynical — they needed to be wowed! And yet what Jesus offers is a simple, humble invitation: follow me.

...That's it. That's the pitch. "Follow me. Still skeptical? Just come and see. You are *known* here. I want you to be with me."

This is not a fiery speech designed to whip up the fervor of the crowd. These are not words of manipulation and coercion. These words come from a deep stillness, a place of intimate knowing. *These words are deeply human.* And they speak to a mystery as old as humanity itself.

Friends, the mystery that Jesus knew and that has now been revealed to us, is that *there is, at the center of the universe, a loving God who longs to be seen and known by us.* There is a loving God who has been conspiring from the very beginning to reveal himself to us, to befriend us, and to share his very life with us. This has been God's *fundamental*, unchanging desire since the very beginning. There was no time in history when this was NOT God's fundamental desire. It's not as if God once only cared about exacting revenge on people who crossed him, or running the calculations of who deserves heaven and who deserves hell, but then at some point decided to soften up and just be our friend. No. For as long as we've been around, this has been his constant aim, ingrained in his very nature.

It was apparent in creation: God made humans to live together with him and share in the enjoyment of a good world. And because humans were made in God's image, the possibility for *mutual* friendship was opened: human beings *share* God's desire to be seen and known. This longing has been planted in our hearts too. The psalmist knows this truth. To be seen and known by God is pure delight. This mysterious, intimate friendship between creature and Creator is the divinely-endowed destiny of every human being. Friendship with God IS WHAT PEOPLE WERE MADE FOR.

This God is so intent on being seen and known that he took on human flesh and entered into the chaos of our world. As the Apostle John writes, "No one has ever (physically) seen God, but the Son...has made him known" (Jn 1:18). Jesus is God incarnate, the one who makes this invisible God *visible*. So when he officially arrives on the scene, Jesus does what we might expect this God to do: he invites people to come to know him and to be his friends.

Jesus has come into the world to liberate us from everything that holds us back from God. Jesus has come into the world to destroy the powers of sin and evil and usher in a new reign of life and peace. Jesus has come into the world to overcome everything that obscures and obstructs the purpose for which we were created. To invite us to step into a future where the brokenness of the world will be mended and transformed into something beautiful. A future where there will be no more pain, or sickness, or death; where there will be no more lies and deception, only truth; where people will come and sit around the table to share in one another's joy; where enemies will beat their weapons of violence into tools of friendship and instruments of flourishing. This is the eternal life that Jesus promises. And it all begins with these words: "follow me."

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I hope you can hear those words afresh today. I hope you can hear the call of discipleship amidst the clamor and chaos of our world. The invitation to "come and see" is still on the table. This is the miracle of grace in the 21st century: God is still reaching out to us in Jesus. The door remains open. A life of friendship with God, through Jesus, is still possible. And with Jesus we will witness the breaking-open, the turning upside-down of our world as we know it.

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Let me ask one more thing of you: please pray for our nation this week. Make time to pray. Please do it. As your Director of Christian Formation, I'm telling you that it matters and it will be good for your soul. Log off when you need to. Limit your doom-scrolling. *Pray for peace.* Pray for the safety and well-being of our leaders. Pray for justice and healing.

We are having morning prayer every weekday, 8:30 AM on Zoom. Please join us. The diocese is also organizing a prayer service for Tuesday evening, which we will be sure to keep you in the loop about as we get details for that. Pray with your household. Pray with your kids. Pray with your neighbors. May we draw near to God this week and experience peace in Christ that surpasses understanding.

Amen.