

Are You Following?
Luke 2:1-20, Ruth 1:16-17
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights
December 23, 2018 (4 Advent)
Pastor Dave Carver

*To hear this sermon as preached in worship, please visit
<https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2018/12/Sermon12-23-2018.mp3>*

Maybe it's just me... or maybe it's simply another sign that I'm getting to be pretty old... but this year in particular, I've been struck by a phrase that has become a feature in advertising.

ONE DAY ONLY!



We have to Act Fast! Do It Now! Christmas only comes around once a year, Bub, and if you're going to be a good parent/child/sibling/neighbor, well then you'd better get moving and get shopping! If you don't drag yourself to the mall, or write out the Christmas cards, or plan the big dinner NOW – well, forget about it.

It's Christmas, for crying out loud! You're *supposed* to be driving/spending/baking/shopping yourself into a frenzy.



Why? Because “it's the most wonderful time of the year...”



Listen, if I ever go out and make a \$60,000 purchase without talking to my wife about it, you'd better believe that you're going to hear a *lot* about that decision... and I'm here to tell you that whatever may be said about that kind of foolish and reckless behavior, two words that *will not* be included are “most wonderful”.

But we do this, don't we? We put such great expectations on the holiday season, or on a single day, or even into one particular hour that if a flight is delayed or a home is sold or a loved one dies, well, then, *everything is ruined* and it's the most horrible time of the year.

You are aware, I presume, that this is not how it's supposed to be...



The Biblical model for Christmas is something unassuming and surprising; it is something that draws us in rather than railroading us into action.

This month we've been seeking to be attentive to some songs of lament and hope that we know as African American Spirituals. Today's song, "Rise Up, Shepherd", is shaped around the word "follow", and I'm here to tell you that as such it is a prophetic word to the culture in the USA in 2018.

Christmas in 2018 is about *creating* meaning and significance – about building up expectation and acquiring the right gift, people, or experience so that you just *know* that it's Christmas and that you've won.

The first Christmas, on the other hand, was more about *discovering* what was already there; at joining in with what had begun. It was about following the soft light of a star that had been shining for, well, who knows? It was about responding to the song of the angels and then hurrying to get to the place where God was already at work.

"Follow, follow; rise up, shepherd, and follow..."

We use that word a lot these days, don't we? And I'm here to tell you that there are a *lot* of followers out there.

How many of you use the social platform called



Instagram? Do you know who has the most followers on that photo and video-sharing network? Cristiano Ronaldo, a Portuguese soccer player, has 148.3 million followers.



How about Twitter? Who would you suppose is the most popular tweet-er? An American woman, Katheryn Elizabeth Hudson, a.k.a. Katy Perry, is followed by 107 million people – that is more than twice as many as follow the President of the USA.

Or what about Facebook? How many “friends” do you have? Who would you suppose has the most followers on



Facebook? Once again, it is Cristiano Ronaldo, who has 122.5 million followers; he is followed by a Columbian pop star named Shakira.

And you say, “Ah, all that social media stuff. I’m not into that.” Maybe not. But I bet that you could use the word “follow” to describe your relationship with the Penguins, or the Stock Market, or the soap operas.



In our culture, surprisingly, the word “follow” has become a passive activity. When you say that you “follow” Shakira or the Penguins, you probably mean that you identify as an interested party or as a fan. However, you probably don’t invest a great deal of your time or energy in “following” Evgeni Malkin or the latest share price for US Steel. In “following” these things, you’re keeping an eye on them, and hoping that they might do something that would interest or benefit you. Do you see what I mean when I suggest that it is a “passive” activity?

Did you know that the Internal Revenue Service has a special category for “Passive Activity”? According to them, passive activities are those in which you participate non-materially – that is, less than 500 hours in a given year. For tax purposes, you can only claim to be actively pursuing a trade or business activity if you spend close to ten hours a week doing so.

I’m here to say that I hope that nobody in this room is investing ten hours a week in Ronaldo, or Shakira, or the Steelers place-kicker. Oh, we say, we follow those folks. But they don’t really impact us. That’s what I mean when we use the word “follow” to indicate a mild interest, or a plan to keep tabs on someone who really is tangential to the main parts of my life.

Yet when we use that definition of “follow” in terms of our discipleship, well, that’s incomplete. According to the spiritual we just sang, you will be so entranced by the presence of the Christ that your following will result in the forgetting of your flocks and of your herds...



