

**Matthew 4:12-23**

The pastor of a 1,000-member church was asked the question, “How many active members do you have in your church?” He responded, “I have 1,000 active members. Two hundred are active for Christ, the other eight hundred are active for Satan.”

Why is it that some faithfully follow the Lord and others do not? We might ask—why did you come out on this cold January morning to God’s House to worship? Why are you a disciple of the Lord Jesus? Was there—is there—something about Him that attracted Him to you? Was it something He said; something He did, that moved you to follow after Him?

Two thousand years ago in the land of Palestine, that’s exactly how it happened. There were a whole number of Rabbis (teachers) in Palestine. Each Rabbi had students (disciples) following after him. Young Jewish men would select the Rabbi of their choice; one whom they felt had a great deal of wisdom—and these young men would make the decision to follow him.

It was unheard of in those days for Jewish Rabbis to go out and call young men to discipleship. To go out and choose disciples and invite them to follow after yourself, just simply did not happen. Until Jesus appeared. He did things differently. He did the unheard of—the unthinkable. He went out and called disciples to Himself.

“And walking by the Sea of Galilee, He saw two brothers, Simon who was called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. And He said to them, “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.” And they immediately left the nets, and followed Him. And going on from there He saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets; and He called them. And they immediately left the boat and their father, and followed Him.” (Matt. 4:18-22)

There wasn’t one disciple who happened to choose Jesus as his Master and Rabbi. Every last one of them Jesus called to Himself. “You did not choose Me,” He told them, “I chose you.”

That was true of them and it is true of us. You are not a follower of Christ because you made some great decision in your life. Jesus chose you. He called you by His Gospel to belong to Him; to be His disciple. When did He call you? When you were sitting in darkness. “The people who were sitting in darkness saw a great light, and to those who were sitting in the land of the shadow of death, upon them a light dawned.” (Matt. 4:16)

The upper regions of Palestine, where the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali had settled, was home to a mixed race of people. Partly Jewish in blood, but now mingled with the blood of pagan lands. In this region Rome had built cities for herself, introducing her “gods” and “goddesses.” The Jews to the south, in Jerusalem and Judah, scorned these Gentile Galileans, as they called them. The Name and worship of the Lord had been lost to these people of Galilee. They were living in spiritual darkness—“sitting in it,” as the Prophet writes.

If you have ever gone through a cave, such as the Meramec Caverns, you may have experienced total darkness. At some point, the tour leader instructs that all lights be turned off. It is so dark that you can't see your hand directly in front of your face. That experience may be okay for a few minutes, but imagine if the lights failed to come back on. There would be nothing you could do but sit down and wait for help to arrive. To try to find your way out would be futile. Your only chance is for rescuers to come with lights to lead you out.

Darkness is the absence of light. To sit in darkness is frightening. To sit in the darkness of sin is death—for spiritual darkness is the absence of Christ. But to the people of Galilee the Light came. To those sitting in the darkness of death, unable to do anything to help themselves, Jesus came to give the light of life.

He came to them, and He comes to you. In your baptism He called you “out of darkness into His marvelous light.” You may think that the lights in here are on the walls and the ceiling. Not so. The true Light shines from the font. It shines from the bread and wine at the altar. The true Light, Jesus Christ, shines forth from His word of forgiveness proclaimed and given to you here.

You were in total darkness, but you have been bathed in Light. To you, God has come. He has given you the wisdom that leads to salvation. He has given you faith in His Son, Jesus Christ. He is the Light. He is the One who has come to lead us out of our darkness. He knows the way, for He is the Way.

You did not choose to follow Him. He chose to come to you—helpless and lost as you were. And by the light of His Word and Sacraments, He leads you from death to life; from sin's darkness into the light of forgiveness and joy.

Why did He come to rescue us? Because He chose to love us. We are nothing but wretched sinners before Him. The darkness has made us into mad fools. Sitting in helplessness, we turn on each other. We lie, cheat, steal. We gossip, slander, covet. But our Lord has come to us. Did He come to us because we were kind, loving, and deserving of His help? No, God does not go out and find lovable objects—He creates them. We were poor sinners in total darkness, but God has come to us and called us to follow Him—and He has therefore made us people of Light.

And when God calls sinners to Himself, we leave the darkness behind. Calling Peter and Andrew, James and John, they left everything and followed Jesus. As they did, so did you. In your baptism you renounced the devil and all his works and all his ways. You no longer sit in darkness—why would you go back into it? You belong to Jesus now. That's why you come here to this House of Light, even on a cold January morning.

He has claimed you. He has forgiven you. He has loved you for Himself. You and I are His disciples. Are you a good one? Are you a faithful follower? I'm not. I'm a lousy disciple—a terrible follower. I'm so often lazy in following Him. I prefer to follow my sinful flesh than my Lord Jesus Christ.

When our daughter was a little girl, she would walk around town with her mom and dad—usually a lot slower—usually stopping every ten feet to pick up a rock or flower—and

usually, now and then, stumbling and falling. To be honest, she just wasn't a very good follower. But you know, we loved her anyway. And we always waited for her to catch up with us. We kept looking back and called gently for her to keep up. When she fell, we helped her back up. When she grew tired, we carried her. That's how Jesus helps us follow Him. He waits on us. He gently calls to us. If we're approaching danger, He warns us. He stays with us. When we fall, He lifts us up. When we grow weary and can't go on, He carries us in His arms. He forgives us always. He loves us. That's why He puts up with our lousy way of following Him. That's the kind of Lord we have—He who is leading us out of darkness into heaven's glorious light. Amen.