

## Searching for Signs of Intelligent Life

Dr. Stephen McConnell

 *John 1:35-51*

This morning we're starting a new sermon series called "Starting Over". Last week we looked at and heard from John the Baptist who stands at the beginning of the year and says, "Repent. Turn around. Choose a different course. It doesn't have to stay the same way." So we are going to talk about that the next few weeks and wonder about the "how's" of starting over. We've all made our fair share of New Year's resolutions and we've all seen our fair share of resolutions fitter away. Many of us come into the New Year with some hope that maybe things might be a little different. But most of the time we don't necessarily take a look at the big picture of our lives enough to wonder if maybe we have engineered things in such a way that we keep coming up with the same results. If you don't change the machine the machine is going to keep producing the same thing. I can go to my black and white copier and put in my paper and I can hope beyond hope for color copies – but unless I change the machine I'm never going to get a color copy. So we are going to wonder together this month about what we can do to change the machine of our lives – so that we get maybe some different results -- the color we're looking for. So today we're in the Gospel of John the first chapter – verses 35 to 51.

Jean-Henri Fabre was a nineteenth century physicist, chemist and botanist – and one day he was in his greenhouse laboratory looking at his plants and he noticed several Pine Processionary Caterpillars in one of his

flowerpots. Pine Processionary Caterpillars are distinct in three ways – 1. they eat pine needles as their primary staple, and 2. they travel never alone, but in procession one following the other – each following the scent of the one in front of them. Wherever the one in front of me goes, that's where I go. And 3. they have no leader. Whoever just happens to be in the front ... is the one who leads. And if that guy falls out to sleep or eat ... someone else takes over. There is no leader in the procession.

Well these caterpillars had managed to process themselves around the circumference of the inside of Fabre's flowerpot. And they were processing in a circle. The procession had managed to form a perfect circle so that there was no beginning or end of the line. And all they did was follow one another. Fabre imagined that they would do this for an hour or two and then someone would figure out that they weren't going anywhere and break the line. But they didn't. Fabre sprinkled pine needles just outside the pot, but they just kept going in a circle each following the one in front of him. One hour, two hours, ten hours, twenty-four hours. Two days. Three days. Six days. Seven days. Finally, in the eighth day – one of the caterpillars made a break. Peeled off and started in a new direction ... and the line followed ... and they found their food before starving to death.

Silly caterpillars we might say, but there is a great attraction to just following the procession. When we were young and we had done something stupid – and our parents asked why we did this stupid thing and we said, "Well everyone did it. Or George and Larry did it." And our parents said, "Well if

George and Larry decided to jump off a bridge – does that mean you'd do it?"

Good question. And if we were honest with ourselves, the answer might have been yes. The power of procession. And it didn't leave us in childhood. The power of procession is still there – egged on by a thousand things. We buy things that everybody else is buying. We go places where everybody else is going. We wear things that everybody else is wearing. We go to movies that everybody else is going to. And sometimes you can find yourself in this little circle everyone following everyone else – and you realize you're not going anywhere. And you're tired and you have this hunger that is not being met and yet you can't quite figure out how to peel off.

Yesterday was Epiphany. And Epiphany is the day in the Christian calendar when the Church celebrates the visit of the wise men to Bethlehem. Long believed to be astrologers and sages from the empires of Persia and Arabia – the wise men get enchanted by this star and what the star does is it causes them to peel off. They leave their country, their

kingdom, their procession and they chart a course to find a newborn king. Easier of course to stay in the same old circle. Follow the guy in front of you. Worship the same God even. But these guys peel off – and find a new king.

I suppose something similar is happening in our story this morning where John the Baptist has his little circle of followers and he sees Jesus walking by and he points and he says, "Look, the new king. Look, the new Messiah. Look, the new leader of the procession." And the gospel writer tells us that two of John's disciples heard him say this and they peeled off. And they followed Jesus. And after following and listening long enough they realized that he was who John said he was – and they went to their family and friends and said, "We have found the new king, the new Messiah, the new leader. Come and see! Come join the procession – the one that doesn't go in circles."