¹One of the best examples of a follower in the Bible is from the ancient story of Ruth. This woman, who had been born as an outsider – a Moabite – had been through some incredible difficulty. There was a famine in her home land, and it was so severe that it took the lives of her father-in-law, her brother-in-law, and eventually her husband. Most of her contemporaries would have said that she was all alone – except she was not. She had a vibrant relationship with her mother-in-law, Naomi. She was so captivated by what she saw in the person of Naomi that she left her old life behind so that she could get in on what

¹ "Whither Thou Goest" by Sandy Freckleton Gagon. Used by permission; more at <http://sandyfreckletongagon.com>

Naomi was doing.

You heard her declaration a few moments ago: it's about as far from passive as one can get, isn't it? For Ruth, "following" meant adopting a new address, a new culture, a new diet, and new habits.

For the first disciples, following Jesus meant disrupting their vocational plans, involvement in significant conflict, and most often, an untimely death.

For many who sang that spiritual, following Jesus meant holding onto hope in the midst of days that seemed bleak and ugly; it meant trusting God to right wrongs even as they themselves worked to subvert an order that was fundamentally unjust.

"Follow, follow; rise up shepherd and follow..."



What does it mean to follow Jesus?

The shepherds were drawn in. The wise men sought slowly and deliberately. The disciples re-oriented their lives.

How are you following? And is it the way that you'd like to follow?

I'm here to suggest that even though it's technically *not* Christmas yet, it's probably too late for this year. I mean, Christmas Eve is tomorrow, for crying out loud. I think that for most of us, the 2018 Christmas train has left the station.

Don't get me wrong – I hope to share with you in worship; I'll advocate for you to look for ways to avoid overspending and unwise debt and to seek out ways to be fully present *with* people in the days that are to come.

But what about *after* Christmas? What will the days *following* Christmas look like for you?

You see, in our current cultural understanding, the number one activity immediately following Christmas (“the most wonderful time of the year”) is kicking back, taking time off work if you can, and breathing a huge sigh of relief... “Oh, boy, I’m glad *that’s* over! I sure wouldn’t want to have to go through *that* again! Now it’s time to get back to what I want to do. I want to spend on the things that I’m interested in. I get to eat what I want to, and to go where I want to go...

As if following the Bethlehem star, or being ‘good’ for Santa, or living in relationship with other people is somehow outside of our normal experience and something we can’t wait to stop...

Today, I’d like to ask you to make the days following Christmas days in which you seek to follow Jesus. And I’d like to suggest that there are at least four things that you can do to help you be a better follower...

Rest. I know, you’re planning on that, just as soon as you get back from Aunt Marge’s place on the 29th. But I mean to ask you this: can you change the pace of your life so that you have a better rhythm? What if you built in more rest each day? I’m not saying that you’re supposed to plan more “spa” days, whatever they are. I’m suggesting that every day, you could probably linger over a meal with a friend for a few more moments. You could probably set aside ten or fifteen minutes at some point in the day to read something that would revive or refresh you. I know, it might cost you some Ronaldo or Shakira time, but we all make choices...

Practice Gratitude. I know, many people think that “thank-you” notes are a quaint and unnecessary formality,

while others think that they've all got to be done in a week. When we view that kind of correspondence in that way, it becomes another source of pressure and a community killer. Look – when you receive a gift or a card, just jot it down on a list. And then in the days, and weeks, and months to come, take a moment to write to the person who extended themselves in that way and say, “Thanks for thinking of me. It matters. Here are some things that are happening now. You matter.” Write a note, or send a text, or make a phone call. Allow the practice of gratitude to drive you more deeply into relationship with people who are important to you.

Give more. We spend a month or so rushing around hoping we've gotten enough stuff to give away and not feel guilty about it, and then we spend 11 months doing whatever the heck we want. Let me encourage you to make giving a part of your following. Look for ways to free up more time, more energy, and more money for you to share with people and causes that you think align with God's intentions.

Try something new. Find a new adventure or passion that will be tied to and also help feed your faith. Maybe that's an active step, such as finding a spot on the Texas Mission Team, or volunteering with the Open Door, or the Preschool, or The Table. Or maybe that's a quieter role, such as doing some tinkering around this building or visiting some of the lonely in our midst. Maybe this is the kick in the pants you need to start investing some new time in an Adult discussion group like Faithbuilders or another small group.

Look, my sense is that for ONE DAY ONLY we're willing to sit and talk with people a little longer, or to pretend to be grateful, or to make a donation to a cause, or to try something new... but then we are ready to get back to “normal”. But really, if Christmas is for one day only – if it's the 25th and then back to business as usual... I think we're doing it wrong.

Follow, follow; rise up, Shepherd, and follow.
Thanks be to God. Amen.