

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: February 26, 2012  
Sermon Title: Follow Me  
Scripture: John 1:35-48  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

## **John 1:35-48**

*The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!' The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, 'What are you looking for?' They said to him, 'Rabbi' (which translated means Teacher), 'where are you staying?' He said to them, 'Come and see.' They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, 'We have found the Messiah' (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, 'You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas' (which is translated Peter).*

*The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.' Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.' Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.' When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!' Nathanael asked him, 'Where did you come to know me?' Jesus answered, 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.'*

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How did you come to "faith"? How did you come to a depth of religious faith that you get up on a Sunday morning, it's school vacation week, the wind is howling, half the church is away anyway, nobody will hold it against you — and yet you're here! How come? It started sometime, somewhere, somehow. It may have even started with somebody. Somebody took you,

somebody pushed you in the right direction. Somebody led you, forced you, enticed you, bribed you. Somehow, the whole idea of God and Jesus and church are connected. And here you are.

I was once a youth pastor at a big church. They wanted to start a "bus ministry." That was really big back in the '70s. Every church wanted a bus to drive around town, pick up kids, bring them to Sunday School, ultimately to bring them to Christ. How to get the kids on the bus? How to get parents to let the kids get on the bus? How to get kids to badger their parents to let them get on the bus? The church decided to give away free McDonald's gift certificates. It worked! The bus was full, the Sunday School was full, everybody was happy.

When I was in Boston, Tremont Temple Baptist Church was one of our great churches, and they had a great pastor. I invited him to guest preach at my church. He told us how he had been led to Christ. He was from Charleston, West Virginia, maybe 12 years old; he was riding a public bus one day. An older man invited him to come to church with him, told him he'd pick him up and take him home. That was the beginning of a lifelong dedication to Christ, and 50 years of excellent service as an outstanding pastor. People have been motivated toward God by parents, by a spouse, by children, by advertising campaigns, books, radio, and TV.

When I lived in rural Georgia, the big social scene was church softball. Any church worth its salt had a softball team. But to play, you had to be a member, an attending member. So every winter, the biggest, brawniest bruisers in town start showing up at church so they could play softball.

Here at Greenfield Hill, people have first come to our church through the Memorial Garden, the Dogwood Festival, our youth programs, or after a funeral or a wedding. More and more common nowadays, people first connect with us through our Web site. They read about our church, they listen to some sermons; they get a picture of what we are about before they ever walk through the door. But nothing tops the old-fashioned way, the tried-and-true method of one person's telling another. Word of mouth. That's why I picked today's Scripture lesson.

John the Baptist points out Jesus to two others. Those two followed after Jesus. Andrew, one of those two guys, went and got his brother Peter and brought Peter to Jesus. The next day Jesus found Philip and issued his famous call, "Follow me." And Philip went and got Nathaniel and brought Nathaniel to Jesus. In short order, Jesus had five of the 12 disciples. A little

nudge here, a little invitation there, a little push, a little direction, a little give and take, and the Jesus movement we are a part of was off and running.

Now, there is more to this story than meets the eye. Let's go deeper. It starts off with John the Baptist. And remember, he was Jesus's cousin, another miracle baby, whose job it was to "prepare the way of the Lord." If you've seen the Broadway musical "Godspell," it begins with that wonderful song, "Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord," a slow, haunting, foreshadowing song that erupts with the arrival of Jesus on the scene!

John the Baptist was a bit of a wild man, he lived out in the wilderness, dressed in animal skins, eating locusts and wild honey. But that wasn't the wildest part. The wildest part was his message. John the Baptist showed up around the Jordan River, insulting everybody, high and low, king and commoner, clergy and cops, cheaters and liars of every kind.

I love watching politics. A few years ago, people attacked President Obama's pastor, Jeremiah Wright, for the harsh things he said about America. Now, people are attacking Senator Santorum for the harsh things he has said about America. Basically, they both said the country is going the way of the Devil. John the Baptist pretty much said the same thing. He called the people of his country, "you brood of vipers, you bunch of snakes, you think you can escape the coming wrath? You are about to be cut down and thrown in the fire." "Repent," he kept hollering, "repent! Change!" "Change what?" the people asked. "Stop what? Repent for what? What should we do?" Well, John gave them specifics. He told the soldiers to stop abusing people. He told business people to stop cheating people. He told the government to stop their immorality. And he told everybody to share clothing with folks who have none, share food with folks who are hungry.

When I was writing my new book about my years with Habitat for Humanity, I told about my first impressions of Habitat people I met back in 1977. Here's what I wrote, "I met folks excited about Habitat when it wasn't much more than an idea. I met one man who had two houses, and he actually sold one to give the money to Habitat! Holy cow, I thought, people really do that? Really do that Jesus sort of thing, walk the extra mile? Or if you have two coats and the other guy has none, you give up one for the other guy? People really do that?"

You can see that idea came straight from John the Baptist. John the Baptist looked at his country and didn't think it was living up to its potential, and he put his complaints in Biblical, theological language. Jeremiah Wright and Senator Santorum did the same thing. They look at our country and don't

like what they see, and they say so in Biblical, theological language. That stirs things up, makes people squirm, turns people off. And so does the age-old call to "repent," an old-fashioned word that just means to turn around. You're one kind of person, you need to be another kind of person. You're headed in the wrong direction, you need to change direction. You're messing up your life, you need to stop messing up.

That was John the Baptist's message, and people flocked to it. He was immensely popular, and people showed up at the River Jordan to be baptized, to wash away their sins, to be cleansed, to be fresh and clean and new. Even Jesus came to get baptized! Truth is, John the Baptist's stark command to "repent ... or else" was hugely successful. It also got him beheaded, but that's another story!