And I suppose as we take up this question of starting over, of charting a new course, of changing the machinery for color copies --- I

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suppose the first thing to think about is who are you following? There is no more basic fact in life than the fact that you are going in the direction of the one you are following. And don't think you're not following anybody, don't delude yourself into thinking that you are at the front of the line – because we are all following somebody. Some philosophy. Some fad. Some presupposition. Some guru. Even if it's the zeitgeist, the spirit of the times – we're all following someone and something. And the thing is when you follow long enough you can get yourself into this feedback loop where we just keep hearing the same old thing and chasing the same old scent. But with epiphany comes this invitation – to meet Jesus again. Come and see, the disciples say. Peel off and meet Jesus again for the first time.

Because you know if there is anything that history teaches us – it's that if there is any person to consider following, because we're all going to follow somebody – it's Jesus. Leaders come and leaders go, but strangely enough after twenty centuries he is still the reference point – it's still a major question of human civilization – what do you think, history asks, about Jesus – and what does it mean to follow him? Because we human beings will always be in the search for intelligent life. And I don't mean necessarily the search amidst the stars and planets, but here on this earth – to be human, is to be in search of, like those wise men – we're always in the search for an intelligent life to follow. We're always in search of someone in this world who can tell us what is the best way to live. Billions and billions of people throughout time have decided that the intelligent life to follow is Jesus – gurus come and go, fads come and go, styles come and go, fashion comes and goes – but Jesus is still walking

through the decades of time and John is still pointing and saying, “Look the king. Look the leader. Look, intelligent life.” Someone finally to show us what it means to be human. Someone finally to show us what it means to live the good life. And by grace some have chosen to peel off.

C.S. Lewis after years of a wandering in unbelief, going in his own academic circles, finally in his thirties considered again the person of Jesus...took the plunge finally after years of consideration, took the plunge and finally peeled off, derailing his career at Oxford and embraced Jesus. All in. And later he said, “I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.”

The search for intelligent life.

Because you see the first step in starting over – is deciding who to follow. To find a new purpose you have to find a new person. And for many of us that means meeting Jesus again for the first time. And that means wiping your hard drive clean and opening up the pages of the gospel – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – and reading again, or maybe for the first, about the life and teaching of Jesus. Maybe start with the Gospel of John, just read little by little through the Gospel of John. Maybe go to our class on the Gospel of John on Sunday morning. Or the Wired Word class on Sunday morning. Or the Quest class starting on Tuesday. Or our discussion on *Mere Christianity* Tuesday nights. Or a Presbyterian Women's circle. Start over – new purpose with a new person.

Malcolm Muggeridge, the famous British cynic, satirist and disbeliever – more by accident than anything else put himself into

the presence of Mother Teresa for a few weeks – bad mistake if you don't want to consider Jesus. But through her life and her work with the lepers of India – Malcolm Muggeridge didn't see any other choice but to consider Jesus. And it led him down this line of history to see all the generations of Jesus followers – and all the good they managed to produce – all the hospitals they built, colleges they founded, and the help they gave to the poor and the needy, the color copies, as it were. The difference one leader made to billions. So he swallowed his pride and met Jesus again for the first time. And followed and became his most ardent advocate all his remaining years. “In the end,” wrote Muggeridge, “coming to faith remains for all a sense of homecoming, of picking up the threads of a lost life, of responding to a bell that has long been ringing, of taking a place at a table that has long been vacant.”

And so we take our place at the table, peeling away from our circle to take our place at this table. Because with Jesus there is always a place at the table. And at Jesus' table – we find what we've always been looking for – the intelligent life, the good life, the eternal life. And what better place for us to start over.



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Dr. Stephen D. McConnell  
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