The part in today's Scripture I find interesting is that John the Baptist was humble enough and helpful enough to point two of his own disciples in the direction of Jesus. Catch this: John the Baptist had his own following, his own disciples; people thought he was the real deal. But he had the integrity to point to Jesus and to say to his own disciples, "That's the one to follow!"

There's a lot to be taken from these verses. One truth is people, most people, are searching, looking, wondering. Some do it more actively than others, more overtly. Some may do it privately or quietly. Some may need John the Baptist's stern push, "Repent, or else"; or John the Baptist's gentle message, "That's what your looking for," a point in the right direction.

We see this variety of seeking and searching in the rest of the verses. Andrew is one of the guys pointed in the right direction, and then he went and brought Peter. Then Jesus goes up to Phillip, and just says, "Follow me," which he does. Then Philip went and brought Nathaniel.

A lot going on there. People inspiring others, teaching others, directing others; people not afraid or ashamed or shy to tell somebody else they had found something good. That's what evangelism is, you know, telling somebody good news. We do that all the time, easily, smoothly, without hesitation.

I can't keep track of all the recommendations I give you in a year's worth of sermons: good books, good movies, good restaurants. I went to see the movie "Hugo" this week — just a delight, great, great fun. I'm telling you, rush out and see it. I've been telling everyone in Bible Study for weeks about this extraordinary biography of Roger Williams, the founder of Rhode Island and the architect of true religious freedom in America (*Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul: Church, State, and the Birth of*

*Liberty* by John M. Barry). In this political season, it may be the most important book to read. And Friday night, when Alida got home from India, before jet lag set in, I took her to a relatively new restaurant on the Post Road, Posto Café, just past Mo's Wine & Spirits, which happens to be owned by a member of our church!

I just gave you good tips if you want a nice bottle of wine, a delicious dinner, a terrific movie, and a vitally important book. That's a lot of good news in less than 30 seconds, and nobody took offense. I didn't pressure, I didn't force my agenda down your throat. I just pointed you in a good a direction. That's evangelism. I know my audience. I know some of you love movies. I know you love to read. I know you like a good restaurant. I simply gauged that I have some good news that you might actually enjoy. Same idea with religion. That's evangelism.

Now, there's still more to these evangelism stories. For example, when John the Baptist sent two of his own folks off to follow Jesus, they all played it kind of cool. They followed Jesus without making a commitment, maybe observing, keeping some distance. But Jesus noticed and asked, "What's up?" They gave a cautious answer, "Rabbi, teacher, where are you staying?" They weren't ready to join, and they were ready to dig deeper. And Jesus's answer is just as intriguing: "Come and see." In their own way, the two men were saying, "We want to check you out, we want to spend more time with you, we need to know more." And Jesus responded with an open invitation: "Come and see. Don't take John the Baptist's word for it, don't get taken in by a superficial impression, don't overcommit — come and see for yourself. See if this is right for you. See if my walk matches my talk. See if your walk can match my talk."

Around our church, all our high school juniors and seniors really get caught up in the whole college search thing. One thing I always tell them is to look around, check them out, find out one place where you walk on campus and you know, "This is the place for me. I can see myself right here for four very important years." Nowadays our youth really do that. Not just the usual campus tours, now you can attend some classes, stay overnight in a dorm, meet professors, hang out with students, eat in the cafeteria, make yourself at home.

That's what Jesus was saying. "Come and see if the fit is right." That's evangelism, too. Different strokes for different folks. And some of these folks need a more direct approach. So in the Bible you have Jesus going up to Philip just as he went up to Matthew and said, "Follow me."

Now, I must add there's obviously more to this story than we know, and that's part of the great fun of Bible study, letting your imagination get to the rest of the story. The four Gospels of Jesus's life are actually rather light on detail. So we use our common sense to fill in some details. I'm sure Jesus looked at Phillip, and Jesus saw something, sensed something. Boredom? Unhappiness? Apathy? Distraction? He could tell Philip wanted more out of life. He didn't know what. He didn't know where to turn. So Jesus stepped in. "Follow me," he said.

You may find it hard to believe, but I was not always this suave, erudite, accomplished gentlemen you see standing before you. In fact, if you've heard my sermons through the years, you know I was pretty much a disaster in my early life. My father always said he sent me away to prep school because he knew either he was going to kill me or the streets would kill me. So at the age of 13, I was dropped off at Northfield Mount Hermon School. Two years did nothing to improve me. Threats, punishment, expulsions — nothing made a dent.

One day, an English teacher took me aside. "Follow me," he said. Literally. He took me into his office and told me if I did what he said, took his classes each year, did the work he assigned, extra work, he'd turn me around and change my world. I don't know what he saw in me, and I'm not being humble. There was not a spark of potential evident, not a hint of ability at anything. But for two years, he introduced me to the world of literature, of reading, of books and plays and poetry. He changed my worldview. He opened me up to a world of insight, creativity, and wonder. He saved my life.

I have no idea what he saw that day, looking at me over in the corner. Something restless. Something unfulfilled? Unchallenged? Something empty? I don't know. But he had enough confidence in himself and what he believed in to think I might like it, want it, need it, take to it. That's evangelism.

Let me repeat that: *He had enough confidence in himself and what he believed in to think I might like it, want it, need it, take to it. That's evangelism.* Someone in your life, someone you know, is just as empty as I was, just as searching as Phillip, just as waiting for someone to point him in the right direction as Andrew was.

You could be that someone.